

## Sunset Over Britain The Matura Magicus

Standard Disclaimer: We do not own this universe.

Author's note: This is a super Harry story with a few twists. He's super Harry but he's more interested in hiding his abilities than using them. This will be a very angsty/romance/drama story involving Harry/Hermione.

While many, including ourselves, do not believe in a Harry/Hermione coupling will occur in canon, we felt that if we wanted to expand our skills as writers, it would be appropriate to try to explore something which we don't believe would be possible, then craft a story making it possible.

---

### Sunset over Britain Chapter 1

---

The Grangers...

If any of her fellow students had seen her bedroom, they would have been surprised by it. The room was an eclectic mix of utilitarian and very feminine. There was a desk, shelves containing a surprising number of books, and a state of the art computer. The bed, on the other hand, lent truth to the fact that the occupant of the room was female. The tall, four-poster bed was tastefully frilled in a delicate pink lace.

Hermione was worried sick as she paced her room. It had been a week since Harry Potter had vanished from 4 Privet Drive and not a single trace of him had been found. When she first heard about it, she'd written Ron and his reply disturbed her even more. Ron had spent half of his letter proclaiming his undying love for her, and the other half ripping into Harry.

Ron had feelings for Hermione which she did not return. She liked him well enough, but in the past year his jealousy of Harry, of Viktor Krum, of anything that involved her, had grown to enormous proportions, and it bothered her a great deal. Ron had started throwing around money in this past year which raised her curiosity. She knew the Weasley's were not a wealthy family, so where the money had come from was a mystery that bothered her. She was actually becoming a

little frightened of Ron. Between his jealousy and his temper, she was afraid someday he'd have trouble controlling it.

Now she paced her room, ignoring her books and homework. She was terribly worried about Harry. He had seemed so lost and distant on the Express. She knew he was blaming himself for the loss of Sirius, but something else looked wrong with him. Her last sight of Harry bothered her because he looked feverish, his eyes sunken, his hair plastered to his head.

It was now the second week of the summer holiday and in another day she and her parents were due to leave for a trip to Australia. It was supposed to be a long trip. They weren't to return to England until a week before they returned to school. Hermione desperately wanted to go on this trip, but her concerns about Harry were eroding away the anticipation.

She broke from her reverie when doorbell rang. "I'll get it," she shouted, as she dashed from her room. She ran down the stairs, taking the steps two at a time and risking the wrath of her parents. Her mother, in particular, felt she needed to be more lady-like.

Throwing the front door open, she was surprised to see someone she hadn't expected to see and she knew in an instant that his visit was related to Harry. An icy ball of fear formed in her stomach.

"Professor Lupin!" she exclaimed. "Please, come in."

Remus Lupin looked terrible. He looked worse than he did after his monthly transformations, or the days following the death of his best friend, Sirius Black, in the Department of Mysteries.

He entered the house and Hermione shut the door behind him. Turning towards her, he ran tired hands over his face. "Hermione, I haven't been your Professor since your third year. Can't you call me Remus, or even Moony?" he asked.

"I'll try to remember that Pro... I mean Remus." she said. "Is there any news about Harry?"

Remus smiled weakly. "Are your parents around, Hermione? I need to speak with them before I speak with you."

Hermione frowned. "Yes, I'll get them for you. Why don't you take a seat in the kitchen and I'll put on a pot of tea, then get them."

Hermione led her old Professor into the kitchen, put the teakettle on the stove to heat, and left to round up her parents.

"Professor," Hermione said, entering the kitchen a few moments later, her parents on her heels, "you remember my parents, Dan and Emma Granger?" Her parents were a bit taken aback by his haggard appearance, but sat at the table while Hermione poured them all tea.

"Hermione, I don't mean to be rude, but I'd like to speak with your parents before I speak with you. Why don't you go up to your room and we'll call you when we're done?" Remus asked

wearily.

She frowned again and wanted to know what was going on, but one glance from her father told her to get upstairs. Once her bedroom, she tried reading one of her books but couldn't concentrate on the subject, no matter how hard she tried. She was positive that whatever the adults were talking about downstairs concerned Harry.

She was about to start pacing again when there came a tapping at her window. Glancing over, she saw that it was Ron's owl, Pigwidgeon, again. Opening the window, she managed to coax the hyperactive owl to land long enough to retrieve the letters attached to his leg. With a hoot, he landed on her chair and stood, bouncing from foot to foot, staring at her with animated eyes. Apparently, he had orders to wait for a reply.

Glancing at the two letters she found one from Ginny and another from Ron. She glared at the letter from Ron for a moment, before dropping it on her bed and tearing open the one from Ginny.

*Hermione,  
It's been a week and still no sign of Harry that anyone's told me about. Everyone thinks that he hasn't been captured by You-Know-Who, but has run away on his own. Somehow I can't see Harry doing that. Did you see how depressed and down he seemed to be on the Express? I hope he's ok.*

*My darling brother Ronald is being a total arse. He seems to think that Harry has done this to get more attention for himself. He runs around the house screaming at everyone and is constantly angry. I wouldn't be the least bit surprised if he tries to hit Harry the next time he sees him. Did they have a fight that I don't know about?*

*Mum and Dad also seem really hacked off about Harry. I don't understand it. You would think they would be worried about him, but instead they're angry. I overheard them the other night and it's really making me wonder what is going on that I don't know about. Something is certainly queer here. Mum told me that I'd get new robes and new books this year, then she changed her mind after Harry turned up missing. I never get new robes Hermione, so where did the money come from that Mum would even think such a thing?*

*Dean Thomas sent me a wonderfully romantic letter telling me how much he misses me. He's trying to get a job in Ottery St. Catchpole so he and I will be able to see each other this summer. Isn't that sweet? And you wouldn't believe how big he is! I found that out our last night at school in one of the broom closets!*

*Well that's all the news. Write me, please? With Mum, Dad and Ron snapping at everything, I'm finding it very lonely here this summer.*

*Your Friend,  
Ginny*

Hermione laughed at the last paragraph. That girl had a one track mind and it was nearly always in the gutter. Frowning, she dropped Ginny's letter on the bed, picked up Ron's and opened it.

*My Love,*

*I can't tell you how much I already miss you and can't wait to see you again. Isn't there any way you can talk your parents out of taking you with them? You could stay with us this summer. We're planning on spending the first half of the summer at home, and then we're going to Snuffles old place.*

*Mum and Dad are really hacked off at Harry for vanishing like that. Can't say I blame them, really. Stupid prat is probably hoping he'll make the papers again like third year. Hey! Remember in third year when they wrote that dumb article about you going out with Harry? Boy, even I knew you would never stoop low enough to date Harry. The jerk. Anyway, enough about rich boy, I'm tired of talking about him.*

*I can't wait 'til you get here! I found a perfect place for us to go to... let's say, get to know each other better.*

*Love,*

*Ron*

In a fit of anger, she crumpled up the parchment and threw it against the wall. She stamped her foot in rage at Ron. She was about to start cursing when her mother opened the door. The look on Emma Granger's face stopped Hermione up short. She looked incredibly angry. In fact, the last time she looked that angry was because her father had gotten a letter from an ex-girlfriend. Hermione froze like a rabbit staring down the working end of a hunting rifle and wondered what trouble she had gotten into and why.

"Come downstairs, love. We need to talk to you about something important," Emma said in a tone that expressed her anger, but also told Hermione that it wasn't directed at her. With a dizzying sense of relief, she followed her mother downstairs to the kitchen to join her father and Professor Lupin.

Sitting down at the table, she couldn't help but notice how mad both her parents were. She was also struck again by how tired Lupin looked. Emma poured a cup of tea for her daughter before she began to talk.

"Hermione, your Professor here has just told us about some things he's learned and I have to admit to being quite disturbed by them. I'm afraid we're going to have to put off our trip to Australia this year, dear. Once you hear the reasons for it though, I think you will agree it's for the best. Also, I have to tell you, your father and I are having very serious doubts about allowing you to return to Hogwarts this fall."

Remus reached over and tiredly put his hand on her arm. "Hermione, before you begin to protest, please hear me out." When she nodded, he continued. "Before I explain, I must ask you something. How long was your Matura Magicus?"

Hermione looked shocked at the Professor. She vividly remembered her Matura and had read what little she could find on the subject, mostly in healing texts. But talking about it? That just wasn't done! It was a taboo subject. Lupin might as well have asked her how often she masturbated!

“Professor... I... well...”

“It’s alright, Hermione. Just give me a number. How many hours did it last?” asked Remus.

“Just over four hours, Professor,” she whispered, blushing furiously.

“And how did you feel during that time, Hermione?” Remus asked gently.

Hermione looked up at her ex-Professor, anger snapping in her eyes. “You know how it feels, Professor. It’s the worst feeling you can have. It’s like having a major case of the flu, every bone in your body feels like it’s breaking and you run a very high fever. I don’t understand why you’re sitting here talking about my Matura when you should be out looking for Harry!”

Remus smiled at her. “I know where Harry is, Hermione. That’s why I’m here.”

Hermione bounced out of her chair. “WHAT? You know where he is? You’ve got to tell the Order! Dumbledore...”

“Hermione Jane Granger! Sit down and listen to the Professor,” her father, Dan, said in a loud voice that brooked no argument. Shocked at her father’s tone, she meekly sat down and looked at Remus.

“Hermione, will you give me your witch’s oath not to tell anyone what I am about to tell you?” asked Remus.

Hermione pulled out her wand. “I solemnly swear not to reveal what I am about to be told without your consent.”

Remus sighed. “Thank you. Now, I asked you about the Matura because Harry’s going through it now.”

“B-B-But that’s not possible, Professor. He wouldn’t be able to perform magic without undergoing his Matura. He’s too old now. It’s supposed to happen in his tenth year, not when he’s nearly sixteen!” she protested.

“Hermione, I was going through some of Sirius’s effects when I stumbled onto a letter from him to me. In the letter, which I can show you later if you want, he told me some of the things he learned about Harry, the Order, and Dumbledore.

“For one thing, Harry’s been brutally abused since he went to live with the Dursleys. It explains why he’s a good five inches shorter than he should be, why he’s so skinny and why his Matura has been delayed.

“But more to the point Hermione, Harry’s been suffering under the Matura since he arrived in Little Whinging this summer and it’s showing no signs of letting up. I came here today to ask for help from you and your parents. Harry is terribly ill and I’m not sure he’ll survive. He can’t be left alone for long. I’ve been away too long as it is. But soon will be a full moon and I need someone

to help watch over him.

“When Sirius’s will was read, Harry was his sole beneficiary and I was named as his legal executor. Sirius emancipated Harry in the magical world, but I haven’t filed the paperwork yet. I’ve got Harry hidden in a place that’s safer than Grimmauld Place or Hogwarts. It’s under a Fidelis charm and unplotable. Your parents have agreed to come with me to help care for him. They know how close a friend he is to you, and hearing how he has been treated these past years, they’re quite willing to help,” he concluded.

Hermione thought furiously. The Matura’s been going on for days? She shuddered when she considered that. The Matura was the body’s way of focusing its magic so a person can cast spells. It also sets a limit on the amount of power a person can cast! She had never heard about anyone having a Matura that lasted longer than eight hours, and that was extremely rare. Harry was either going to die from this process, or he would come out of it as the strongest wizard on record.

“But Professor, shouldn’t he be at Hogwarts where Madam Pomfrey…”

“NO!” barked her father, shocking her into silence again.

“Hermione,” her mother said, reaching for her hands, “according to Professor Lupin, your Headmaster has been systematically robbing your friend Harry of his money for the past sixteen years. It seems that several Order members have also been getting money from Harry’s vaults. And if that isn’t bad enough, Remus here seems to think that everything that has happened to Harry since his parents died was deliberately orchestrated by your Headmaster.”

Hermione slumped back in shock as her conception of her world was torn asunder. Her keen mind starting pondering things, making connections previously not made. Why was the Sorcerer’s Stone so badly protected? And what about the Chamber of Secrets? That place should have been found the first time it was opened. In fourth year’s Tri-Wizarding Tournament, the naming of the Champions could have been called a four-way draw. That could have negated the magic and new champions could have been selected. And Snape! Why didn’t he teach Occulumenty to Harry?

Remus watched the young witch carefully. He could see her impressive intellect putting the pieces together.

“Hermione,” Remus said softly, to gain her attention. “I’m sorry if this comes as a shock, but I had to reveal this to you and your parents. I need help with Harry. Your parents have medical training I don’t have and Harry has been calling for you in his delirium. That’s one of the reasons why I came here. Because he trusts you, I have little choice but to do the same.

“Dumbledore knew Harry was very sick and refused to allow anyone to help him. When I finally removed him from the Dursley’s, he was badly bruised from beatings, and some of his ribs were broken. Hermione, Harry may die without someone to watch over him while I undergo my transformation. Harry needs your help,” Remus said, his face contorted in anguish.

Hermione didn’t need any prompting. Harry was her friend, her best friend. In her heart she

wondered if someday Harry could possibly be even more. She thought she knew how she felt for Harry, but she was unsure how he felt for her. For now, it was enough to know that her friend was in trouble and needed her.

“You know I don’t like breaking rules, Professor. However, if Dumbledore can do so, and put Harry’s life in jeopardy while he’s at it, then I’m certainly not going to stand for it. If that means breaking rules, so be it. Harry’s put his life on the line for me. It would be churlish of me to not come to his aid when he needs it,” she stated with a degree of finality.

Remus slumped in his chair in relief and gratitude. “Alright then, Harry’s in a safe place, and I can give you a portkey to get to him. What I suggest is that, since you are supposed to leave tomorrow for your holiday, you leave a day early. Park your car in the underground lot at the airport and portkey from there. Hermione should send notes to a few friends, telling them you’re leaving a day early for your trip.”

Dan Granger nodded. “I’m only a dentist, but Emma here is an oral surgeon. We’ll go to the office and get some of the supplies we have on hand, antiseptics, some antibiotics and such. We have some I.V.’s, normal saline, dextrose and water, that sort of thing, which should help. If he’s as sick as you say, then keeping him hydrated is going to be a problem.”

Later that evening, Emma, Dan and Hermione drove to Heathrow Airport, where they parked their car in the underground car park as Remus suggested. The three of them loaded their luggage onto a trolley and moved to a secluded area.

Looking around and seeing no one, Hermione pulled out the quill that Remus had given her as her father grabbed the trolley. Once her parents nodded their readiness, she touched the quill with her wand and they vanished.

---

The Burrow...

“Ronald!! Come get your owl! It’s driving me crazy,” yelled Molly Weasley from the kitchen.

Ron bounced his way down the stairs. If his owl was back, that meant a letter from Hermione! He practically ripped the letter from Pig’s leg and the small owl hooted in protest. Tearing at the envelope he read quickly.

*Ron,  
My parents and I are leaving a day early. They have decided that we won’t be back until the end of the summer, so I won’t be able to come to the Burrow at all this year. I’m sure that once Harry is found, he’ll be able to keep you company there. Unfortunately, I’ll be staying with muggles, so no one will be able to send me any owls. That means I won’t be able to hear about Harry when he is found, which annoys me greatly but there isn’t anything I can do about it.*

*I know how you feel for me, but I do not have those feelings for you. I’m sorry if this hurts or upsets you in anyway but I had to tell you so you could move on. I’m your friend, Ron, and*

*anything more would probably ruin our friendship, not to mention hurt Harry's friendship with us as well. I'm sure you're mature enough to understand this.*

*Please give my best to your family and I'll see you on the Express September first.*  
*Your FRIEND,*  
*Hermione*

Ron swore, threw the letter down on the kitchen table, and then stomped up to his room. Ginny, who was sitting at the table drinking a cup of tea, snagged the letter and started to read. As she did so, more writing appeared.

*Ginny,*  
*Remus Lupin has charmed this section so only you can see it. You're right. Something queer is definitely going on. I don't have a full handle on it yet, but I'm working on it. I won't say anymore than to watch yourself this summer, especially around Ron. Burn this letter after you've read it. I'll talk to you on the Express.*  
*HG*

While Ginny was watching Hermione's letter burn to ash, Ron was upstairs on his bed, thinking furiously.

*That bitch! If she wants to play that way, I'll have to tell Dumbledore and we'll do it the way he suggested,* he thought.

---

Headmaster's Office, Hogwarts school of Witchcraft and Wizardry...

Dumbledore paced his office, then looked wistfully at the perch where Fawkes used to sit. His phoenix had abandoned him shortly after Harry's fifth year at Hogwarts.

*Harry,* he mused, *where are you hiding?*

Once again, he carefully checked his tracking instruments, which had been repaired after Harry smashed them at the end of last term. They were unable to detect the boy at all. Curiously, he checked on some of the other students. Neville Longbottom was with his Grandmother, as he should be. Ron Weasley was at the Burrow. Interestingly, Hermione Granger was now undetectable as well. He shrugged at that perhaps she and her parents had left early for their holiday.

Another clue that didn't make any sense was Dobby and Winky. Several days ago, the two elves had vanished after leaving a note saying they were quitting their service at Hogwarts. Dumbledore was sure that Dobby quitting and Harry missing was related, but he found out about it after they had left the castle.

Dumbledore's plan had been slightly derailed when he told Harry about the prophecy at the end of the school term. The foolish child had dragged five other students to a battle in the Department of



Mysteries, and the only good to come out of that had been the removal of Sirius Black from the picture. For the past four years, sending Harry back to the Dursleys had ensured that he would become more and more dependant upon Dumbledore.

By the end of the term, Harry had such anger and distrust building inside of him that it was disconcerting. It was critical that Harry trust him. Without that, his plans couldn't succeed. With the boy's illness, and the way his relatives treated him, Dumbledore was sure that, by summer's end, the boy could once more be led in the right direction.

The Dursley's had been carefully selected because Dumbledore knew they would not provide Harry with a loving environment. Leaving him there meant Dumbledore would end up with a submissive, but extremely powerful wizard who Dumbledore could guide. What he hadn't counted on was the abuse the Dursley's had heaped on the boy. Instead of a cold, unloving environment, they had beaten and abused him. The Headmaster was aware of the Dursley's actions and had done nothing to prevent it. After all, Dumbledore had gotten what he wished from the situation, a meek boy, more than willing to please those around him, if given just a bit of praise.

However, it all seemed to be falling apart now.

Harry was missing and no one had a clue where he was. Dumbledore didn't believe for a second that Harry was still angry with him. He was sure that once Harry was found, he'd fall into line again. He was such a trusting lad.

---

Ministry of Magic, Department of Law Enforcement...

Amelia Bones was reading the report of the investigation of the break in at the Department of Mysteries where ten confirmed Death Eaters were captured when the office door opened. Looking up, she smiled as her niece, Susan, entered.

Three days earlier, Susan had held four Death Eaters at bay until help arrived. In doing so, she had not only saved her own life, but the life of a visiting friend, as well as Amelia's household staff.

"Susan, how are you feeling today?"

"Better, Aunt. But my emotions seem all messed up. Sometimes I want to cry, sometimes I get so angry I want to scream."

Amelia nodded knowingly. Such a reaction was common among new Aurors who had just seen their first action in the field.

"Aunt, that's not why I came to your office today," the girl said, sitting down in front of the desk.

"Oh?"

"I'm worried about one of my friends. You asked me a few days ago where I'd learned to fight.

Well, the truth is, last year a group of students at school formed a study group for Defense Against the Dark Arts. I wanted to owl the person who ran the group to thank him because his lessons saved us all, but the owl refuses to accept the letter.”

Amelia frowned. For an owl to refuse a letter, the person would either have to be too far away, which is nearly impossible, or in a location totally un-findable.

“Who are you trying to owl, dear?”

“Harry Potter. He and Hermione Granger ran the group with help from a few others.”

All of Amelia’s senses went on full alert and she leaned forward in her chair. “Potter? Harry Potter?”

“Yes, Aunt.”

“Don’t be afraid, child. You did the right thing,” replied Amelia, seeing her niece tense up.

Amelia pressed a button on her desk and a secretary entered the office. Looking up at the woman, Amelia said, “Bring me the complete Potter file, including those of his parents. Then tell William Hill to go over to Potter’s currently listed residence and check up on him.”

The secretary nodded and rushed from the room.

---

12 Grimmauld Place...

Nymphadora Tonks was alone in her room at Grimmauld Place. The dark house had been taken over by the Order of the Phoenix in the past year on the approval of her cousin, Sirius Black. Nymphadora, or Tonks as she preferred to be called, was an Auror and a new member of the Order of the Phoenix. In one sense, her loyalties were torn. On more than one occasion she had been forced to break the law for the Order, even though she had vowed to uphold the law as an Auror.

Now she sat wringing her hands in her room. No one had made the connection that she had. Not yet, at least. Remus Lupin had gone out on a mission for Dumbledore. A few days later, Harry had vanished without a trace from Privet Drive. Remus should have been back yesterday, but there is no sign of him and the owls are refusing to accept any letters to him, just like they refuse owls to Harry.

Tonks’ problem was not just loyalties. Over the past year, she had slowly gained respect and admiration for the down-on-his-luck werewolf. Remus was an attractive man, even if he was more than ten years older than she was. He was calm, soft-spoken, and very intelligent. He was also extremely loyal to his friends. When Sirius died, she had spent several hours comforting him and, in the process, discovered she was falling in love with the enigmatic man.

---

Black Manor, Ireland...

Hermione and her parents stood up from their portkey arrival and looked around. Remus stood at the top of the stairs. Spotting them, he quickly made his way down the elegant marble staircase.

Hermione stepped forward. "Remus, how is Harry?" she asked worriedly.

"His fever is down a little at the moment. I've kept a chart of his temperature so I know this is just a low point for him," he said softly. "Don't worry about the luggage, the house elves will take it to your rooms. Let me take you to Harry's room."

Leaving their luggage behind, they followed Remus up the stairs. He reached a set of double doors and, opening them, led the small group inside. Glancing around curiously, the new arrivals realized they were in the master suite of the manor. The room was spacious and the bed enormous. The room was tastefully appointed, elegant in its simplicity and decorated in muted colors.

Harry lay on the bed, his forehead covered in sweat and his cheeks sunken in. Hermione knew her parents couldn't feel it, but the magic pouring off of him beat at her senses in waves. The power she sensed was nearly staggering.

Seeing her friend's condition, Hermione cried out in protest and rushed to his side. She grabbed the cloth that had fallen from his forehead, dipped it in a nearby basin of cool water and placed it on his forehead.

Dan walked to the other side of the bed, gazed down at the young man and frowned in thought. Reaching down, he took Harry's pulse, and then lightly pinched the skin on Harry's arm. "Emma, we're going to need those supplies. He's dehydrated so we need to start an IV. Let's also see if a painkiller eases the pain he's in."

Emma made a motion to move and Remus stopped her. She looked at him curiously. "Dobby!" Remus called out loud. There was a popping sound as the little house elf appeared. Emma staggered back in a moment of shock and Dan looked on with amazement.

"Dobby, would you please bring the Grangers luggage to this room? There are some items they need in it to help Harry."

"Anything to helps Harry Potter, sir!" Dobby said and, with a pop, he was gone.

A moment later he reappeared, levitating the baggage. Once the bags were on the floor, Emma pulled out the case of medical supplies they had put together. Dan quickly prepared an IV for Harry while Remus conjured a stand to hold it. Once the needle was inserted and secured, he used the I.V. shunt to inject the painkiller.

After a short while, Harry relaxed as the painkiller hit his system. Remus conjured a table and chairs and the adults all sat down. Hermione stay at Harry's side.

"I'm curious, Dan," Remus said. "You're a dentist, but you seem to know an awful lot about

muggle medicine.”

Hermione looked up. She didn't know how her father knew so much about medicine either, and was curious about his answer.

“Well, before Hermione was born I was a dentist on the HMS Hermes, a Royal Navy air craft carrier. We had to take all the basic medical courses that any sick bay attendant would take. I didn't have much call to use the knowledge until the Hermes went to the Falklands back in '82. When the Sheffield was hit by a missile, the number of wounded we plucked from the ocean was horrific. Our doctors and SBA's were swamped, so they pressed anyone with a medical background into duty.

“I had never seen war up close before and I had nightmares for months after. I opted out shortly after that. Hermione was still a toddler and I didn't want her losing her father because some bloody politician decided a rock in the middle of nowhere was important.”

Remus nodded in understanding. He knew, roughly, about the war in the Falklands. Despite the separation between their worlds, even the magical community had found it difficult to ignore that fact that their country was at war.

Emma placed her hand over Dan's and turned to Remus. “Please tell us more about this Matura Magicus. Is it a disease, like Measles?” she asked.

Remus shook his head. “The Matura is something all wizards and witches experience. It's not a disease. It's best to think of it as a sort of magical puberty. In ordinary witches and wizards it happens in their tenth year. It's at that point that they start to gain the ability to control their magic. The Matura actually accomplishes two things. It focuses one's magical core and it sets up how much power one has available.

“For example, and please, forgive me Hermione, but her Matura lasted four hours. That's about an hour over the average Matura. It means she's a powerful witch, more powerful than someone who's gone through a three hour Matura.”

“So why is Harry undergoing his Matura so late? And how come it's taking so long if everyone else only takes three or four hours?” asked Emma.

Remus ran a hand through his graying hair. “I didn't find out until I read Sirius's note, but his muggle guardians have been abusing Harry and starving him. The Matura was delayed because he's been prevented from growing as he should have. Lack of food, lack of care, physical and mental abuse, lack of any kind of nurturing environment have all played their part in slowing his Matura. As to why it's taking so long, I don't know. All I can say is if he survives it, he'll be the most powerful wizard on record. Oh, speaking of records...”

Remus got up and walked to the desk. Opening a drawer, he pulled out a notebook and a ledger. Walking back, he placed both on the tabletop.

“The notebook contains a chart of Harry’s fever. I don’t know if it’s useful to you or not. Harry’s godfather, if you can believe it, stole the ledger before he was killed. It’s a record of the activity on Harry’s trust account. In the past year alone, nearly a million galleons have been removed from the account and I know Harry didn’t take the money out.”

Dan, who had been looking over the fever chart, interrupted. “Remus, are these number right?” he asked worriedly.

“Yes, they are.”

“What have you been doing to bring the fever down?”

“Mostly cool clothes to the head. I’ve tried to get him to drink a fever reduction potion, but he just won’t swallow. I was afraid he’d choke, so I stopped trying. That’s when I made the decision to come to you for help.”

“What is it, Dan?” Emma asked.

“He’s been running a fever of a hundred and one degrees for the last three days. Previous to that, his fever went through the normal cycle of spiking and breaking. According to this chart, it hasn’t broken this time.”

“Three days?” Emma asked, looking over at the pale young man lying so still on the bed.

Dan stood. “We need to break the fever, its been going on far too long. Can you conjure a large tub?” When Remus nodded, he added, “Fill it about half full with lukewarm water.”

Remus created the tub needed while Dan went over to Hermione. “Love, we’re going to try to break Harry’s fever by placing him in a tub of cool water. You might want to step out of the room as he’s going to be naked for this.”

Hermione looked up defiantly. “No, you’re going to need help Dad. It’ll take the three of you to get him in the tub and someone needs to make sure the IV doesn’t pull loose.”

Dan smiled down at his daughter. “Good girl! This Harry of yours must be something special indeed for you to insist on being here for this.”

Hermione could only nod in reply and she turned back to her friend. Dan looked over the tub Remus had conjured and smiled in approval.

When Harry was lifted from the bed, Hermione blushed at his nakedness. Looking away, she quickly grabbed the I.V. stand and walked closely behind the adults.

For the next twelve hours, the four battled Harry’s fever. They removed Harry from the tub when his fever dropped, only to return him to the water twenty to thirty minutes later as the fever climbed once again.

As the first light of dawn peaked through the drapes, and sleepy birdsong reached the bedroom, Harry's fever reached one hundred and five degrees. As Remus called out the pale youth's temperature, Hermione collapsed on the floor in exhaustion and looked up at Harry in despair.

"We're losing him," Emma murmured to her husband.

Dan sat down tiredly and ran a shaking hand through his hair, thinking hard. "There's one more thing we could try, Emma," he said quietly.

"You're not thinking...No, Dan! The shock alone could kill him."

"And what do you think will happen if we don't break the fever?" he asked in a low, fierce tone. "That young man has fought hard for weeks against this illness. He's strong, Emma. We have to try!"

"What is it?" Remus asked.

Looking at the werewolf, Dan saw the grief and sorrow in his gray eyes. "I have an idea, Remus, but it's dangerous. It could kill him. I don't know a lot about the Matura, and if we do nothing, he could live. But my experience with fevers tells me that he probably won't. The fever must be broken, but it has to be your decision."

Remus looked down Harry. Reaching out, he ran his finger down the young man's cheek. "Do it," he said quietly.

"What?" Emma asked.

Remus turned towards Dan. "Whatever it is, do it. I can't lose him."

Dan nodded, then stood up. "First, replace the water in the tub with ice water. It has to be cold, Remus, very cold. It's going to be a dangerous shock to his system and we need to be prepared to administer CPR if need be."

At Remus' puzzled look, Emma explained cardiopulmonary resuscitation, while Dan spoke quietly to Hermione, telling her what they were going to do.

Once Remus had changed the water in the tub and all was ready, Dan said, "Remus you might want to call the house elves in as well. His reaction to the cold water could get violent and we may need more help than just the four of us," Dan added.

"Dobby, Winky!" Remus called.

Remus quickly explained to the two house elves what they were going to do and what they hoped to accomplish. The three adults then went over to the bed. Hermione grabbed the IV stand once again.

Placing Harry in the tub, Dan knelt down and dipped a cloth into the icy water. As he bathed the

young man's face, the others stood, watching closely.

The minutes ticked by with no reaction from Harry. Dan laid the cloth over the side of the tub and checked Harry's pulse. When Remus pulled out his wand to take Harry's temperature once more, he saw eyelids flicker a moment before he found himself staring into a blazing emerald fire.

Harry leapt to his feet, ice water cascading down his body, and yelled, "BLOODY HELL MOONY, WHAT ARE YOU TRYING TO DO TO ME!" Then, just as suddenly, his knees buckled.

Winky and Dobby leapt into action around the shocked humans and levitated Harry before he could hit the floor. They moved him over to the bed and covered him with a sheet.

Remus took his temperature again, and then sighed in relief. "It's down to ninety nine degrees. What do we do now?" he asked, looking at the others.

"We wait," Dan replied. "The fever may begin again. If it doesn't, then he should wake up soon."

Emma looked at everyone. "Perhaps now would be a good time to take a break for something to eat? We can eat here, at the table."

Remus nodded and asked Dobby to serve them in the bedroom, rather than the dining room. The little elf gazed at Harry for a moment before nodding and vanishing with a small pop.

As her parents sat down with Remus at the table, Hermione looked closer at Harry. She had seen a few things today that would forever be burned in her brain, but what caught her attention was the crisscrossing pattern of fine scars that seemed to cover his torso. She clenched her teeth as she realized that her best friend had been hiding a terrible secret from her for five years. She wasn't sure whether to be angry about it or weep for the pain he had endured.

"Hermione? Come join us," Remus said softly.

Hermione turned to him, her eyes filling with tears. "WHY? WHY Remus? Why would anyone beat him like that and why wouldn't he tell anyone? Why didn't he tell me?" she asked before breaking down, sobbing.

Emma stood and walked over to her daughter, sweeping her into her arms. She gently pulled the sobbing girl from the bedside to the table. She sat Hermione down on a chair and knelt by her side.

"Love, according to Remus, Harry has been abused for a long time. When that happens to a person, they start to feel as if they somehow deserve the treatment. They feel that if they tell anyone, it will get worse. Sometimes they even feel that they don't deserve to be happy or loved..." She trailed off, looking up at the other two adults for some support.

"Hermione, think of it this way. You know how brave Harry is, but he's been treated both as a conquering hero and a villain by our world. You also know how he hates to share his problems with others. He thinks his problems aren't worthy of our attention. Think how embarrassed he'd be if people found out his muggle relatives were beating and starving him," added Remus

seriously.

“Your friend is going to need a lot of your support, Hermione, not your anger,” Dan said gently. “I want you to think about that carefully. He has known so little in the way of the love of a parent, or even of a friend. Which brings me to another issue. Remus, I think we should hold off on telling Harry what Dumbledore and his Order have been doing to him until we’ve figured out how to stop it.”

“I’m not sure I agree with that. We need to tell him something. But I do agree we’ll need to figure out a way to stop it,” replied Remus seriously.

When the adults began to discuss how much to tell Harry, Hermione picked at her food, her mind in overdrive. *Dad’s right, Harry wasn’t trying to hurt me by not telling me about his home life. And if I really consider it, he’s dropped plenty of hints that his home life was not at all good, she thought. What he needs now more than anything else is a friend who will support him and be there for him, and I’m going to do just that!*

She ate her meal and listened to the adults. They had finally agreed not to tell Harry specifics of anything they weren’t positive of, but would warn him not to trust anyone in the Order, especially Dumbledore. She was about to tell them of Ron Weasley and her suspicions when she heard a noise coming from behind her.

Turning abruptly, she saw Harry looking at her. His hand moved feebly in her direction. “Hermione?” he whispered.

She dashed from her seat to his bedside. She felt his forehead and was relieved to find it still cool. “How do you feel, Harry?” she asked him gently.

“Tired... hungry...”

The adults crowded around him, smiling. Remus called Winky and asked for some soup and bread for Harry.

“Harry, you’ve been sick for a long time, over two weeks. It’s going to take a bit for you to recover your strength, so we want you to relax,” Remus said, the relief evident in his voice.

Emma helped prop Harry up with some pillows while Hermione helped him eat the soup. Every now and again she’d dunk a piece of bread in the soup and let him chew on it. His arms and legs felt so weak that he was grateful for her help.

Hermione couldn’t help smiling down at her friend. He was going to live!

When the soup was gone, he looked around at the Grangers and the room he was in. “Moony, where am I? What’s going on?”

Remus frowned for a moment. “Harry, there’s a lot going on and I promise I will tell you about it when your stronger. But for now, Hermione and her parents have agreed to come help you recover



from your sickness. As to where we are, well, this little house belongs to you now. Sirius left it to you, among other things. It used to be called Black Manor, but I supposed we'll have to change that to Potter Manor now."

Harry leaned back into the pillows and closed his eyes, a single tear slid down his cheek. "No, Moony. If I've got to call it anything, I'll call it Padfoot Manor, in his memory." He smiled as Hermione gripped his hand and gave it a squeeze in support.

"I think that's a wonderful idea, Harry," the graying werewolf said, closing his eyes against a wave of grief. Opening them a moment later, he saw himself reflected in the green eyes staring at him and he smiled softly before saying, "Now, until you're up and about, we'll have someone here with you all the time, even at night. Dan and I will switch off the nights to make sure you're all right. During the day, Emma and Hermione will be here to help you. Also, Dobby and Winky are here to help out. Oh, and a couple things. Harry, Hermione, this manor house is under a masking charm, so you can practice your magic without the Ministry detecting it. And there's a library..."

He trailed off as Hermione bounced to her feet and yelled, "YES!"

Harry smiled at her antics as his eyes closed and he drifted off to sleep, safe for the moment.

---

Ministry of Magic, Department of Law Enforcement...

Amelia Bones sat at her desk, frowning. She was reviewing Harry Potter's file and finding many discrepancies that bothered her a great deal. Apparently, when his parents had been killed, Albus Dumbledore had circumvented the entire placement process. According to the records, the Potter's will had been very specific as to who Harry should go to if anything happened to them. In fact, his parents had listed several people, starting with Sirius Orion Black, as possible guardians and they specifically stated that Lily's sister should not get Harry.

Auror Hill had reported last evening that Harry Potter was not in Privet Drive and hadn't been seen for over a week. His guardians had no desire to file a missing persons report on him. Hill had talked to Amelia last night and he admitted to being suspicious of the muggles. He didn't suspect foul play in Harry's disappearance, but he did suspect Harry had been abused while in the home.

Further reading of the file showed a number of disturbing incidents that seemed to be aimed at discrediting, undermining, or outright injuring the young man, starting with his first year at Hogwarts.

Amelia had been involved in the incident that took place the summer before Harry's fifth year. The Ministry's response to Harry's use of the Patronus charm during that summer had been excessive. She had participated in the trial and it had clearly been a travesty of justice. The trial should never have been held in the first place, and she was glad she'd been able to derail it.

The last incident, Harry's break-in at the Department of Mysteries, clearly didn't fit the pattern. Yes, Harry had led the group, but Voldemort had been behind it. That wasn't the case with the

others, and Amelia wondered just who was pulling the strings.

There was also a strange pattern of withdrawals from the young man's trust account that she couldn't account for. It had taken some extensive digging and prodding the Goblins at Gringots on her part, but they had finally released some of the records. In the past year alone, nearly a million galleons had been withdrawn from his account. Some of the monies had gone to other Gringots accounts and, on at least one occasion, to a muggle account.

Sixty years in law enforcement hones one's instincts and those instincts were telling her something was seriously wrong. It appeared to her that not everyone was looking out for Harry's best interests. She wrote a note to send to Auror Hill, telling him to form an investigative team with two purposes. First, find Harry, then, follow the money trail.

---

The Burrow...

Ginevra Weasley was the youngest of seven children and the only girl. As such, her brothers hovered around her, protecting her like she was some precious object, the crown jewel of the family. In her own mind, she found this particular aspect of her family annoying. Of all her brothers, Ginny was most like the twins, Fred and George.

She also had a Slytherin streak in her a mile wide. Therefore, few who truly knew her would find her current activity surprising. She had been banished to her room a few minutes earlier, and was now using a pair of extendable ears to listen in on a conversation between her mother, Ron and Professor Dumbledore.

"I'm sorry, Molly, but it's out of the question! Until Potter is found, there is no safe way to touch that account. No, it will have to wait until September when he's back in school, I'm afraid," said Dumbledore.

"Oh, very well Albus, I'll wait. But just so you know, we need those galleons come September!" Molly said with asperity.

"Headmaster, have you given any further thought to my problem with Hermione?" Ron asked.

"Yes, Mister Weasley. I agree that we need to get her under our control. To that end, I have instructed Professor Snape to make the appropriate potion for you. Since she won't be back until the start of the school year, I suggest giving her the potion during the welcoming feast," Dumbledore replied. "In the meantime, we have more pressing concerns on our hands. Finding Potter is just one of them. I learned this morning that the Ministry has also set up a task group to find him. We must not allow them to succeed."

Ginny quickly reeled in the ears and leaned back in her chair in a state of shock. *WHAT THE BLOODY HELL IS GOING ON HERE?* She thought furiously. *I need to find a way of contacting Harry or Hermione! Something really strange is going on.*

---

Padfoot Manor, Ireland ...

Harry opened his eyes and looked towards a window. He didn't know it but he had slept for two days straight. Sunlight streamed in through the open window and a gentle breeze ruffling the drapes. He could hear the sound of birds singing and it made him smile. He felt tired and weak, but he'd had enough sleep. He thought about trying to get out of bed, but he was naked under the blankets. Naked?

"What the hell?" He murmured softly.

"Oh, you're awake!" Came a vaguely familiar voice.

He turned to see a brown topped blur approach and sit on the side of the bed.

"Hermione?" He croaked, pulling the blankets up to his chin. There was a sound of throaty laughter.

"No, dear. I'm Emma, Hermione's mum. Hermione is busy right now, looking through your library I'm afraid, but I expect she'll be along shortly."

Emma reached over to the night table, picked up Harry's glasses and put them on for him. Harry blinked for a moment as the world swam into focus.

"Where am I, Mrs. Granger? How did I get here? What's happening?"

"Go easy, Harry. First, let me get you some breakfast and then I'll tell you some of what I know. Remus will probably fill you in on all the details in a day or two, but he's recovering from his transformation."

He sat up on the pillows as Emma placed a breakfast tray on his lap.

As he ate, Emma explained some of what Remus had told her and Dan. She said Remus had come to visit him and found him dreadfully ill. Remus had removed him from the Dursleys home and taken him to Black Manor, where he would be safe. She also told him that Remus had discovered that some people Harry had thought to be friends were actually working against him and that he had to be extremely careful who he talked to.

Frowning, Harry motioned for Emma to continue while he ate.

"Well Harry, that's about it for now. Remus came to us because you had been calling for Hermione while you were sick. He seemed to think that if you trusted her, then maybe he could get us to help you. He didn't want you left alone when he underwent his transformation. Apparently, he got a letter from your godfather that explained how there were some really strange things going on around you. Your godfather managed to steal a copy of your trust account ledger, which shows some pretty hefty withdrawals."

"B-B-But I haven't been to Gringots in a few years," Harry protested.

“Yes, we know. It seems someone else has been helping themselves to your trust money.”

“Alright then, I’ll wait ‘til Remus can talk with me, but in the meantime I have to get better. Are there any clothes in the dresser Mrs. Granger? I need to start getting up and about, but I can’t do it naked,” he said.

Emma rummaged through the dresser and later, turned her back so he could dress. He had just slid out of the bed and started to put on a pair of boxers when Hermione threw open the door. Harry, startled, fell backwards on the bed while Hermione stood, blushing to the roots of her hair.

“Hermione! Turn around,” Harry yelled as he trashed around on the bed, trying to pull up his shorts. Emma was holding her sides, trying to contain her laughter, while her daughter buried her face in her hands. Emma couldn’t help but notice her daughter was peeking between her fingers, which only caused her to laugh harder.

Harry finally got his pants on and calmed down a bit as he continued dressing. He told the two of them it was alright to turn around again.

Harry was facing away from them as he struggled to pull on a shirt and both women noticed the scars on his back. They much like the scars they’d seen on his chest the night before. Hermione vowed silently she’d never let anyone hurt Harry like that again. Emma, seeing Hermione’s fierce expression, smiled knowingly and quietly left the room.

“Harry, come sit at the table for a moment, I’d like to talk to you about something,” Hermione said, a bit nervously. Then she added quite impishly in her best Minerva McGonagall imitation, “Quite impressive, Mr. Potter.”

Harry blushed and stared at her confused as she sat at the table.

Hermione rolled her eyes. “Oh honestly, Harry. I’m not going to bite you. Come sit down. We have some things we need to talk about.”

Harry took a chair and looked at her expectantly.

“How much did my mum tell you, Harry?”

“She said that Remus took me from the Dursleys, and not to trust anyone except for you guys.”

“Yes, I suppose that’s a good start. Did she say why you were sick?”

“No. No one’s said anything about that yet.”

“Tell me Harry, have you ever heard of Matura Magicus?”

Harry looked at her in confusion. Hermione chuckled at his expression.

“I’ll take that as a no, Harry. Alright then, the Matura is a process we all go through. In a normal

witch or wizard, it lasts between three and four hours. It's kind of like puberty. You do know what puberty is, right?"

Harry looked away and said something under his breath. Hermione could barely make it out, but she could have sworn it sounded like, "Well, I like what it's done for you." Hermione heart skipped a few beats and her thoughts went wild for a moment before she recovered.

"Harry, the Matura is like puberty for a wizard or witch. It takes the magic in our body and focuses it so we can use it consciously. It's not something people talk much. It's private and very personal. The amount of time you undergo the Matura is directly related to how powerful you are. For most, it lasts just about three hours."

"And that's what I had? I thought it was more like a flu or something."

"No, the symptoms are flu like, but it was the Matura. The problem is, you should have underwent your Matura on your tenth birthday."

"You went through this also, Hermione? How long was it for you?" he asked her, seriously wanting to know.

"That's personal, Harry. I don't ask you about your private life, do I?" Hermione replied snippily.

Harry ducked his head, staring down at the table. "I'm sorry," he mumbled.

Hermione frowned, as many pieces of what she knew of Harry's life clicked into place in her mind. His constant apologizing was just a reaction to his upbringing. She reached over and grabbed his hand. Startled, he looked up at her.

"My Matura lasted just over four hours, Harry," she said softly.

"That makes you pretty powerful, doesn't it?"

"Well, it does to an extent, but there have been a few cases of longer Maturas. The longest one on record in the book I read was eight hours. You broke that record..."

Harry looked at her with astonishment. "Just how long have I been sick?"

"You looked like you were getting feverish when we got off the Express at Kings Cross Station. A week later, you went missing. So, if I'm right, you've been undergoing the Matura for fifteen days now."

"Great! Another thing to be a freak about," Harry muttered under his breath and looking away.

"Harry Potter! You're not a freak! Just because you had a longer than usual Matura, that doesn't make you a freak."

"It is too abnormal Hermione. I can't even fit into the Wizarding world without being abnormal."

I'm tired of being weird!"

Harry spun out of his chair and threw himself on his bed. He wanted to scream, break things. Like all of this past year, his anger raged and he was having difficulty controlling it. Years of repressed anger were within inches of boiling over and he knew he couldn't let it happen. The last time he had come close, he had destroyed Dumbledore's office and, before that, he had inflated his Aunt Marge. Shuddering, he pulled himself back from the edge. As he did, he noticed that someone was rubbing his back.

He looked up from his pillow.

"Hermione?" he asked.

"Shhh Harry, just relax. You're still weak from your illness. I can't pretend to understand what you're feeling, but I want you to know that you can talk to me about it. You can't keep it all bottled up inside you without it tearing you apart."

Reluctantly he agreed that he would try to talk to her about what he was feeling and why. With Hermione gently stroking the hair on his head, he drifted off to sleep.

---

Grimmauld Place that same evening...

It was a full meeting of the Order of the Phoenix, the group Albus Dumbledore had formed back during the first war with Voldemort. This meeting was entirely different, however. Tonight, they would talk about one Harry Potter.

Dumbledore was getting desperate to find Harry. According to Snape, even Voldemort was now looking for him again. Three different groups and not one had a clue were to find the boy.

Dumbledore's grand plan to make himself more famous than Merlin would sink fast if Potter wasn't found soon. He knew that Harry had to kill Voldemort, the prophecy was infallible in that regard. But once Voldemort was dead, Potter could be eliminated or just pushed to the side, leaving him the most powerful wizard on record.

If Potter could be found, that was.

Tonight he had to light a fire under his people. Few, very few, knew about some of his motives and no one knew about his ambitions. In fact, most of the Order were sincerely opposed to Voldemort and thought the Order was working to stop him.

Dumbledore looked out over the people arrayed around him, then he knocked on the table to garner their attention.

"Friends, we must do everything to find Harry and bring him here. His safety is paramount, even if it means losing the chance to capture Death Eaters," began Dumbledore.

Collectively, the group looked at Dumbledore in shock. This change in mission priority was strange to them. They had known Harry was missing for over a week now, but this seemed to be a radical shift to many.

“We’ve learned that the Ministry and Voldemort are desperately seeking Harry Potter. I can only hope we can find him first. I believe that if Harry is captured by Voldemort, he will attempt to turn him and possibly be successful at it. Without Harry, and I know some of you will find this difficult to accept, but without Harry, we stand no chance of defeating Voldemort.”

“I don’t know what else we can do, Albus. The Ministry is at a loss and seems to be having as little luck as we are. The Ministry has even begun random aerial searches,” stated Arthur Weasley.

“Whatever hole that brat has found to hide in is obviously a deep one,” sneered Professor Snape.

“Has anyone heard from, or seen, Remus Lupin lately?” Dumbledore asked. “He should have been back from Northern Ireland three days ago.”

“I tried to send him an owl two days ago but the owl refused to accept the letter,” said Tonks worriedly.

“Indeed, Ms. Tonks. In the future, I expect you to inform me as soon as these things happen. I guess it’s safe to assume that wherever Remus is, so is Harry Potter. Interesting,” replied Dumbledore, leaning back in his chair. *Remus knew nothing of what was going on. Perhaps he merely took the boy to some place safe where he could enjoy a peaceful holiday? Remus felt a tremendous sense of responsibility towards young Harry,* Dumbledore thought.

“Ronald tried to send Hermione a long distance owl and it was also refused,” added Molly Weasley.

“So Miss Granger has somehow linked up with Harry? Kingsley, has there been any activity at the Grangers?”

“No, Albus. They were seen leaving their house a day early for their trip and Moody followed them until it became clear they were headed to the Muggle airport.”

“It is possible that the Grangers are simply too far away for a post owl, even a long distance one, to want to make that journey. I do believe Miss Granger had mentioned traveling to Australia this summer.

“No, I think the most likely scenario is that Harry is with Remus, who probably wanted to give Harry some quality time after what happened at school. Finding Remus will probably result in our finding Harry. I am somewhat heartened by this. Remus loves the boy and will see no harm comes to him. Nonetheless, we should make every effort to find him and bring him back to Headquarters.”

---

Ministry of Magic, Department of Law Enforcement...

“Auror Tonks is here to see you as you requested, Director,” said her secretary.

“Send her in please.”

A moment later Nymphadora Tonks walked into the office. Her immediate reaction was a mental “*Oh Shit!*” as she saw the Director looking over her personnel file. She guessed that her initial reaction was justified when she saw that Miles Masters, the Ministry’s leading Obliviator sat at the Director’s side. On a table in the corner were several stacks of documents.

“I’m curious, Miss Tonks,” Amelia said in a frosty tone. “Just where do your loyalties lie these days?”

Tonks blinked in confusion. “Ma’am?”

“I’m asking where your loyalties lie, Tonks. On the one hand, you’re one of our brightest up and coming young Aurors. On the other, you’re a member of a marginally legal, paramilitary organization run by Albus Dumbledore known as the Order of the Phoenix.”

“I can assure you Director, there is no division of my loyalties between my job and my outside activities,” said Tonks in a frosty tone.

“I should warn you, Miss Tonks, right here and now, you’re only a short step away from being arrested. Some ‘things’ have come to light in regards to your organization, your activities, and one Harry Potter, which are most disturbing. Do you see that table loaded with documents, Auror Tonks?” she asked as she stood and walked over to it.

“These documents,” Amelia said, pointing to one pile, “contain evidence that Mr. Potter was illegally placed with his muggle relatives. I would like to point out that more than half of this pile are Harry’s medical records, detailing dozens of broken bones and injuries sustained during the first nine years he lived with those people.”

Tonks blanched and paled when she saw the size of the stack of papers on the table. *Abuse? He’s been abused by those muggles?* she thought.

Then Amelia pointed to the smallest pile. “This pile contains information documenting Mr. Potter’s time at Hogwarts and his interaction with the Ministry. I might further add that Mr. Potter’s dealt with more dark wizards in his short school career than many full time Aurors. There is some very interesting information in here. But the most interesting information isn’t in this pile of documents. Oh no Auror, its in the third pile.”

Amelia moved to the third pile and placed her hand on them. “This pile shows very interesting financial transactions from a child of one of the richest Wizarding families. Tell me Auror, did you ever notice that Harry has but one set of school clothes and the rest of the time he wears only slightly better than rags?”



Tonks could only shake her head. She liked Harry, he was a good kid as kids go, and she was still struggling over the abuse issue.

“It’s very interesting to note that, in the past year, nearly one million galleons have been removed from Mr. Potter’s trust vault. The money has been transferred to several accounts, owned by members of the Order and his muggle relatives. We’ve since discovered that Harry has not received any of this money. His clothing hasn’t been replaced and he hasn’t received any better care. It was just taken from him. Some would say stolen from him.”

Amelia walked back to her chair while Tonks stared at the massive pile of documents, her mind churning.

“Now I ask you again, Auror. Where do your loyalties lie? Do you uphold the law, or do you work for Albus Dumbledore?” asked the Director coldly.

Tonks turned back from staring at the table and straightened in her chair. “Director, say the word and I’ll take a team to bring in Dumbledore,” she said angrily.

Miles Masters slowly relaxed next to Amelia. The Director leaned back in her chair, a cold smile on her face.

“Very good, Auror Tonks. Now, I’ll let you in on a little secret. There is an ongoing investigation into Dumbledore’s organization and I want you to play a part in that investigation. Here’s what you’re going to be doing...”

---

Padfoot Manor, Ireland ...

Over the next several days, Hermione, Remus and Hermione’s parents discovered several unusual things about Harry. First, Harry seemed to have developed the ability to use wandless magic at a very high degree of sophistication.

Second, Harry was a growing young man. Literally growing right before their eyes. Harry, in the course of several days, shot up from his short height of five foot five to five feet eleven and his upper body bulked up considerably. Another change that surprised everyone was the fact that Harry no longer needed his glasses. The best explanation anyone could offer was his that magic was imposing upon his body changes that should have taken place over the course of five years. The Matura, in releasing Harry’s magic, had allowed his body to wash away the physical effects of years of abuse and starvation that had kept his growth stunted.

Remus and the others had filled Harry in on what they knew for sure, and he had been deeply hurt by their actions and the sense of betrayal he felt. The idea that Dumbledore might be involved in something so underhanded didn’t seem to bother him as much as the fact that the Weasley’s might be involved. Hermione had reluctantly told them all about her suspicions about Ron.

Once the information had been imparted to Harry, he retreated into himself and rarely spoke

unless spoken to. He seemed to give trust easily, but was quite unforgiving when it came to betrayal.

Harry and Hermione took long walks outside of the house. As long as they stayed on the ground they were undetectable and safe. It was during these walks that Hermione began to finally understand what made Harry tick. His years of abuse had left him with a very low sense of personal worth. Harry just believed his life wasn't worth as much as anyone else's.

Slowly Hermione got Harry to talk about his life with the Dursley's. It hadn't been easy for Hermione to listen to. She never thought of herself as having much of a maternal instinct, but Harry's tales were enough to make her blood boil. Sometimes he didn't want to talk about it and he'd rage at a question or try to storm off. Hermione would always follow him and eventually get him talking again. His rages were terrible to see, and during them there would be bursts of uncontrolled magic. But no matter how out of control the magic got, he never harmed her. Sometimes during his explanations he'd break out weeping and Hermione would hold him long enough for him to regain control.

The worst part of all wasn't the rage that Harry would sometimes express. It was his hunger for things she took for granted. He had desperately wanted his Aunt and Uncle to love him and they had rejected him. He felt that was somehow his fault. He hungered for emotions and feelings that he had never experienced.

Hermione was torn. Having been hurt by Ron, she wasn't sure she wanted to get involved with anyone, let alone Harry. But his physical changes over the past few days had made him a major distraction. When she added in his emotional problems, she realized that anyone who got involved with Harry would have to go very slowly and carefully. Logic said she should avoid a romantic entanglement with him, but her heart suggested otherwise.

At the moment, Hermione sat with her back against a tree. She was pretending to read a book, but she was really engaging in what was fast becoming her favorite pastime, Harry watching. Harry knew she was there, but he was busy trying to coax a squirrel into taking a peanut from his hand. She was stuck by how gentle he was. In some ways, he had an almost child-like wonder of the world, and in others, he had the cynicism of an old man who'd lived a hard life.

Hermione smiled as Harry coaxed the little animal right into his hand. The squirrel sat contentedly in his hand as he fed it peanut after peanut until its cheeks bulged with them. Then his eyes narrowed sharply. With a sudden intake of breath, he placed his little friend on the ground and one hand shot straight upward, emitting a flash of bright light.

When the light faded, Harry stood and walked over to Hermione, offering her a hand up.

"Harry? What was that?" she asked.

"Ministry Aurors on brooms flying overhead. I extended the Fidelis charm to cover the property in a bubble instead of a wall so it won't be visible," he replied.

“We’d better go find Remus and my parents and let them know.”

Without thinking about what he was doing, Harry grabbed Hermione’s hand and they went in search of Remus, Dan and Emma.

They found the adults sitting on the veranda enjoying a bit of afternoon tea. The adults smiled at their arrival, noticing that they were holding hands. Harry suddenly blushed and released Hermione’s hand. She, in turn, blushed when she realized that he had been holding her hand all the way back.

“Remus,” Harry started, “we need to go over the wards for this place. We just had a flyover by Ministry Aurors. I took care of it by extending the Fidelis charm into a bubble over the property, but I want to make sure the rest of the wards are alright.”

Remus’ jaw dropped in shock. A bubble shaped Fidelis was supposedly impossible!

“Um... right Harry. How about we do that now? Hermione can stay with her parents while we check the wards,” Remus replied, standing up and taking Harry back into the house.

“How are you and Harry getting along?” asked Dan with a smirk.

“Dad,” she said playfully, smacking him on the arm. “He’s my friend and I’m trying to help him!”

“Oh, well it seems to me you and your ‘friend’ found hand holding enjoyable,” Emma added with a grin.

Hermione blushed and buried her face in her hands. Emma reached over and put her hand on her daughter’s shoulder. “It’s alright, Hermione. Just give him time. He seems like a very polite, fine young man. I’d say one of his problems is he’s in totally uncharted waters right now.”

“I know, Mum.”

---

93 Diagon Alley, Weasleys Wizarding Wheezes...

Ginny Weasley stepped from the floo into the spacious store. She had agreed to spend several days a week helping her brothers, but only under the condition that they didn’t test any pranks on her. And they did pay her for her work.

Today was different. She wanted to talk to her brothers about what was going on at home. Fred and George could be serious, but not if they were in the same room together. There was some inherent flaw in their makeup that prevented their serious bone from kicking in if they were together. So today, Ginny would have to channel her mother if she was going to get anything out of them.

Ginny brushed the ash off her robes and looked around the shop. There were only a few customers

about. Her brothers, Fred and George, were behind the counter.

“OY! Gin-Gin,” shouted Fred.

“Your not supposed to be here today,” added George.

“It’s a day off for you,” Fred continued.

Ginny gave her brothers her best Mum look and pointed at George.

“You! Mind the counter while I talk with your evil twin,” she hissed, then she pointed at Fred. “Come along, you. I want to speak with you,” she added, flawlessly imitating Molly at her worst. Fred quailed for a moment before following her into the back room.

Shutting the door, Ginny rounded on her brother and glared at him with her hands on her hips. “I want to know what the bloody hell is going on! First, I find out that Ron has put a three hundred galleon deposit on a new Nimbus broom, then he’s forced to cancel the order because Harry is missing? Suddenly he’s acting like he hates Harry and would like nothing better than to beat him up. Then I hear him discussing slipping a potion to Hermione at the welcoming feast with Dumbledore...”

Fred’s eyes grew larger and larger as Ginny ranted. Finally, he stopped her by the simple expedient of grabbing her and putting a hand over her mouth. Struggling to the door, he yelled to his brother.

“OY! George! Close up the shop and get back here! NOW!”

Ginny continued to struggle in her brother’s arms, and she managed to land a few decent kicks to his legs before George arrived. George took one look at the scene and his eyes popped wide open.

“Ginny, stop it,” began Fred. “I’m going to let you go in a second. I want you to explain slowly and carefully now, to both of us.”

Fred released her and she bounced a few steps away before turning on the two of them.

“Ginny,” pleaded Fred. “Explain it slowly again.”

Ginny huffed for another moment then told her brothers the tale. George had recognized as soon as he entered the backroom that the situation was serious, so he prudently withheld any joking comments. When Ginny finally wound down, she looked at her two older brothers expectantly.

Fred looked at George. In that strange bond that exists between twins, they seemed to hold a silent conversation and come to a decision.

“Ginny, you’ve just given us more confirmation to something we were suspecting,” Fred said sadly, holding up his hand in a bid for her silence when it appeared she was going to say something.

“A couple months back,” he continued, “Dumbledore approached us because we had been asking for some advice on how to deposit money directly into Harry’s Gringots account. He tried to convince us to put it into an ‘Order’ account instead. George here joked about Dumbledore wanting to steal Harry’s money. But as time went on, it sounded more and more logical. I mean, why else deposit it to an account that Harry can’t access?”

“I can’t say I like this business with Ron and Hermione one bit. I think Harry and Hermione need to be warned somehow,” stated George.

“You guys are here in the Alley all day. Keep an eye out for Harry or Hermione. Maybe they’ll show up here needing something,” replied Ginny.

Fred and George nodded to their sister and she headed out to use their floo to return to the Burrow.

---

Padfoot Manor, Ireland...

It was early July and Harry was having breakfast on the balcony of his bedroom when Hermione and her parents joined him. Something was happening between them, but by an unspoken agreement, they had decided to take it real slow. Harry was getting more comfortable telling her things, but for him, it wasn’t an easy or even pleasant process opening up after so many years of hiding his hurt.

A few times she ask him something that, much to his own embarrassment, would reduce him to tears. Then she’d hold him and he’d cling to her, drawing what comfort he could from her. He was slowly coming to grips with his past, thanks mostly to Hermione and her parents.

The Grangers had surprised both Remus and Harry in how willing they were to help, especially when Harry had finally sat down with all of them and explained why Voldemort was so interested in seeing him dead. Hermione wept when she first heard the prophecy, and her father, in particular, took a grim view of the Wizarding world in general. Since that day, they had each offered to help in any way they could. That sort of unconditional support was new to Harry.

Hermione dropped two dusty old volumes on the breakfast table as she and her parents joined him at the table. Harry eyed the old books and looked at Hermione questioningly. She had a look about her that he had learned to dread. It was the same look she’d have when she wanted him and Ron to study.

“Harry, I found a couple of wonderful books in your library,” Hermione started with a manic grin.

Harry reached over and took the two books from the table and looked at them. *Occulumency for Masters and Beginners*, by *Cyrus T. Tubertoath* , read the first book. The other was an advanced potions book called *Potions of the Ages by Vander Morton* . Handing Hermione the books, he grimaced. She knew he was a lot like Ron when it came to studying.

Sighing, he said, “Alright Hermione, I know I need to learn Occulumency anyway, but I’ll make a

deal with you. We'll split the days in half. Mornings for studying, and in the afternoon, I'll teach you how to have fun, including learning to ride a broom."

Hermione turned red and immediately started to sputter. "H-H-Harry Potter! I know how to have fun! And I certainly do not need to learn how to fly a broom."

Harry rolled his eyes. "Even when we take a walk you bring along a book. I know you love your books and love to learn, but you're missing the world Hermione. Please? Try it for a week and if you don't like it, you can go back to spending all day reading."

Dan and Emma burst out laughing. Hermione sat back in her chair with her arms folded across her chest, looking at him and making huffing sounds.

"Harry," began Emma with a laugh, "if you can make our Hermione learn to have fun, then you must be more powerful than she seems to think you are."

"MUM," Hermione shouted as she stood up.

Harry's seeker's reflexes kicked in and his hand shot out to grasp her wrist gently. He pulled her back into her seat, and then he turned to face her fully. Hermione had trouble tearing her eyes from his emerald gaze. His eyes glowed with power and a sadness and hurt that would never go away. Hermione was particularly vulnerable to his gaze. Since his recovery, his green eyes seemed to radiate a power which put even Dumbledore to shame. When he was angry, his eyes seemed to spark with lightening flashes. When he was happy, they seemed to be almost lit up from behind by the power of his magic. They were eyes she could stare into for hours at a time, windows to Harry's soul.

"Hermione... You are probably one of the last few true friends of my own age I have left. By your own words, Ron has betrayed me. Who knows what the rest of the Weasley's think? I don't intend to force you to do something you'd hate, and I'm more than willing to spend time every day studying and practicing with you. All I'm saying is, in the afternoons, we try to have a little fun," he said quietly.

Dan and Emma watched the interplay with amusement. Hermione had all the earmarks of being the Wizarding version of a workaholic. But right now she was staring into her friend's eyes and her resolve was clearly weakening.

"Oh, alright Harry. But I'm going to hold you to the studying and practicing," she said with a half smile.

Harry grabbed her hand and gave it a quick squeeze before releasing it and grabbing the Occulumenty book.

"I suspect I'd best start with this one, then. What about you, Hermione? Potions?" he asked.

"Oh, Remus asked me if I'm able to brew the Wolfsbane potion. I told him the potion room here

didn't have all the ingredients, so he's going into Diagon Alley today to pick up enough to make several batches, just in case I make a mistake the first time."

Harry chuckled. "Hermione, in the six years I've known you, unless Snape was deliberately ruining your potion, you've never gotten one wrong yet. Every one has been right the first time."

Hermione couldn't help but preen under Harry's praise.

---

Ministry of Magic, Minister's office...

"Minister, Director Bones is here. She's asking for some of your time."

"Please send her in, Janet," Minister Fudge told his secretary.

A moment later, Amelia Bones walked into the room. Fudge felt no great affection for his Director of Law Enforcement, but even he had to admit she was competent in her job.

"Ah Amelia, so nice to see you again. What can I do for you today?" asked Fudge.

"Minister, thank you for seeing me on such short notice. I wanted to speak to you about something we're investigating," came her reply.

Fudge motioned for her to continue as he poured himself a cup of tea.

"Minister, some of the things I'm about to reveal to you cannot be told to anyone else. We have reason to suspect that there is a some sort of major problem going on between Harry Potter and Albus Dumbledore. In fact, I am very concerned for Mr. Potter's well being at this point.

"We have reason to suspect Albus Dumbledore has been helping himself to Mr. Potter's trust account, and there are definite irregularities involving Mr. Potter's placement with his relatives, contrary to his parent's will. His placement in that environment has led to an unusually high number of personal injuries to Mr. Potter..."

Fudge leaned back in his comfortable executive chair and thought about it for a moment. Last year he had allowed a smear campaign to be waged against both Dumbledore and Potter. Maybe he had been wrong. Maybe it wasn't Potter and Dumbledore? Maybe Potter was just a pawn in Dumbledore's game? He continued to muse for a moment longer when something Amelia said snapped him back to attention.

"Missing? Potter's missing?" he asked sharply.

"Yes, sir. As far as we can tell, his relatives picked him up in early June from the Express. He spent roughly a week with them, then vanished without a trace," Amelia replied.

"Director, do you think he's gone into hiding or has something worse happened to him?" asked Fudge.

“We have no reason to suspect foul play at this time, Minister. If You-Know-Who had gotten his hands on him, Mr. Potter would have been killed and he’d be publicly bragging about it. No, I suspect he is in hiding.”

“Director, I am authorizing you to put the full weight of your department on this if need be. And any other department you might need, for that matter. I want Potter found and I want him to know that the Government will support and protect him. Don’t pressure him, but if possible, let him know he can feel safe coming to us for aid and assistance,” said Fudge.

“As you wish, Minister. I’ll get my department right on it,” Amelia said as she stood up.

Fudge never noticed her leaving. *Maybe I was wrong about Potter*, he thought. *In any event, if I can use Potter, even slightly, against Dumbledore, then it will be worth helping him.*

---

### **Author’s Notes:**

Well with the first chapter, there are few notes to put in place. Read and Review.

A couple stories I’d like to recommend to people.

The Refiners Fire by Abraxan. This is a sixth year fic and its one of the best I have read. MUCHO RECOMMENDO!!

The Father by black-phoenix-warrior, a work in progress, super Harry fic, but very well done. Also highly recommended.

For all you canon pickers out there. One word. DON’T. Sit on your fingers, take up knitting. This story is going to be so far off canon it’s not funny. It is the intent of us to take this entirely AU!!

We are doing this deliberately. Why? Because we want to. Wait ‘til you get to the scene where Dumbledore and McGonagall are bathing in Lime Jello, drinking Tequila shots and playing saxophones while Lemon Drops wearing Cowboy hats dance in a chorus line. Just kidding. Well maybe. Never can tell.

And now continuing with my Pet Peeves.

Things I hate in Fan Fics. Author’s begging for reviews. I ABSOLUTELY LOATHE Authors posting notes like, “Gee, thanks for the reviews, now I’ll post the next chapter when I see another twenty reviews!”

This is low, if you’re writing fan fic for reviews only, don’t bother writing.



## **Sunset Over Britain** **The Lord and Allies**

Standard Disclaimer: THIS IS NOT TO CANON. IT'S AN AU SIXTH YEAR FICTION. Once upon a time in a galaxy far far away I owned Harry Potter, but I lost Harry Potter and Chewbacca in a poker game with JK Rowling. So it's all hers. I bow before her awesome presence. Damn Wookie!

---

### Sunset over Britain Chapter 2

---

Diagon Alley...

Remus Lupin kept the hood of his cloak up to cover his face as he apparated to the Leaky Cauldron. He had every faith in Hermione's potion making efforts, but he'd order a set of Wolfsbane doses along with the regular ingredients, just in case.

He made his way carefully to the back of the Leaky Cauldron, his enhanced senses working on overdrive, trying to spot trouble. He had a portkey in his hand. If necessary, all he needed to do was give it a squeeze to activate it.

The apothecary he wanted wasn't far from Ollivanders. He quickly made his way to the store and checked the windows to see how crowded it was. Entering the small shop, he crossed to the counter and made his request to the shopkeeper, who bustled about, getting the necessary ingredients and potions.

As Remus watched the clerk, a voice whispered in his ear.

"Remus, we need to talk," the voice was familiar.

Turning slightly, he saw a non-descript man standing next to him.

"Tonks?" he muttered under his breath with a sinking feeling in his stomach.

"Yes. Now get your stuff and follow me out, Remus. Either we talk or I'll haul your ass in for questioning."

Remus sighed. He knew going to Diagon Alley was a risk. Silently he followed her out of the shop after collecting his purchases. Remus' mind was a whirl with possible courses of action. The one thing he couldn't do was let Tonks take him back to Grimmauld Place, or even the Ministry. That left him with few options. He could overpower her, his werewolf reflexes and strength would make that easy, but he couldn't do that in the broad light of Diagon Alley. Besides, he really didn't want to hurt her. Maybe if he could get far enough to use his portkey?

Exiting the shop, the non-descript man grabbed his arm. Remus quickly spotted three other Aurors closing in on them. With his choices reduced to one and unable to shake Tonks' hand from his arm, he cursed savagely and gave his portkey a squeeze. They vanished from Diagon Alley.

---

Hogwarts Headmaster's Office...

Minerva McGonagall, Severus Snape and Filius Flitwick sat in front the Headmaster's desk for this special meeting he had called. After the obligatory offer of lemon drops, Dumbledore began the meeting.

"I called you all here today so that you could prepare in advance. I'm convinced that this coming year will be a pivotal one in the life of Harry Potter. He stands on the cusp of his life and has a choice to make, to remain faithful to the light, or to turn to the dark. We can, of course, influence that decision as much as possible, but we must be watchful and see that he does not turn into another Voldemort.

"But Albus," squeaked Flitwick, "do you honestly think Harry would turn dark? I have watched the boy since he started and he seems to be the most light-oriented boy I have ever met. His grades are good and his loyalty to his friends and to his house are even stronger than his father's."

"Yes Filius, I believe there is a chance this year could see a change in Harry's behavior. That is why I have decided to lighten his load this year. I am not revoking his lifelong Quidditch ban, despite Minerva's protests, nor will he be made a prefect. I will, however, allow him to continue his Defense club, under the supervision of Severus here. In the meantime, we must all watch him closely.

Minerva frowned. "Albus, I will follow your directions, but I want to go on record as stating that I, for one, believe your actions will only succeed in driving him away from us."

"Believe me Minerva, I wouldn't be doing this if I didn't truly feel it was necessary."

"How do you want us to do this then, Albus?" she asked.

"I have asked young Mister Weasley to speak with several of his friends and get them to keep a watch over Harry, mostly your Gryffindors, I'm afraid, Minerva. Severus will observe his Defense club to ensure Harry is not teaching any dark art spells to the members, or practicing them himself. I will also ask Severus to begin again with the Occulumency lessons when he returns to school.

“As head of his house Minerva, you will get reports from Mister Weasley and relay them to me. Filius will have to contend himself to merely watching him in class,” Dumbledore concluded.

“I still think you should reconsider his Quidditch ban, Albus,” Minerva said.

“So convinced you can’t win the Quidditch cup without him, Minerva?” sneered Snape.

“Enough! My decision is made and it’s final. I will not listen to you to argue about the Quidditch cup again,” Dumbledore snapped, dismissing them from his office.

---

Padfoot Manor, Library...

Harry had been reading the Occulumency book Hermione had found and had discovered something fascinating. Though the book contained just over two hundred pages, he had finished reading it in less than an hour. It seemed as though he had read and absorbed the book into his mind. He could recall any page in the book and it’s contents, but more importantly, he had managed in that single reading to grasp its concepts almost as if he had sucked the information from the book. Setting the book down, he leaned back, closed his eyes, and applied the techniques to building his own mental shields.

Within minutes he had an impressive set of shields that could stop most intrusions. He was about to apply the technique of reflexive Occulumency when he heard a disturbance from the foyer of the large house.

He jumped from his chair and ran to the foyer with Hermione hot on his heels. Arriving in the foyer, he saw Remus being held by a strange man. Without thinking or drawing a wand, he shouted, “*Stupefy* !”

The stranger shouted, “Protego,” putting up a shield, while Remus shouted, “WAIT!”

Harry’s stunner shattered the stranger’s shield, and hitting him in the chest. Both the stranger and Remus were thrown right through the front door and landing a good thirty feet from it on the lawn.

Harry and Hermione rushed out to help Remus, who was dizzily trying to get to his feet.

“Merlin, Harry! If that was a stunning spell, I’d hate to see what your other spells look like,” exclaimed Remus.

Dan and Emma stood watching from the door as Harry removed the wand the stranger was holding. He was about to bind the man when Remus stopped him.

“Don’t, Harry. You don’t recognize her, but that’s Tonks. I want to hear what she has to say. I would have sworn she was about to have me arrested.”

Harry scowled and shook his head, looking at the very stunned witch. “Alright then, let’s get her

inside on a couch and we'll see what she has to say. If necessary, I'll *Oblivate* her and send her on her way."

"Harry..." began Remus.

"No, Remus. She's a member of the Order and I don't trust her. She's endangering Hermione and the rest of us. Be thankful I won't do any worse than a memory charm," Harry stated flatly.

As he spoke, he stood fully erect and his eyes seemed to dance with the power behind them. His tone was cold and harsh. Hermione could tell that, despite the progress he had made opening up to her and reconciling himself with his past, the most recent betrayal had hurt him deeply.

Remus stared worriedly at Harry before levitating the Metamorphmagus into the house. Everyone followed the werewolf into the house, passing the wreckage that used to be the front door to the house. Harry stopped in the foyer and with a wave of his hand the doors were repaired. Turning quickly, he followed the others.

Once in the living room, Remus laid Tonks on the couch and cast a quick *Ennervate* to wake her. She groaned and slowly opened her eyes.

"Cor blimey! What the ruddy hell was that?" she asked, looking up at Remus.

"That, Tonks, was Harry's stunning spell," replied Remus softly with a bit of a smirk.

Tonks glanced up at the people in the room, taking in the Grangers and Hermione, Remus and Harry. Spotting Harry, she jumped off the couch and walked over to him. She got within three feet before bouncing off the shield he had erected, a shield that was not visible. Her brow furrowed at the idea of a barrier between them.

"Harry...", started Remus.

"NO! How do you know she doesn't have a portkey on her, Remus?" He then turned his gaze on Tonks. "What were your plans for Remus? I know he wouldn't have brought you here unless something had gone wrong. Were you going to drag him Dumbledore and let the old man crawl through his mind? Or maybe take him to the Ministry so Umbridge's crowd could torture themselves a werewolf?" he asked scathingly.

She staggered backwards from the sheer power rolling off him, waves of it. The house groaned from the pressure of so much magic and Hermione stepped up quickly to Harry's side, touching his arm. He seemed to relax a little and his magic bled away.

"I suggest you start talking, Tonks. And it had better be good, or I'll send you back to Dumbledore to report as little more than a vegetable," he said coldly.

"Harry, relax," Remus began. "We don't know what she wants. Let's give her a chance to talk first before you do anything."

Tonks kept glancing at Harry. He had changed considerably in the last few weeks since she had seen him. He was taller than she was now and his power seemed incredible. His simple stunning charm had blown through a shield that was supposed to be able to handle spells a lot more powerful.

“Harry, we’ve been looking all over for you. The Order is looking for you, V-V-Voldemort is looking for you, everyone. I only wanted to talk to Remus. I didn’t know the other Aurors were there. Remus saw them before I did and portkeyed us away,” she said.

“And whom do you represent, Tonks? I seem to remember you being both an Order member and an Auror,” Harry replied. He was leaning against a wall now, his arms crossed over his chest, staring at her. The eerie light behind his eyes made her nervous.

“I’m not here to bring you back to Dumbledore, Harry. I’m here because Amelia Bones is worried about your safety. We’ve been investigating your case and we’ve uncovered a fair number of irregularities that shouldn’t have happened. I’m here because the Ministry wants to know you’re protected.”

“The Ministry? They won’t be able to do a damn thing with Fudge in charge, Tonks. Dumbledore will run all over him,” Harry snorted.

“Fudge may be an incompetent idiot, but Amelia is running your case personally, with Fudge’s support. I know you don’t have reason to trust a lot of people, but there are people on your side that you don’t know about,” Tonks stated quietly.

Harry ran his hand through his hair, which had started to grow of late. It wasn’t long yet, but it was less unruly than it had been. He turned to look at Hermione and Remus, the appeal evident in his face. Hermione could only shrug. She was as unsure as he was. Remus nodded and turned back to Tonks.

“Why don’t you tell us what you know and what you can offer Harry? I should warn you, he’s aware of what Dumbledore has been doing and has lost all faith in the Order of the Phoenix and its membership. We,” he said, pointing to Dan, Emma, Hermione and himself, “are the only reason why he hasn’t already *Obliviate* d your memory.”

Tonks cringed and looked around at the people in the room. For the next couple hours, she told them what the Ministry had discovered and why she thought the Ministry was so willing to support Harry against Dumbledore. When she finally wound down, Remus recounted some of what they had found out and explained why Harry was so mistrusting of others. When Remus got around to explaining why he had removed Harry from Privet Drive, he opted to tell her about Harry’s Matura in vague terms. He left out how long he had been sick. Tonks was surprised to hear how late his Matura was, and she was visibly angry when Remus said he felt the lateness was due to his abuse at the hands of the Dursley’s.

Harry stood silent during the conversation, watching Remus and Tonks talk. It slowly dawned on him that both of them had feelings for each other. He trusted Remus implicitly and started to feel

that if he could trust Remus, then he had to trust Remus' feelings for Tonks as well.

Tonks kept glancing at Harry as Remus spoke. She seemed saddened by the fact that Harry had suddenly grown up. Sure, he was just going on sixteen, but he looked and acted more like a twenty year old. And his sense of presence was incredible. Muggles might not be able to sense it, but it hammered against anyone magical.

Harry glanced at the clock on the mantel, sighed and broke into the conversation. "Remus, we need to put an end to this. I'm going to be blunt. Do you trust her? Say the word and I'll go along with it."

"Yes, I think I'm willing to trust her, Harry," the older man replied.

Harry eyed him carefully. "Now tell me you trust her with your head, not your heart, since you obviously fancy her."

Hermione looked shocked for a moment, and then started to snicker. Her parents smiled as Remus started to sputter, "I do not fancy her!"

"Oh, come on Remus! I can see it all over you when you talk to her," Harry replied grinning. "You lean in close and talk in soft tones, you make a lot of eye contact and your hands keeps inching forward like you want to hold hers."

Tonks looked between the two in amazement. Finally she turned to Remus. "Is it true, Remus?" she asked shyly. Remus looked at her, blushed and suddenly he found his feet very interesting.

"I think that we should let Tonks and Remus talk alone for a while. Let's go into the study until they're done," suggested Emma, smiling at the two of them.

Once in the study, Harry sat down and picked up his book again. With a frown, he turned to Hermione. "The Matura... does it only affects magic or can it affect other things?" he asked her quietly.

Hermione paused and thought carefully before answering. "I'm not sure, Harry. No one has undergone a Matura as long as you have. If pressed, I'd have to say it's affected other things as well about you. Look at yourself. You have grown a good six inches in the past three weeks, you've probably gained a good thirty pounds in muscle mass, even your hair is growing out. It's logical to assume it's affected you in other ways."

Harry nodded thoughtfully. He stood and walked over to a bookshelf and pulled down another book. Scanning it quickly, he walked back to join Hermione.

"Harry, what happened to the volume on Occulumentency?" she asked curiously, eyeing the new book.

Harry shrugged. "That's why I asked if there were any other changes. I finished that book already."

Hermione's jaw dropped. "You finished it? You barely had an hour with that book!"

"I can't explain it, Hermione. It wasn't like normal reading. It was more like absorbing the book. Half an hour after reading the book, I'd built a complete set of shields. Since then, without even thinking about it, I've been reinforcing them."

"Is that why you've picked another book Harry?"

Harry looked sheepishly at the volume in his hands. "I was curious to try a new subject and see if I could pick it up like the other book."

"So what's that book?"

"Um... 'Magical Transportation, a Guide to Things the Ministry Doesn't Want You to Know'," he replied.

Hermione crossed her arms over her chest and eyed him suspiciously. "Harry, that book is illegal."

"I know Hermione, but considering what I'm up against, some of this might be useful to us," he replied.

"Well, it's bigger than the first book, so maybe it is a good way to test your ability to read and retain the information," she said, a little put out.

He nodded and sat down, eagerly opening his book. Hermione watched as Harry started reading. He was turning pages at an unbelievable rate. In less than an hour he closed the book, leaned back and closed his eyes for several minutes. Then he leaned forward, tapped the book twice with his wand and murmured, "Portus".

Standing he picked up the book and vanished. He reappeared in front of the bookshelf, where he put the book back and pulled another from the shelf.

Smiling, he walked back to Hermione and leaned down to whisper in her ear.

"You're still the smartest and prettiest witch I know, Hermione."

Hermione felt chills running up and down her spine. She shivered and was unsure whether it was because of his warm breath on her or that he called her pretty. *Is Harry flirting with me?* She wondered.

Meanwhile, Emma was tugging on Dan's shoulder to get his attention from the book he was reading. Both of them watched as Hermione blushed and Harry sat down next to her.

Hermione frowned, then an idea hit her. She summoned a quill and some parchment.

Leaving the table, she started walking up and down the bookshelves, making notes and absently

humming to herself. Occasionally she'd pull a book off the shelf and levitate it back to the table.

"Uh oh, Harry, better run," Emma said, grinning.

"Most definitely. Run Harry, she's humming," added Dan, trying hard not to laugh.

"Humming? What does that mean?" Harry asked, confused. Hermione never hummed!

"It means she's got a new project, Harry, and I suspect that project is you," replied Dan. "With you reading and retaining things, I suspect she's picking out books for you to read."

Harry was banging his head against the table as the door to the study opened admitting Remus and Tonks. Unsurprisingly, they were holding hands. Remus looked startled to see his ward's behavior and he turned to look questioningly at Dan and Emma.

"Oh, he'll be fine. Hermione has decided to make him her study partner and is busy building up a book list for some light summer reading," Dan said with a smug grin. As he spoke, three more books floated down the aisle between the shelves and added themselves to the considerable pile.

Remus blinked, looking at the growing pile, then yelled for Hermione to come join them. A moment later, she came running lightly down the aisle and stopped when she saw Harry, still banging his head against the table.

"Oh really, Harry! Think about it. There are only about thirty books there. At an hour apiece, that's just a few day's reading for you," she said snippily. Harry looked up to eye her warily, then he sighed heavily in defeat.

"Alright you two, worry about that later. Let's talk about what we've decided to do," said Remus trying not to laugh at the look on Harry's face.

Tonks walked over to Harry and took a seat next to him. "Harry, I don't pretend to understand all of what has happened to you since I saw you last, but I'm trying to help you. What I would like to do is arrange for you to meet with Amelia Bones. I know you won't come to the Ministry building, so we've decided to meet in muggle London. I'd like you, Remus, Amelia and I to sit down and plan for your safety, and to put those that have wronged you where they belong.

"I'm not going to lie to you, kiddo. This won't be easy or quick. Dumbledore is chief Magistrate of the Wizengamot. That means our case has to be airtight and waterproof. Building that sort of case will take time and a lot of planning. Some of the things you might be asked to do may be dangerous, or unpleasant. But if you'll let us help you, we will. You're not entirely alone in this Harry. Besides the Ministry, and myself, I ran across the Weasley twins and they are dying to find you. They said they have important information for you, but wouldn't tell me what it was about."

Harry looked into her eyes, wishing he had read a book on Legilimency. He wasn't sure of her motives, but perhaps there was a way to protect himself and the Grangers.

"Alright Tonks, I'll agree to your meeting. But first, I'll want your witches oath that you will not



reveal the location of where we are without first asking Remus or me first. Also, I want Hermione and her parents at the meeting, and Susan Bones,” said Harry.

Hermione looked at Harry and frowned. She sat down in a chair next to her parents and glared at Harry.

Tonks smiled. “Very well. I give you my oath as a witch that I will not reveal your location to anyone without your prior approval.” Standing, she looked at Remus.

Remus coughed and looked embarrassed. “Would you like me to show you out, Tonks?” he asked nervously.

“I’d like that, Remus,” she replied shyly. Remus opened the door and led Tonks from the room.

Harry noticed the glare coming from a certain bushy haired book witch and sighed. He looked at her apologetically and said, “Think about it. Amelia wouldn’t dare bring her niece to a trap. If Susan does show up, it should be safe.”

Hermione’s gaze softened and she smiled gently at him. Harry leaned back and looked at the stack of books she had selected.

“Alright Hermione, I’ll read them. But this afternoon we’re going to try that pool out back. Remus spent yesterday cleaning it up. Besides, this looks like the only chance I’ll get to learn how to swim.”

Hermione blinked in shock. “You can’t swim, Harry? But what about the second task of the Tri-Wizard tournament?”

“I used gilly-weed, Hermione. I’ve never been anywhere where I could swim before,” he replied softly.

“I think that’s an excellent idea, Hermione. We could have lunch by the pool and then you could help Harry learn how to swim,” offered Emma with a broad smile.

---

Later that day, Ministry of Magic...

“Director, Auror Tonks requests a moment of your time.”

“Send her in please,” replied Amelia.

A moment later Tonks walked in and took a seat in front of Amelia’s desk.

“Director, this afternoon I managed to locate Harry Potter. As Dumbledore suspected, he was removed from 4 Privet Drive by Remus Lupin. But not for the reasons that Dumbledore suspects.”

Amelia conjured two cups of tea and handed one to Tonks, then motioned for her to continue.

Tonks smiled appreciatively for the tea. “Apparently, Lupin went to visit Harry roughly a week after he had left the Hogwarts Express and found him deathly ill. Harry was undergoing his Matura and, while they wouldn’t tell me how long he was sick, I suspect it was quite lengthy, days long maybe. Lupin tried to convince the muggles to get help for Harry. They told Lupin they had already informed Dumbledore several days earlier of his illness. Dumbledore’s reply was, ‘It will pass, and you need not worry’. Later that night, Lupin snuck back into the home and removed Harry. But before he did, he gave Mundungus Fletcher, the Order member on guard that night, a bottle of fire whiskey. Fletcher, of course, drank the whiskey and fell asleep on duty.

“Lupin has Harry in a place that is both unplotable and protected by a Fidelis charm, as well as multiple other wards and masking charms. Once he had Harry in a safe place, he found help in the form of Hermione Granger and her parents. Hermione is close a friend of Harry’s and her parents have some muggle medical training, which they used to help Harry get over his illness.

“I should warn you, Director, Harry has become extremely wary of trusting anyone. He’s aware of some of what Dumbledore has been doing to him and he’s more than a bit bitter about it. Right now, he trusts a grand total of five people, including myself, and that took a witches oath to get.

“The home they are staying in is safe for the moment, at least. And it’s masked to prevent Ministry detection of underage magic. He’s become incredibly powerful, Harry cast a simple stunning charm at me that blew right through my shield and threw me a good thirty feet.

“There you have it, Director. He’s safe and willing to meet you in muggle London to discuss what the Ministry can do for him. He also insists you bring your niece, Susan, along. I think he figures you wouldn’t bring her with you if you intended to spring a trap on him. He’s extremely powerful now, and frightened. I think he believes everyone is out to get him,” she concluded.

Amelia leaned back in her chair and for a long moment she stared at the ceiling before turning back to Tonks.

“Given Mr. Potter’s history, if he’s aware of even a little of what Dumbledore has done, he has every right to be cautious. Very well, inform Mr. Potter that my niece and I will meet him for dinner at Pico’s, just off Kensington Road and Sloane Street, near Hyde Park. It’s a nice little Italian restaurant. We’ll see him at five p.m. Friday,” Amelia said with a smile.

Tonks nodded and stood up to leave when Amelia stopped her.

“Oh and Auror Tonks, other than yourself, who I expect will be bringing Mr. Potter along, I don’t want to see any of the other task force members. If Mr. Potter is as scared as you say he is, let’s try to start this off on the right footing, shall we?”

Tonks frowned. “Speaking of that, Director, there’s something you should know. Kingsley Shacklebolt is a member of the Order.”

Amelia scowled. “And why didn’t you inform me of this fact earlier, Auror?”

“In all honesty, Ma’am, I didn’t think of it. I was so angry about Dumbledore and worried about Harry that I simply forgot about Kingsley,” Tonks replied, shaking her head at her own carelessness.

Amelia stood and leaned over her desk, glaring at the young woman before her. “I trust you realize that your lack of attention to detail could have blown this case out of the water before we were able to gather enough evidence?”

“Yes, Ma’am,” Tonks said, wanting nothing more than to kick herself for her mistake.

Seeing the shame in her eyes, Amelia sighed heavily. “This will not happen again, Auror Tonks.” It was not a question, and the young Auror knew it.

“No Director, it won’t,” she said with conviction.

---

Meanwhile, at The Burrow...

Ron had invited some friends over to the Burrow and Dumbledore had assisted by providing portkeys for them. Now Ron sat in his bedroom talking about Quidditch with Seamus, Dean and Neville. None of them noticed the flesh colored thread that quivered under the door.

“... and that’s why I think the Cannons will take the cup this year,” concluded Ron.

“Yer barmy mate! The Cannons will never get Goodrich as Keeper. Even if he did leave the Irish National team, the Cannons couldn’t afford him,” exclaimed Seamus.

Ron looked around the room at his friends before changing the subject.

“Guys, there’s something else I want to bring up. It’s very important, something Dumbledore told me.”

Unlike Ron, the others had had little contact with the Headmaster. To them, he was a god on high, a paragon of magic and virtue. They all looked at Ron expectantly.

“He wants us to keep an eye on Harry this year. He’s afraid Harry is going to turn dark and he wants us to keep McGonagall informed about everything he does,” concluded Ron.

Seamus and Dean nodded wide eyed at Ron. The very thought of Harry turning dark made their blood chill. Neville frowned.

“That’s bollocks Ron and you know it! Harry would never turn dark. Now what the bloody hell is going on?” asked Neville heatedly.

“Oh come on Nev, you’ve seen him, all shirty and brassed off for the last two years. I’m telling you, Dumbledore has the right of it,” replied Ron.

“Sounds pretty dodgy if you ask me. Look mates, if you want to spy on Harry, fine, but I’m not going to do it. I won’t tell him you’re doing it, but I trust Harry and you bloody well should also! I can’t believe that you’d even suggest such a thing, or go along with it, Ron. If it weren’t for Harry, your sister would have died in our second year! GAH! You’re all nutters! Count me out,” said Neville, then stormed out of the room, slamming the door behind him.

Seamus and Dean looked at each other for a long moment, and then Dean turned back to Ron. “We’re with you mate, tell us what to do. We don’t need Neville. Besides, he’d probably only trip over his own two feet.”

“Well, Professor Dumbledore wants to get as many Gryffindors as possible on board, so speak to your friends. Get them to help and have them speak to others. They’re to report to me or Professor McGonagall everything Harry does,” said Ron, puffing out his chest and looking proud. With the most important part of the conversation over, the extensible ear quietly retracted out of sight.

---

### **Padfoot Manor, Later that day...**

Dan and Emma Granger, both wearing bathing suits, sat with Remus at a table by the pool, enjoying cool drinks in the summer sun. Dan was trying to explain to Remus the concept of barbequing, when Hermione came out. She wore a light blue bikini and carried a towel over her shoulder. Her parents had included her on many trips to the continent, both before and during her time at Hogwarts, so body modesty wasn’t that big a deal to her. While she had visited clothing optional beaches with her parents, she had learned to accept what people wore, even if she wore a more modest style of swim wear.

She sat on the edge of the in-ground pool with her feet dangling in the water, waiting for Harry to come out. Harry walked out wearing a pair of shorts that were several sizes too big for him and his towel was draped over his shoulders in an effort to cover some of the scars on his chest and back. His bathing suit was tied off with a piece of rough cord to keep it tight.

Remus frowned seeing Harry. Spotting his frown Dan and Emma turned to watch as well.

“Before we meet with Amelia we’re going to have to see about getting Harry some new clothes. Every thing he has is either stuff Sirius left here for him, or hand me downs from those damned Dursleys,” he growled.

Dan and Emma could only nod in agreement. Physically, Harry looked great, but his clothes did little for his image.

Harry kept his eyes down as he walked up to the pool. He quickly tossed the towel on a lounge and stepped into the shallow end. Looking up, he spotted Hermione and his jaw dropped. So much skin! Hermione smiled at his reaction and beckoned to him with a finger. Slowly he made his way over to her, trying very hard to keep his eyes fixed to her face, the trees behind her, the pool side, anyplace but her bikini!

Getting close enough to touch her, he stopped and looked at her face. She smiled sweetly at him and he blushed and dropped his gaze for a moment. His embarrassment fled and his expression darkened as he reached out with one trembling hand and touched her.

Hermione was initially surprised that Harry would be so forward, but then realized what had really caught his attention. Dan, spotting Harry's movements and being at the wrong angle, immediately assumed the wrong thing. He surged from his chair, but halted when Hermione held up her hand.

Hermione watched as he traced a single finger down the length of her scar, the scar given to her by Dolohov in the Department of Mysteries not too many weeks ago. She was surprised when she saw the first tear roll down his cheek. The adults looked at each other with concern as his shoulders started to shake, creating ripples in the water.

"I-I-I'm S-s-sorry Hermione! I nearly got you k-k-killed," he choked out and started to back away from her, the panic and pain evident in his eyes. Hermione slid carefully into the pool and walked to him. He flinched away from her touch. She tried again, and he flinched once more.

"NO! How can you stand to be around me? I nearly got you killed! I led us into a disaster! You c-c-could of died, Hermione!" He screamed at her, his body stiff with shock of seeing the extent of her injury. Hermione moved closer and pulled him into an embrace.

"You got h-h-hurt because of me. And Sirius... oh god... Sirius... what have I done?" he wailed.

He broke down completely, weeping on her shoulder. The adults were now standing at the edge of the pool, watching anxiously. Emma climbed down into the pool and walked over to them. She helped Hermione guide him back to shallower water. Once there, they sat on a ledge in the pool and gave him time to work it out of his system. Hermione held him closely, refusing to let him go. Slowly his sobs grew quieter until they eventually stopped.

Still holding him, Hermione started talking. "Harry, you didn't get me hurt. Dolohov was the one to cast that spell that hurt me." She took his head in both hands and looked him straight in the eye. "You didn't kill Sirius, Bellatrix did. Voldemort did. You didn't."

"If I had listened to you, we never would have gone there that night," he said, trying to wipe away fresh tears.

"Shhh... We did everything we could to try to verify the vision, Harry. If it weren't for Kreacher, we wouldn't have been tricked," she replied, sliding her arms down along his sides and holding him. She leaned her head forward until she was resting her forehead against his. "You didn't hurt me that night. I've seen you so angry your magic has literally shaken the trees around us, but you've never once hurt me. I know you'd never deliberately hurt me," she whispered to him.

He looked into her eyes. "N-N-No, Hermione. I'd rather die than see you get hurt again."

"I know, Harry. Now, how about some swimming lessons?" she asked with a smile.

Harry smiled weakly back at her and gave her a quick kiss on the cheek, then he blushed. “Thank you, Hermione. I’m not sure what I’d do without you around. I think you’re really pretty in that bikini,” he whispered.

The two teens broke apart as they realized everyone was watching them and grinning. The adults waved them off to start the lessons and returned to their table. Hermione stood blushing almost as brightly as Harry. It took a great deal of effort before she could start teaching Harry to swim.

“I think he’ll be better now. I know Hermione’s helped him come to grips with what the Dursley’s have done to him, but that’s the first time he’s cried over Sirius,” Remus said quietly.

“It will take more than a single crying session, Remus, but I do agree he’s finally starting to grieve like he should. In some ways, the emotional damage will last much longer than the physical damage. I don’t remember much from my college psychology, but I do know he’s still got a long way to go,” Emma added as she watched Hermione showing Harry how to swim.

All three adults looked up as Tonks came walking out the back door to join them.

“Cor blimey! Nice pool Remus!” she said breathlessly.

“Alright then, Amelia and Susan will meet you and Harry, on Friday, five P.M., at Pico’s just off Hyde Park. She suggests you bring anything which would help the investigation, as well as any legal paperwork that might help Harry,” she added.

“I was thinking of taking Harry clothes shopping that day. Do you think Hermione would like to go along?” Remus asked Dan and Emma.

“Go along? She’d probably love to help Harry get out of those dingy clothes,” replied Emma.

“I know Amelia wouldn’t have a problem with it, Remus. Heck, bring them all if you want. We’ll just get a private room. I know Pico’s really well and they can handle a private dinning room,” Tonks said with a grin.

Remus watched the two teens swimming. Harry seemed to be getting the idea and Hermione had him swimming the length of the pool now. Suddenly an idea hit him. Startled, he turned back to the others.

“You know, we’ve been sitting here planning on what we’re doing, and we’re making roughly the same mistake that Dumbledore’s made. We need to include Harry in on these decisions. I’m not saying he’s an adult, not quite yet at least, but he’ll be more trusting of us if we at least ask him about it,” he stated.

The other three looked guiltily at each other, acknowledging that Remus was probably correct.

“I’ll speak to Harry this evening, tell him what’s going on and ask if that’s alright with him.”

“COR! I forgot to tell you! We’ve set up an owl drop at the Ministry for any owls for Harry and

the rest of you. I'll check them twice a day and pick up any letters to deliver. If you don't mind, Amelia would like me to spend time here. She's uncomfortable that other than Remus, there are no other adult wizards protecting Harry and Hermione."

Dan and Emma both sighed in relief. "Thank God," Dan exclaimed. "I don't think Hermione could live if she didn't find out her... what did you call them? OWL? Owl scores?"

---

The Burrow...

Ginny Weasley walked into Ottery St. Catchpole. It had become a habit for her. Every few days she walked the distance to the small combination muggle and Wizarding town. Normally, she went to pick up a few items of produce her Mum needed for dinner that night, but every time she went in, she brought with her a gradually thickening letter.

After completing her shopping, she stopped, once again, at the post office to attempt to mail her letter. To her complete surprise, the owl blinked at her, took the letter and flew away. She swayed with relief. Hopefully, Harry would make some sense out of what she had written.

With that thought firmly in mind, she paid for the delivery and headed home.

Meanwhile, Ron had also developed a daily ritual involving his owl. He had a letter for Hermione and one for Harry that had been written for weeks and every day he'd offer them to his owl, Pig. Today, like Ginny, he discovered the owls were finally accepting mail for them both.

He made a mad dash out of his room and down the stairs to find his mother. "MUM! The owls are accepting letters to Harry and Hermione again!" He shouted.

Molly looked up in surprise and quickly dashed off a letter to Dumbledore, which she gave to Errol. Hopefully, the dumb bird would survive the trip to Hogwarts.

---

Padfoot Manor, two days later...

Hermione bit her lip as she watched Harry. It seemed to her that in, showing Harry how to swim, she had created a monster. Every morning he'd get up at six A.M. to swim laps in the pool, then, before bed, he'd repeat the process. He said he wanted to get into shape and that, in her considered opinion, was patently impossible. Since his recovery from the Matura, his magic had accelerated his growth considerably. She didn't think Harry could get into any better shape, and if he did, she didn't think she'd be able to stand it. What she didn't understand, until he explained it, was that he was trying to improve his endurance. The swimming provided him with that.

With Harry's morning swims becoming a routine, everyone had decided that having breakfast out by the pool would be appropriate. As Dan, Emma, Hermione and Remus enjoyed their morning tea, watching Harry swim his laps, they were joined by Tonks. She pulled a stack of letters from her robe and placed them on the table. Most were addressed to Harry.

Remus quickly looked through the stack of letters, and then turned to the pool. "HARRY! MAIL!" he called.

Harry looked up as he was about to turn to start another lap and nodded. He climbed out of the pool and cast a drying charm on himself before putting on a shirt. He was still self conscious of the numerous scars on his back and chest. Walking over to the table, he took a seat and Remus handed him a stack of letters, then passed several letters to Hermione.

He sifted through the letters, looking at whom they were from first, before picking one to open. He was about to open a letter from Ginny when Tonks placed a hand on his arm, causing him to stop and look at her.

"Harry, the Ministry decided not to screen your mail, but they are asking that any letters be saved as possible evidence. We are checking for obvious stuff like letters with hexes or portkeys. Obviously they don't want to see any letters that concern your love life, or your fan mail, but anything else they are interested in seeing. Also, we have contacted our Australian counterparts and they are taking some steps to insure Hermione and her parents are 'seen' around that area," she said softly, looking at him.

"My love life? Oh, like I'll ever have a chance at that, Tonks. I'll save anything that seems like it may be useful for you though," he replied with a snort and a grin.

Opening the letter from Ginny he read quickly.

*Dear Harry,  
I hope this letter finds you and that, wherever you are, you're safe and happy. In fact, I don't want to know where you are. Something weird has started to happen here and I need to tell you about it. I've overheard several conversations and I am still shocked over what I have heard.*

*I'm afraid this letter will contain little good news, Harry, and it may seem that everyone has turned against you. I want to assure you this is NOT the case. Fred, George, Bill and I are all angry about what's happening here.*

Ron had been meeting with other Gryffindors over the past few weeks. He's told them that Dumbledore is convinced you are turning dark and wants them to report all your actions to McGonagall or Ron. All of your immediate dorm mates, with the exception of Neville, have agreed to go along with this. Neville told Ron to piss off before he stormed out of the Burrow, very angry. I broke up with Dean because of his agreeing to go along with Ron.

*I also overheard a conversation between Ron, my Mum and Dumbledore about removing money from your trust account? I didn't understand it at the time but it now explains how my parents seem to have more money to spend. My Mum is quite incensed over the fact that they can't touch the account until you return to Hogwarts. Also, if you can reach Hermione, you have to warn her!! Ron is supposed to slip her a potion at the Welcoming Feast, which will put her under his control. I know he's obsessed with her, but I never thought he'd stoop so low as to do something like this. Nor can I believe Dumbledore is willing to go along with it. He's having Snape make the potion!*



*Isn't that illegal? If not, it should be!*

Harry was so angry, his eyes shone with an intense green light. Grinding his teeth and ignoring the others at the table as they stared at him in concern, he continued reading the letter.

*Harry, just what the hell is going on here? I like you, you're like a brother to me and I don't understand why my family is suddenly so angry with you. Can you please explain to me what is going on?*

*Please be safe and careful Harry,  
Love from,  
Ginny*

Harry stood up so fast he knocked over his chair. Caught in the chair legs, he staggered a bit. In a fit of anger, still clutching the now crumpled letter in one hand, he picked up the chair and hurled it into the pool. The chair hit with such force it threw up a huge spray of water and the legs bent at odd angles.

“THOSE BLOODY FUCKERS! I SWEAR I’LL KILL THEM ALL! GODDAMNIT! HOW DARE THEY!” he yelled.

He stood there for a moment, then the ground rumbled ominously. Several trees nearby swayed violently. He felt a tug on the letter in his hand and noticed Hermione was standing next to him. Taking a few calming breaths he closed his eyes, trying to push back the anger and his magic.

“Harry... relax... that’s it, take a centering breath... and another... relax. There’s nothing we can’t deal with, but you have to stay in control,” she said to him.

Slowly, he calmed, and then he smiled down at Hermione. He leaned down and gave her a quick kiss on her forehead. “Thank you, Hermione. I can always count on you to help,” he said softly, then he handed her the letter to read before turning to Tonks.

“Auror Tonks, you wanted evidence? Well, you’re going to get it. But I’m also going to tell you right here and now, if the Ministry fails to help in this, I’ll tear Hogwarts apart, stone by stone if I have to,” he said in a cold tone.

Hermione, reading the letter as Harry spoke, suddenly paled, and then gasped in outrage. With trembling hands, she passed the letter to her mother. Tonks looked up at Harry in surprise and shock. She was unused to people issuing threats to her, but she could still feel and see the magic burning behind his green gaze.

Harry held the Aurors’ gaze for a moment longer before turning back to Hermione, who was near tears. He grabbed her by the shoulders and pulled her into an embrace.

“Don’t be afraid, Hermione. I won’t allow anyone to hurt you,” he whispered to the trembling girl.

“Why, Harry? Why would they do this to me?” she asked, trying hard not to cry.

“Because, of all the people around me Hermione, you were the one thing they hadn’t planned on. Think about it. I met up with Ron on a full train, yet he was alone in the compartment, all the others were full. It was a set up, I think, the two of us meeting. But you weren’t something they planned on. A muggle born witch, incredibly smart and driven to prove herself, who later become my friend, then my best friend? You have influence on me they can’t control.

“It’s all clear now. The Dursley’s, all the incidents at school, even the Department of Mysteries, everything’s been aimed at keeping people they can’t control out of my life. I think part of it might also be to keep me dependant on Dumbledore. Sirius was another unplanned element, so they orchestrated lessons that would leave me vulnerable to Voldemort’s visions, knowing Sirius would come to my aid.

“What they hadn’t counted on Hermione, what they hadn’t anticipated, was you or your impact on me. The Dursley’s taught me to respect and fear authority figures. They thought I would willingly rely on Dumbledore, but instead, I did things myself, or relied on you. Growing up in a loveless environment, they never expected me to find someone I could learn to love...” he trailed off, looking at her, still ignoring the adults only a few feet away.

Hermione looked up at him, smiling shyly. “Do you really mean that?” she asked softly.

“I think so,” he murmured. “I’ve never felt this way about anyone before, but is it love? I don’t honestly know. I know Sirius loved me in his own way, so does Remus. But this is different somehow. Is it love? I wish I could say one way or the other. Damn the Dursley’s! Here I am, stuck trying to say what I feel and I can’t even describe...”

Hermione stopped him by placing her hand gently over his mouth. “I think I see what you’re trying to say.”

Hearing an odd sound, Harry looked up to see Tonks snickering at the two of them. He scowled at her and Hermione stepped out of his embrace to face the smiling adults around them.

“Oh don’t give me that face, Harry. If you can’t take heat from friends, how can you take it from enemies?” Tonks quipped with a smirk. “I have the letter and I promise you, we will take steps to protect Hermione. Now check the rest of your mail. There may be more letters we can use. In the meantime, I’ll make a note to talk to Fred, George, Bill and Ginny. If they are on your side, they may have more information we can use.”

Hermione sat back in her chair and Harry turned towards the pool and sighed. With a scowl, he levitated his chair out of the water and brought it to him. He repaired the chair quickly and sat down next to Hermione. Picking up his mail once again, he went through the pile until he came across a letter from Dumbledore. He frowned at it for a moment before opening it.

*Harry,*  
*I hope this letter finds you well, but I must insist that you send me a note telling me where you are so we can pick you up and return you to your family. Voldemort will stop at nothing to find you and you are not safe where you are. Only with the Order protecting you, and your family’s*

*presence, will you be safe.*

*Albus Dumbledore*

*Headmaster, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry*

Harry rolled his eyes and gave the letter to Tonks. The next letter was from the Ministry.

*Mr. Harry Potter*

*Pursuant to Wizarding Regulation 157-86b, here are the results of your OWLS. Please note these represent total scores, summing both the written and practical exams (where applicable). Scores that earn an OWL grade are O and E. Owls are not awarded for any score below that level.*

<u>Class</u>	<u>Score</u>
Potions	O
Charms	O
Transfiguration	O
Divination	A
History of Magic	D
Care of Magical Creatures	O
Defense Against the Dark Arts	O+
Herbology	O
Astronomy*	E

*\*All results for this subject were graded on a curve due to the disturbance during testing.*

*Total Owls: 8. (Please note: the O+ counts as two Owls, the extra credit awarded by a very impressed examiner.)*

*This places you as one of Hogwarts top ten students, with an overall ranking of five. Please inform the Deputy Headmistress, Professor McGonagall, which classes you wish to attend next year before August 10th.*

*In regard to your Quidditch ban, we recognize that the ban was emplaced illegally. However, the matter of the ban is now in the hands of the Headmaster of Hogwarts. It is up to him to lift or keep it in place.*

*Sincerely,*

*Mathilda Hopkiss*

*Department of Examinations*

*Ministry of Magic*

“I got eight owls from nine courses,” Harry said a shocked voice.

Remus grinned broadly and took the letter from Harry’s unresisting hand to see for himself. Hermione immediately tore open her letter. Scanning quickly then she yelped.

“I got eleven owls, Harry! Oh, this is perfect! What ranking did they assign you? I’m ranked second. I wonder who’s first?” she babbled excitedly.

Chuckling, Harry looked at the last letter he wanted to open. Now he wasn't sure about it. The letter was from Ron. Gritting his teeth, he tore it open.

*Harry,  
Hey mate! I don't know where you're hiding but Mum and Dad are sure worried about you. The muggles couldn't have been all that bad could they Harry? You need to write back so that we'll be able to get together this summer and practice Quidditch.*

*Mum's all weepy about your being missing and it's driving me barmy. I saw Snape in Diagon Alley the other day. Can you believe that greasy git is still greasy, even during the summer?*

*Write back soon you git! We're all worried about you.*  
*Ron*

Wordlessly, he passed the letter from Ron to Hermione. He arched an eyebrow at her when she gave him one in return.

*Hermione,  
Thank Merlin this letter is able to reach you! How is your vacation going sweetie? Is Australia warm? I can't wait until you get back here and we can be together again. I miss everything about you Hermione, from your smile to your hair.*

*There's no news on the Harry issue. The rich bastard is still missing. If anyone asked me, I'd say the dumb git is probably laying on a beach somewhere, waving his money at anything that looks remotely female in the hopes he'll get lucky. Personally, I wish everyone would just shut up about him. I'm tired of being in his shadow all the time.*

*Write back love, I really need to hear from you!*  
*Love,*  
*Ron*

Hermione quickly scanned the letter from Ron and was struck by the completely different tones between them. She glanced up to see Harry's anger threatening to overwhelm him again. Under the table, she laid a hand on his leg and gave it a gentle squeeze. In response, Harry closed his eyes and took several cleansing breaths. Opening his eyes, he smiled apologetically at Hermione before turning to Tonks.

"What are we to do about these letters? Do we reply to them?" he asked.

"That's up to you, Harry. If you do reply to them, you have to do it real carefully. We don't want to tip off anyone about the investigation. Why don't you do nothing until we've had a chance to talk to Director Bones?" she replied.

Harry thought about it for a moment. Not answering at least meant he didn't have to deal with any anger possibly spilling out into the letters. He shrugged. "All right, I'll wait. There's something else I need to ask you about though, Tonks. Would you please ask Madam Bones about locating a

tutor in Occulumenty for Hermione and me? I need someone I can trust to help me develop my skill in that field, and Hermione will need someone who can teach her from scratch. I can pay for the tutor, if necessary. Between what my parents left me, which I can't touch yet, and what Sirius left me, money isn't a problem."

"I'll ask her about it, Harry. She might be able to find you an Unspeakable," Tonks said, her eyes gleaming with excitement. "They have techniques which aren't generally known."

---

### **That evening at Grimmauld Place...**

"It seems that Harry Potter is once again reachable by owl, but as yet, we do not know where he or Remus Lupin are, and have received no response from any owls we have sent. On the other hand, one of our Order representatives spotted Hermione and her parents in Sydney, so that puts one issue to bed entirely. Until we can locate Mr. Potter, finding him is still our top priority."

Dumbledore turned to Arthur Weasley. "What can you tell us about what is going on in the Ministry?"

"Minister Fudge has authorized a force increase in the Aurors that would swell their numbers ten fold. Also, the MLE is currently involved in some sort of top-secret investigation and all the records are being sealed. No one seems to know a thing about it," Arthur reported.

Dumbledore looked to Tonks and Kingsley Shacklebolt, both of whom were Aurors.

"I can't really add much to what Arthur told you," started Kingsley. "Yes, there is some sort of investigation going on, but it's been compartmentalized and only those in on the investigation have any idea of what they're doing."

Dumbledore nodded. "I'll try sounding out Amelia about it when I see her next. Now, moving onto other business..."

---

### **Gringots, Ollivanders and Snape...**

The next morning, Harry finished his laps in the pool, showered, and dressed for the trip to London. When Remus handed Harry a new vault key, he turned it over in his hand and noted the very low vault number engraved on it. Raising his eyes, he looked at Remus questioningly.

Remus shrugged. "You're the sole heir to the most Noble House of Black, Harry. As such, it's only right that you get access to the family vault."

Harry gulped nervously and nodded.

Everyone gathered in the foyer, waiting for Tonks who was bringing concealment cloaks that would allow them all to move about freely in Diagon Alley without being recognized. Hermione

and Harry were especially pleased to be getting out, even if it were only for a day.

Their time in the Alley would be short. Harry had two stops that he needed to make and, while the risk of being seen had been limited with the cloaks, no one wanted to take chances.

Tonks eventually showed up and passed out the concealment cloaks to everyone. The cloaks were a light gray and, in Harry's opinion, pretty boring. Borrowing from a book he'd read the night before, he cast a charm to put a Celtic cross on the right breast of every cloak.

Hermione arched an eyebrow at him. "Well, it's pretty Harry, but even better, it's a highly protective rune," she said, smiling at him. "I'm just curious as to why you've been looking up fabric marking charms."

Harry managed to look very embarrassed and then told her he wanted to try his hand at making some t-shirts like Tonks' Weird Sisters shirt.

Once the now decorated cloaks were donned, they portkeyed to the Leaky Cauldron. From there, they walked out the back entrance and opened the doorway to Diagon Alley itself.

Arriving at Gringots, Harry's expression grew sly. With a grin, he turned to Emma, Dan and Hermione.

"You guys don't have a vault with Gringots, right? You usually just come in and exchange muggle money for galleons?" he asked.

"That's right. We've never seen a need to open an account for Hermione, although we thought about opening one as a present for her at graduation," replied Dan.

"Well, why don't you come with me to my vault then? I think you'll find the trip very interesting. You might even see some of the more unique security features," Harry said innocently. Remus and Tonks were staring at him, both trying very hard not to grin.

"Are you sure, Harry?" Hermione asked. "I don't want to pry into your affairs, but I'm curious now."

"Really, it's quite alright for you to come along. You won't be able to enter the vault, but I think you'll enjoy the trip to it," he replied.

Dan and Emma looked at each other before nodding to Harry. Hermione, in her excitement, grabbed Harry's hand, startling him for a second. With a smile, he led them up to the manager's desk. Pushing back his hood to reveal his face, he turned to the managing Goblin.

"Good Morning. I would like to ask that Griphook take my friends and myself to my vault, please," Harry said.

The goblin peered down over his high desk and asked, "Your name?"

Harry cringed, but replied as Remus had coached him. “Harry James Potter-Black”

The goblin leaned back and smiled toothlessly at Harry. “Of course, Lord Black. I will have Griphook attend to your needs immediately.”

Hermione looked at Harry in surprise. “Harry?” she breathed.

He shrugged and leaned closer to her whispering, “Sirius wasn’t kidding when he called it the Noble House of Black.”

A moment later Griphook appeared and bowed. “If you will all follow me please?” he stated.

“It is good to see you again, Griphook. Have you been well?” asked Harry.

Griphook looked surprised that a wizard would remember him, or even ask for him by name. “I’m sorry, my Lord...” he began.

“Please, just call me Harry, Griphook. I feel very silly having someone call me a Lord,” Harry said, wanting to cringe.

Griphook smiled toothlessly and bowed again. “It would be a pleasure to call you Harry. I was just surprised that you would ask for me. Most wizards couldn’t care less about Goblins.”

“I understand, Griphook, but I remember quite fondly my first trip to Gringots and you seemed like a fine fellow. Whatever other wizards might think of Goblins, I assure you, I do not echo their sentiments.”

Griphook grinned again at the compliment and led them to a small wheeled cart on a track. Seeing the look of confusion on the faces of Dan, Hermione and Emma, Griphook jumped in to calm them.

“Please do not be alarmed. All of the older vaults can only be reached via the track. The cart is spelled with sticking charms so no one will fall out during the trip. But I do caution you not to stick your hands outside of the cart. When we arrive at the vault, please remain seated until I have secured the vault dragon.”

Harry helped Hermione into the cart, Dan and Emma took the seats behind them.

“Did he say dragon?” asked Dan incredulously.

“That’s correct, Mr. Granger. All of the older vaults are guarded by dragons,” replied Griphook. Dan looked stunned and wondered how Griphook knew his name. Emma and Hermione looked very excited at the chance of seeing a dragon.

Griphook climbed into the front seat and checked to see if all his passengers were seated properly, then he turned and placed a hand on the front railing. The cart suddenly surged forward at a high rate of acceleration. Emma whooped with joy and Dan joined her as the cart zoomed along the

little track, taking impossible turns and death defying dips. Hermione, on the other hand, closed her eyes and buried her head in Harry's shoulder. Twenty minutes later, the cart started slowing again as it approached its destination.

Hermione looked up and Harry smiled weakly at her, murmuring an apology for not warning her about the ride. She smiled back at him and nodded, then looked around curiously. Each vault was inset deep inside its own private cavern, the entrance guarded by a dragon. Eventually, the cart came to a halt outside a cavern and Griphook made a series of gestures to the dragon that was tethered to the wall.

The Hungarian Horntail strained against its neck chain and slowly moved away from the entrance. Smoke puffed from its nostrils and the claws left gouges in the stone as it stared at them balefully.

Dan looked apprehensively at large creature, while both Hermione and Emma struggled with the cart's sticking charm trying to get a better look at it. Slowly the cart entered the cavern and rolled to a stop in front of a platform that ended in two huge doors. Griphook climbed out of the cart and waited for Harry.

"Harry, as the new Lord Black, you will have to key the doors to your blood. Place your key into the keyhole and put your hand on the round centerpiece, then state your complete name, including title. You will feel a pinprick as a sample of your blood is taken and the doors are re-keyed. Your friends may join you on the platform, but cannot enter the vault itself. Only Black family members and their spouses may enter," Griphook lectured.

Harry nodded and walked over to the massive doors as the others got out of the cart. He placed his key into the door, then put his hand on the center round piece molded into the two doors.

"Lord Harry James Potter-Black" he stated clearly, embarrassed by the grandiose title.

There came a series of clicking noises and he felt a sharp pain in his hand, which faded almost as soon as he felt it. The two vault doors swung inward with a rumbling groan.

While Dan and Emma continued to watch the dragon, Hermione, now fully curious, craned her neck to look into Harry's vault. She gasped when she saw that the vault was nearly the size of the Hogwarts Great Hall and full of money and what appeared to be furniture, trunks, books, and even a few suits of armor. Harry walked over to a pile of galleons and scooped a bunch into his moneybag. Tying it off, he turned and walked out of the vault. As he exited, the vault the doors swung closed behind him.

"I not sure about the exchange rate, but I pulled out about five hundred galleons." Harry said.

"Today's rate is quite favorable Harry, one galleon to ten pounds," replied Griphook.

"That should be enough money then, right Hermione? I don't know what muggle clothes cost. I've never been shopping before..." he trailed off, thinking about all of the things he's never done before.



Hermione nodded mutely. She'd never gone shopping with five thousand pounds before. While her parents were certainly affluent, they weren't extravagant spenders. Harry looked at her, embarrassed. She knew he was still wearing Dudley's old clothes that he'd transfigured into something that looked better. But in a few hours, the spell would wear off and his clothing would return to its shabby state.

Back in the lobby, they met up with Remus, who handed Harry and Dan each a wallet containing a card. Remus explained that, since they were helping Harry this summer, he had arranged special Gringots cards for the Grangers. Dan tried to protest, but Remus insisted he accept it, telling him that it was the least he could do since they were helping Harry. The Gringots card would work at either Magical or muggle stores.

Harry watched the conversation for a few moments before going over to convert his galleons to pounds. Personally, he thought the wallet was a nice idea. It was less bulky than a moneybag and the compartments were cool. He could even put photos in them! The Gringots card was a nice touch. It was keyed to his Black vault and it meant he never had to visit the vault again to withdraw heavy coins.

From Gringots, Harry led them to Ollivanders, as he had a specific purchase in mind. Entering the dingy shop, Mr. Ollivander looked up at the group of people. Harry approached the counter.

"Welcome, young Master Potter. How can I be of service to you today? Some polishing cream, perhaps? Or does your wand need to be serviced? A chip or crack needing to be mended?" asked the gnomish old man.

Harry looked startled. "I'm sorry, how did you know it was me, Sir?" he said, pushing back his hood.

"Concealment cloaks are nice Master Potter, but even the best of cloaks cannot fool a keen mind. Now, what can I do for you today?"

"Wand Holsters, Sir. I'd like to enquire as to what types are available?" Harry asked.

Tonks pushed the hood of her cloak back revealing her face. "Ollivander, give him the Auror model. He needs them to be summon proof," she said.

Ollivander smiled at Tonks. "So nice to see you again, Auror Tonks. Might I suggest that he get two then? One for his wrist and another for his leg?"

Tonks nodded in approval while Harry grabbed Hermione and pulled her closer to the counter.

"For myself and my friend, please," he hastily added. Hermione tried to protest, but Harry told her he didn't want her going unarmed this summer and a holster would do the trick for her.

Ollivander smiled at the startled Hermione. "Good day to you, Miss Granger. I trust all is well with your wand? Vine wood, if I'm not mistake, with a dragon heartstring core. A lovely wand,

excellent for Transfiguration.”

She smiled weakly at Ollivander and nodded as the old man flicked his wand at her, taking measurements. Repeating the process with Harry, he ducked behind the counter and returned moments later with four boxes. Setting two near Harry and two near Hermione, he waved them over. In minutes, each was wearing their new holsters.

Ollivander showed Hermione how to move her hand to extract the wand. Harry watched for a moment, repeated the motions himself and smiled as his wand appeared in his hand. Hermione had to practice it for a while before it came easily. Harry paid for the purchase with his Gringots card, thinking that the forty galleon price tag wasn't bad when one was protecting one's buttocks.

Making sure everyone was properly cloaked, they walked out of the shop and moved towards the exit of Diagon Alley. Remus had just passed the entrance to a small alley when a hand shot out and pulled him in.

Remus was pinned against the wall with a wand to his throat.

“Well, well, if it isn't Lupin,” sneered Severus Snape. “You're coming with me. Dumbledore wants a word with you.”

Suddenly Snape's wand flew from his grip and landed in the hand of one of the gray cloaked figures. The figure snapped the wand in two and tossed the pieces at Snape's feet. The same figure gestured and Snape found himself pushed against the opposite wall and pinned there. Another, smaller figure pulled a wand and Snape's robes were transformed into a pink sequined evening gown and a large feathered boa wrapped itself loosely around his neck.

Still stuck against the wall, Snape's eyes bulged as Remus pulled up his cloak.

Dan Granger stepped up next to Remus and placed a hand on his shoulder. Remus pulled the hood of his cloak up around him while Snape tried to look past the concealment illusion surrounding the second figure.

Dan then did something that surprised everyone. “Go back to your Order and tell them that the Brotherhood protects Harry Potter now,” he snarled. With that, he turned and followed Remus out of the alley and the small group walked out of Snape's sight.

Snape struggled to free himself from the sticking charm. By the time he had, Remus and the other strangely clad figures had vanished from sight. Grimacing at his outfit, he scooped up the pieces of his wand and made his way to Ollivanders.

---

Dinner at Pico's...

Leaving Diagon Alley, they headed into the heart of the London shopping district where Harry suddenly found himself at the mercies of three different women. He was measured from top to

bottom in each store they visited. Tonks carried a bottomless bag for the purchases. After several hours of the women approving and disapproving the selections, Dan Granger pulled him aside.

“Harry, I know this shopping is new to you, but you can’t let the women pick out everything for you. If you let them do that now, they’ll want to do it every time you go shopping. Now, I want you to go find something that you know they’ll hate, even if you know you’ll never wear it, and insist on buying it,” he said in a hushed voice so the nearby women wouldn’t hear him.

Harry nodded at Dan and smiled. Turning away, he walked down a few aisles, trying to find something that would suit his purpose. Eventually, he settled on a couple neon yellow t-shirts.

Seeing his choice, the women immediately objected, but Harry remained firm, telling them he had plans for the t-shirts. Finally, all three women gave up in disgust and let him make the purchase, each sure that he’d never wear them.

In the last store they visited, Harry picked up several pairs of black jeans and some black shirts as well as new shoes. He wore one set from the store, leaving behind the Dursley’s cast-offs forever.

Pico’s turned out to be a nice little neighborhood restaurant. It had the usual Italian décor, but better still, it was the type of place that only the locals knew about and loved because the food was great. Tonks told the waiter by the door that they were with the Bones party. He smiled and then ushered them all into a small side room with a table set for eight.

Throwing back his cloak, Harry reached out with his mind, trying a technique he had read about. He was trying to sense and detect the magic around him. Ignoring Remus, Tonks and Hermione he reached further and his eyes glazed over.

“There’s a witch and a wizard nearby, not Aurors. There are four Aurors taking up positions near this block, but I don’t think they’re interested in what’s going on in here. Their attention is focused outwards. Two witches are approaching, having just arrived via portkey I think. Strange, they arrived in the kitchen...”

“I must say, Mister Potter, you’re quite good. Susan and I did arrive via portkey, the owners of Pico’s are friends of mine,” said Director Bones entering the room.

Harry blinked a few times and reconnected to those in the room. Susan rushed over to him and gave him a hug that had Hermione fuming. Amelia took a seat at the end of the table and invited Harry to sit next to her. Susan, to Hermione’s annoyance, took the chair right next to him, so she had to settle for a seat on the other side of the table, opposite of Harry.

“Harry,” began Amelia, “with your permission, I suggest we keep our conversation to enjoyable topics during the meal. We’ll talk business afterwards. Susan, I know, has been dying to tell you something, so I’ll let you three talk. We’ll get down to business soon enough.”

Harry nodded and watched as two waiters came in and started putting food on the table. Pico’s was a family style restaurant. The tables were loaded with food and everyone filled their plates with

whatever they wanted. It was a concept similar to Hogwarts, but it was the first time Harry had experienced it outside of school.

Harry filled his plate and looked at Susan who squirmed in her chair. She looked ready to burst if she didn't speak soon. He grinned at her. The blonde girl had matured like Hermione and was really quite pretty. He knew her from the DA, where she had been one of the better students, if a bit shy around him.

"Harry, I tried to owl you three days after we got of the Express, and every day since. But the owls kept refusing the delivery," she began.

Harry arched an eyebrow at her in question.

Susan suddenly seemed unsure of her self. Her hands trembled and her voice dropped to just above a whisper. "I live with my Aunt. She had gone to work that Monday, leaving me at home with two house elves and my friend. Four Death Eaters attacked the house an hour later. They killed the Auror on guard and had us trapped in a room upstairs. I hurt two of them, but I couldn't get away. If it hadn't been for the DA and what you taught me..." she trailed off, lost in the memory of the event.

Harry glanced at Hermione, who was staring at Susan with nothing but compassion in her eyes. Hermione reached over and grabbed Susan's hand, causing the girl to jerk back to the present and look up at her.

"You did what you had to do to live," Hermione told the blond in a quiet voice.

"Hermione's right, Susan. All we did was give you the tools to survive. Don't feel bad about hurting two Death Eaters. They would have felt no guilt about raping and killing you. I'm sorry I had to say that so bluntly, but we're at war. In war, you kill, not arrest your opponent. You did nothing to be ashamed about or feel guilty over. You survived an attack that would have killed most adults. You should be proud of that," Harry said, looking into her eyes and smiling at her.

Amelia had been watching the interaction of the three teens and realized that her niece's life had been saved because of what Harry had taught her.

"Harry's right, Suse," she said. "You saved your own life and held off those other two Death Eaters until help arrived. I'm very proud of you for that. And I see I owe my niece's life to you, Mister Potter."

"Oh no, Director. I may have taught Susan the spells, but ultimately, she's the one who saved her own life. Our DA was just a study group because we had a bad Defense teacher last year," he replied.

"BAD DEFENCE TEACHER??" Hermione exclaimed. "Harry James Potter, that woman! That toad! She wasn't bad...she was downright cruel. And don't think for a moment I don't know about the scar you keep hidden, or that she tried cursing you in her office."

“Scar? Curse?” asked Amelia, frowning.

Harry looked at Hermione, his face stricken. It had not been his intent to bring up Umbridge at this meeting.

Hermione launched into a description of the events of the past year, the ‘educational decrees’, the torture sessions for detention, the attempt to cast the Cruciatus on Harry in her office, even the inquisitorial squads. Throughout her description, Harry stared down at his plate, pushing the food around with a fork, his scarred hand in his lap. In a way, Hermione’s words wounded him deeply. For all of her understanding of his background, she still didn’t understand that, although he hated being the Boy-Who-Lived, he tried very hard to live up to that impossible image.

Hermione trailed off as she noticed Harry’s reaction to her tale. She quickly stood up and walked around Amelia to reach Harry, who was sitting in his chair, biting his lip. Wrapping her arms around him, she whispered an apology in his ear. Amelia watched Hermione calming him and realized they were developing a relationship, even if they didn’t know it yet.

Hermione looked up and smiled gratefully at Amelia when the Director offered to change seats with her.

“Harry,” Amelia said gently, “may I see the scar Hermione spoke of?”

Hermione took her new seat and smiled encouragingly to him as he reluctantly pulled his hand out from under the table. He pulled up the cuff of his long sleeve shirt to reveal the words “I WILL NOT TELL LIES” carved into the back of his hand.

Amelia paled at the broad scar and pulled out a parchment to take notes. She had Hermione repeat the story and asked questions from Harry as well. Hermione gripped Harry’s hand tightly throughout the conversation, while Susan watched wide-eyed.

“Harry, the use of a blood quill has been outlawed for nearly a hundred years. That and the other things she did to you and the other students will be enough to bring her up on charges. I’ll assign some Aurors to investigate this. We’ll do our best to make sure that you don’t have to testify. We may need a deposition, however,” Amelia said.

Harry nodded gratefully at her. Emma shot Hermione a glance that she was well familiar with. It said simply, “I want to talk to you later tonight”. Sighing, Hermione nodded at her mother then went back to eating her dinner, wondering what she had done wrong this time.

After dinner, Remus gave Amelia the ledger that Sirius had stolen. After copying it, she returned the original to him. He also showed her Harry’s emancipation papers, which still hadn’t been filed. She and Remus had a long conversation, while Harry was busy talking with Susan and Hermione.

“Harry,” Amelia said once she’d looked over the paperwork, “are you willing to trust me?”

Susan smiled encouragingly at him and Hermione squeezed his hand. Reluctantly, Harry nodded, much to Amelia's relief.

"Excellent. Let me suggest a plan to you and you can tell me if you like it or not."

Harry motioned for her to proceed.

"All right, first things first. Security. I'm concerned that there aren't enough adult wizards protecting you. Right now, there's only Mr. Lupin. I'd like to assign Auror Tonks and four others who could rotate in twelve-hour shifts. That way, there would always be three Aurors nearby for your own protection. I will ask that at least one of the Aurors be willing to help you and Hermione train up in dueling.

"Next, Auror Tonks has made me aware of the problem with Miss Granger at the coming welcoming feast at Hogwarts. I intend to see she's given supply of a Ministry restricted potion neutralizer. It's designed to neutralize ninety nine percent of the potions out there.

"I understand you need an Occulumency specialist to help with your training and I've located a retired Unspeakable who's willing to help you with it. The Ministry will pick up the cost of this for you. It will be necessary for you, Hermione and, I'm afraid, Susan, to learn Occulumency. Her being here at this meeting puts her at risk also.

"I am also willing to remove the tracking charms from both of your wands so you can perform underage magic anywhere. However, I trust you to be responsible with this and follow the guidelines all adult wizards must follow.

"In return for all this, I ask that you cooperate in our investigation, that you return to Hogwarts this year, where you will continue your education and, hopefully, cause the suspects to trip up further. We are dealing with some very high profile people. Our case must be airtight. The Ministry will take every step we can to protect and help you, but you need to help us as well," she concluded.

Harry looked thoughtful for a moment. "One change, Director." He glanced at Remus with a grin before turning back to Amelia. "I trust Auror Tonks a lot. I think it would be ok if she just moved in. There are plenty of bedrooms in our location."

Amelia glanced over at Tonks, who suddenly found the carpet highly interesting, then looked at Remus, who was stirring his coffee like a madman. Looking between the two with a slight frown, she wondered what was going on. It was a small enough request however, so she nodded in agreement.

Later, as they stood to leave, Harry reached out and offered his hand to Amelia. As she shook it, she looked into his eyes and saw the pain and doubt in them.

"I know it's hard, Harry," she said quietly, "but you can trust me. I won't betray you."

He nodded, though his expression didn't change. When he turned away and gathered his family around him to leave, she repeated that vow silently to herself.

---

**Author Notes: (kind of long this chapter, so skip if you'd like)**

Wow, folks! That's a lot of reviews for one chapter. Thanks, everyone! Sorry for the long A/N that follows, but we wanted to address your questions/comments. Hopefully the length of our chapters will make up for it.

Yep, we're back. We know HBP comes out in a few days, but this story wouldn't leave us alone. So to all of you who read our previous stories, welcome back and we hope you like this story. To the new folks, we hope you enjoy our work. This story will be different from our previous, in that we're taking a LOT of ideas that we either KNOW won't happen in canon (hence the AU listing) or don't really like and are trying to make them work. Think of it as the authors stretching their wings and writing against their inclination.

As for HBP, we know everyone's going to rush out and read it as soon as they can (we will too!), but don't worry, we'll be here when you're ready for more fan fiction. (Bob's note, I suspect that having read and written two fics already, I may not enjoy HBP because it doesn't match my vision of where Rowling should go.)

A reviewer asked a question about the size of our chapters. To answer, yes, all of our chapters are nearly the same size – 30-32 pages. Occasionally, we'll go over that, but have never posted anything over 40 pages per chapter.

How long was Dumbledore/Riddle/Merlin's Matura? No one knows. Remember, asking about the Matura is a horribly rude thing to do, as it's such an intensely private event. There are no records kept about such things. However, as the authors, we can tell you that nobody's Matura has lasted as long as Harry's. (Bob's note: Why is this important? This is a very private thing. I don't ask you how often you play with yourself do I? \* Grin \*)

Yes, this is a Super Power Harry story that takes place in 6th year (the 7th year story will follow this one, just like we did with DA and SC). But Harry isn't flaunting his powers in Sunset...at least, not yet. Will he ever flaunt them? We're not telling (Evil Cackle).

We like Remus too. We wouldn't hurt him...would we? Muahahahaha...

Dumbledore isn't evil...he's just VERY misguided! Yeah, that's it! Think of him as a keebler elf with an attitude.

If something in the story happens and isn't explained right away, keep your shirts on. Most likely, it will be answered further down or in another chapter. Yes, we know, we're making you wait... but that's part of the fun, right? Patience, Grasshopper...all will be explained in time :D

As for the Harry/Hermione ship, we know people are split over it. It's either love/hate with little

room between. As for ourselves, we're not big on Harry/Hermione either. However, we did it this way for three reasons. First, our last stories were Harry/Ginny. Second, we wanted to do something we didn't like, and see if we could make it work. Third, the plot itself called for Harry/Hermione, and we don't argue with the Muse when she's on a roll! (Bob's note: I PROTEST! THIS IS SEXIST! WHY IS THE MUSE FEMALE?)

Arthur's involvement in Harry's trust? Let's put it this way. He knows about it and did nothing to stop it, which makes him, at the least, an accessory.

Dumbledore going Vader? Sorry, but that made us laugh. "Call me Darth Helmet!" Dumbledore said menacingly. Hehehe...nice parody material, maybe :D "Hey, your Schwartz is as big as mine!"

Molly, Arthur, Ron and Dumbledore are not giving into the dark. With the Weasley's, it's simple greed. With Dumbledore, it's fame. These things may lead to a path of darkness, true, but in this story, you will not see them prancing besides Voldemort at the final battle.

We've had a few people asking for our opinions about their outline(s). We're willing to help if you need a sounding board for ideas, but as we're in the middle of a story, it may take a day or two to get a response from us so keep that in mind. In any case, anyone can contact us at alyx\_nw at yahoo . com (don't know if Fanfic will allow the email addy to show, but remove the spaces and use the "at symbol" if it does).

We plan to update this story twice a week, possibly more if the muse ties us to our chairs like she did with our last stories. So for those issuing death threats, relax, take a deep breath and eat a chocolate frog. Just as an FYI, we are currently on chapter 6, with chapters 3-5 being worked on by my wife. We are striving to have at least three chapters complete at all times while another is in the pipe.

A quick note about any spelling/grammar errors you may find in this story. We thought about finding a beta and I (Alyx) even contacted someone about it. However, Bob got impatient and wanted to start posting. As such, all errors can be blamed on him :D

### **Pet Peeves:**

Canon Worshippers! No matter how many times we say something is not to canon, someone has to leave us a review saying "This isn't to canon". Well you can go suck my er... forget that. Please read the authors notes to see if the author is claiming to be to canon or not before complaining.



## Sunset Over Britain First Moves

Standard Disclaimer:

Harry: "HEY! You guys don't own me!"

Bob: "They know that Harry, but we're going to torment you anyway!"

Harry: "B-B-But that's unfair! I won't allow it! Only JK Rowling owns me!"

Bob: "Silly teenage wizard! Here, let me stick your toe in this pencil sharpener!"

Harry: "Noooooooooooooooo!!!!!!!!!!!!!"

NOPE WE DON'T OWN THIS STUFF

---

Sunset over Britain  
Chapter 3

---

Padfoot Manor, in the foyer...

Returning home from Pico's, Harry had one burning question on his mind. "Tonks, why did you insist both wrist and leg holsters for Hermione and myself?"

Tonks looked at him impishly and pulled up her sleeve, showing off her wrist holster with wand firmly in place. Then, she lifted up her skirt enough to reveal another holster, with a second wand!

Remus seemed more interested in her leg than the second wand, but Harry ignored him. "Do you think we can get second wands, Tonks?" he asked quietly.

"I'm not sure, Harry, but the two holsters give you options, depending on your clothing. For now, get comfortable with the wrist holster. I'll talk to Director Bones about a second wand permit when I think you're both comfortable with them and ready for a second wand, all right?"

Both Harry and Hermione nodded eagerly.

Padfoot Manor, the Granger's bedroom...

Hermione knocked on the door to her parent's bedroom and waited before entering. The door opened and Emma smiled at her daughter.

“Come in, dear. There was something I wanted to talk to you about,” she said.

Hermione slipped into the room and took a seat near the fireplace while Emma poured them both some tea, then sat in another chair

“Dear, tell me about the Boy-Who-Lived,” Emma said softly.

“B-b-but Mum, you already know Harry,” she protested, throwing a glance over at her father, who was sitting on the bed, watching them curiously.

“That’s just it, Hermione. I know Harry. I want you to tell me about the Boy-Who-Lived.”

Hermione stared at her mother in confusion. Emma sighed. She was inordinately proud of her daughter, but sometimes her impressive intellect was a liability.

“Hermione, I asked you because you don’t seem to be seeing the whole picture. Harry grew up abused and unloved. Then suddenly he’s thrust into an environment where he’s a hero simply because he survived a terrible attack that he barely remembers. The Wizarding world cannot make up its mind about him. One year he’s a villain, the next he’s a super hero. In some ways, they’ve placed the Boy-Who-Lived onto a high pedestal, an icon of hope for dark times. Then they do their best to knock him off that pedestal.”

Hermione sat back and thought for a moment. “Alright Mum, I see that. But what’s your point?”

“I watched tonight as you explained to Director Bones about Harry’s last year at school and it occurred to me that, as much as he hates to be thought of the Boy-Who-Lived, he still feels the need to try to live up to that image. No matter how impossible it may be he tries anyway because he thinks people expect it of him. That damn prophecy hanging over his head doesn’t help either.”

Hermione felt a hand on her shoulder. Looking up, she saw her father smiling at her. “Your mum’s right, sweetheart. Harry has an incredible sense of responsibility. For all his problems, he’s the most mature teenager I’ve ever met. Everything he does, whether it’s studying with you in the morning, or dragging you outside in the afternoons to relax, seems to be geared to increasing his strength and endurance. He takes you swimming and, while you relax by the poolside, he’s doing laps. After you’ve gone to bed, he’s still awake, reading. I’ve even seen him out late at night jogging around the grounds. He may hate being famous, but he’s trying to live up to that image. Tonight, when you explained to Director Bones about his last year at Hogwarts, it was, to Harry at least, like you were pointing out every time he’d failed to live up to being the Boy-Who-Lived. It hurt him deeply, Hermione.”

Hermione frowned. “Should I go talk to him about it? I wasn’t trying to hurt him, Dad. I just wanted Director Bones to know what happened last year.”

“I think it would be a good idea to clear the air with him. He’s a fine young man, but he’s still healing. He needs to know you didn’t mean to hurt him,” her father replied.

Hermione was about to get up when another thought crossed her mind. “Dad, what was that ‘Brotherhood’ business about today?”

Dan chuckled. “That? It was nothing, sweetheart. I just thought it might be funny to toss your dear Professor an illusion made up of a single word.”

Hermione grinned and shook her head. Standing, she kissed her parents and left the room quickly. She wanted to talk to Harry before he went to bed.

---

Grimmauld Place...

Tonight’s meeting was not open to the full Order. Only the executive council was called to meet, with a few other selected members.

Alastor Moody sat next to Professor McGonagall and Professor Snape. Snape had just finished his report about his encounter with Lupin and his anger was still seething. The charmed evening gown had not been amusing. Nor had the laughter that followed him to Ollivander’s shop for a new wand.

Dumbledore rapped on the table to gain their attention. “I have reviewed Severus’ memory in a pensieve. A couple of factors struck me immediately. Remus was surrounded by five figures, all bearing the same strange, curious rune on their cloaks. At least one of those figures performed several impossibly strong feats of wandless magic.”

The information caused those in the room to fidget nervously. Both Dumbledore and Voldemort could perform wandless magic, but only barely. It was a dying skill in the Wizarding community and it suggested that the Brotherhood contained at least one member who was more powerful than Dumbledore.

“Now, I’ve traced the rune and found that it is tied to an organization that, as far as I know, exists only in legend. There is a reference to a group who wore similar cloaks. They called themselves the Brotherhood of Druidic Knights and they existed long before the age of Merlin. Legend has it that the Brotherhood was firmly entrenched on the side of the light, but their methods were somewhat unorthodox. While defenders of the light, the Brotherhood of Druidic Knights never took prisoners. They simply slaughtered any dark wizard or witch they came across.

“If the Brotherhood still exists and has taken over the protection of Harry Potter, we must make contact with them, get them to ally themselves to our cause and convince them to return Harry to us. But I must caution you, if the legends are true, the Brotherhood contains highly skilled wizards, trained in the arts of war both magical and muggle. We must be cautious in dealing with them.

“I will talk about this again at the next general meeting so all our members can help look for the Brotherhood. We will adjourn for this evening, but I’d like each of you to do what research you

can regarding this group and how we may approach them,” Dumbledore said, standing.

Everyone else stood and filed from the room.

---

### **Padfoot Manor, Harry’s bedroom...**

Hermione walked quietly up to the door of Harry’s bedroom. There was a light under the door so she knew he must still be awake. She knocked softly and waited. When no answer came, she gathered her Gryffindor courage and, hoping Harry was decent, opened the door and peered in.

His nightstand, table and bed were piled high with books, but that wasn’t what caught her attention. Harry was standing in the middle of the room, moving fluidly from one position to another, and the sight nearly took the breath from her lungs. The leashed power of his form and the innate grace of his movements held her spellbound. He wore only a pair of black jeans and a light sheen of sweat covered his naked torso. As he moved, she noted that his eyes had an unfocused quality to them, almost as if he were looking inward.

She inhaled a breath of much needed air and slipped into the room, quietly closing the door behind her. Harry seemed to be unaware of her presence as she moved to one of the chairs near the table and sat down. With her head cocked to one side, she watched him for several minutes, trying to figure out what he was doing and soon became frustrated with the puzzle.

Unable to contain herself any longer, she stood, walked to his side and touched him on the arm. He blinked a few times and shook his head.

Turning, Harry frowned when he noticed her standing there. “Hermione?”

“I’m sorry to disturb you, but I wanted to talk to you. Every time I see you though, you just make me think up more questions. What were you doing?”

Harry motioned towards the table she’d just left and they both sat down.

“It’s called Tai Chi, Hermione. The Chinese call it meditation in motion. It helps with my Occlumency and a few other things. I can start up a routine and, while doing it, work on my shields, or scan the surrounding area. It’s actually quite relaxing, actually. I could teach you, if you like.”

“How did you learn it?”

“Well, I was wondering if there were any forms of meditative techniques that could help with my Occlumency, so I went down to the library and found a book that mentioned Tai Chi. Wanting something a little more in-depth on the subject, I checked the shelf again and found...” Harry paused in thought for a moment. “Hermione I’m going to tell you something and I don’t want you to laugh at me, but I think there’s something strange about the library downstairs.”

“Strange? How do you mean? I haven’t noticed anything.”

“Every time I’ve needed a book on a particular subject, I’ve found it in the library. All of these,” he said, waving his hand at the stacks of books around the room, “came from one particular shelf marked ‘Miscellaneous’. Even with all these books missing, the shelf is still full, or appears to be at any rate. It seems to always have the same number of books on it. You remember the Room of Requirement?”

Hermione knitted her brow in confusion. “Yes, I remember it very well. Why do you ask?”

“Is it possible that the library contains a shelf that might do the same thing as the Room does? A Shelf of Requirement?”

Hermione’s eyes lit up and he shook his head. Merlin, but the girl did love her books!

“I suppose it’s possible. Why don’t we check it tomorrow and see if that’s the case?”

“Sounds like a plan to me. We spend several hours in the library every day anyway so it won’t be like we’re going out of our way to do something different.”

“Harry... about today. When I told Director Bones about last year...” she started.

When Harry frowned, she folded her hands on the table and stared at them. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to hurt you with what I was saying,” she finished quietly.

She stopped when Harry put his hands on hers. “I know you didn’t mean to hurt me, but I can’t help the fact that it did. Don’t worry about it. I know you didn’t do it deliberately, it just happened. I’ve come to realize that even the people you care about can accidentally cause a person pain. The difference lies in the intent, not the pain itself, and you had no intent to hurt me,” he said softly.

Hermione leaned towards him and smiled. “Harry, what’s happening between us?” she asked carefully.

Harry leaned back in his chair and ran a hand through his hair. “Honestly, I’m not sure, Hermione. I think it’s more than just friendship, but I don’t know. It scares me. You scare me. I have feelings for you that I’ve never felt before for anyone, or from anyone. I don’t think I’d be a good boyfriend. I don’t even know what a boyfriend does! Merlin, you frighten me more than Voldemort sometimes...” he trailed off, realizing he was rambling. Taking a deep breath, he looked into her eyes and said, “I don’t know what this is, Hermione, but I know I don’t want it to stop.”

Hermione’s eyes softened. “I don’t think I want it to stop either, Harry. I don’t have a lot of experience in relationships, but I promise you that I’ll try to help you over the rough spots. Alright?”

Harry nodded and they smiled at each other, both feeling lighter somehow. When Hermione stood

and moved towards the door, he followed her. Before she slipped out, he embraced her, a little embarrassed and she kissed him on the cheek.

---

## Plans in Motion...

Michael Landsbury stood before the door of number four Privet Drive. He carried two briefcases, one supplied by his client and his own. Placing his own briefcase on the ground, the well-dressed man rang the doorbell and waited for it to open.

“Yes?” asked the corpulent, red-faced man.

“Mister Vernon Dursley?” asked Landsbury.

“That’s correct, I’m Vernon Dursley.”

“Mister Dursley, my name is Michael Landsbury, solicitor. Might I have a word with you and your wife please? I am here on behalf of a client and wish to discuss a rather lucrative offer my client would like me to tender towards you.”

Vernon’s eyes lit up at the word ‘lucrative’ and he motioned for the man to enter. Leading him into the kitchen, he introduced Landsbury to Petunia.

“Would you like some tea, Mister Landsbury?” asked Petunia politely.

“Yes, tea would be fine thank you.”

Vernon leaned closer to Landsbury. “I do believe you mentioned a lucrative offer?”

“Ah yes, cutting to the chase then,” Landsbury said as he put on briefcase on the table and opened it.

“Mr. and Mrs. Dursley, my client is willing to offer you 150,000 pounds, cash,” he said, turning the open briefcase around so the Dursley’s could see that it was full of money.

“All my client requests in return is your signature on these Emancipation papers for your nephew, Mrs. Dursley, one Harry James Potter, age 15, nearly 16. Of course, my client is planning on paying for all court costs and filing fees as well. Just sign the papers and I’ll leave the briefcase with you.”

Vernon’s jaw dropped open and he reached with trembling hands for the offered papers. Petunia swayed and nearly fainted in shock at seeing so much money.

Vernon looked at her and handed her the papers with a pen. She signed them quickly before giving them back to her husband.

“This means that abnormal brat won’t be coming back next year, right?” Vernon asked.

“Oh, quite correct, Mr. Dursley. My client has decided to see to the care of young Mr. Potter from here on,” replied Landsbury smoothly.

Vernon quickly added his signature to the papers, and then Landsbury signed them as a witness. He handed them a copy of the papers and pushed the briefcase towards Vernon.

“Mr. and Mrs. Dursley, I appreciate your prompt cooperation in this matter. Oft times these things take weeks or longer to sort out.”

The three of them sat in an awkward silence as Landsbury finished his tea. The Dursley’s never looked away from the cash in the briefcase. It was almost as if they were afraid it would disappear.

When he noticed the naked greed in their eyes, Landsbury felt ill. Standing quickly, he said his goodbyes, nearly choking on the pleasantries. At the door, Vernon shook his hand and all but shoved him out. On the stoop, hearing the door close behind him, Landsbury did his best not to shudder in revulsion. Walking quickly to a local store a few blocks away, he ducked into a public restroom and never came out again.

Once the door had closed at number four Privet Drive, Vernon rushed back to Petunia and gave a whoop of triumph.

---

Ministry of Magic, Department of Magical Law Enforcement...

The owl came through an open window and dropped a locked container in the “IN” basket before flying back out the window again. An aide picked up the container and noted the priority routing for the Director’s eyes only. Standing, she rushed off to deliver it.

Amelia opened the container once the aide had left the room. She extracted one sheath of muggle paper and one parchment and examined them carefully. Chuckling, she could only shake her head in admiration. Remus Lupin had been correct in his assessment. He had provided Landsbury, a retired Auror turned Solicitor, with enough muggle money to buy the Dursley’s signatures. Between the two groups of documents, they represented the complete and total emancipation of Harry James Potter in both the Muggle and Wizarding world.

Remus had told her about Sirius Black and, while she didn’t relish the idea that the escaped prisoner had been held for twelve years without a trial, or that he had died, she was pleased that his efforts had helped bring this about. Black had left behind a briefcase, which contained his “mad money” as he called it. It was muggle money, 150,000 pounds worth, which he’s planned to use if he needed to go on the run again. It was this money that Lupin had used to buy Harry’s emancipation in the muggle world.

Still chuckling, she copied the documents, and then sent the muggle papers via hand held courier

to the Muggle Ministry for official filing. Once that was done, she filed a copy with her Ministry in the form of a sealed record. As a final act, she crafted a letter to Gringotts, requesting special handling in the matter and that they contact her.

---

Gringotts...

Ragnok, Director and Chief Executive officer of the Goblin Nation and Gringotts looked over the letter from the Ministry's Department of Magical Law Enforcement again and considered his options. With the coming war, the Goblin nation would eventually have to pick a side. Right now it seemed, at least according to the letter, that the Ministry was firmly backing Harry Potter.

Word had filtered up through the ranks of the goblins that Mr. Potter, one of their biggest depositors, harbored no prejudice against the goblins, unlike so many other wizards. It was even rumored that he was quite fond of Griphook, a minor Gringotts employee.

Snapping his fingers, he summoned an aide.

"Take care of this immediately," he ordered, handing over the letter.

---

Padfoot Manor, several days later...

*Sirius fell backwards. Harry watched and felt like he was encased in concrete. He yelled in slow motion, the words long and drawn out. Then the scene shifted and they were in the room with the strange time turner. Dolohov cast his spell and hit Hermione, cutting her from her shoulder all the way down to her hip.*

*He fell to his knees next to her and begged her to get up. Another shift and he was back in the Death Chamber, watching Sirius walk into the veil, then Remus, then Hermione, Fred, Susan, George, Ginny, Hermione's parents, his parents. Each person looked at him before they entered the veil, as if to accuse him of causing their death.*

It was three A.M. when Harry bolted from his bed and sighed. Another nightmare. They were happening more and more frequently and waking him up earlier every night. His Occlumency seemed to have blocked Voldemort, but it was doing nothing for his nightmares.

Getting up from his bed, he decided he might as well start his day early with a jog around the grounds. He threw on some clothes and opened the door to his bedroom, only to skid to a halt. Hermione stood in the doorway wearing a robe over her pajamas, her arms crossed over her chest and glaring at him, angrily.



She poked him in the chest. “Going somewhere, Potter?” she hissed.

He started backing up. “Hermione, what are you doing up at this hour? You should be in bed, asleep!”

“I could say the same thing about you,” she retorted. “Now I’ll ask you again, where do you think you are going?”

Harry tried to brave it through, but he knew he was busted. “Out for a jog?” he finished lamely.

Hermione glared at him and pushed him further into the room until he had fallen back on the bed. When she stepped closer, she felt the silencing charm in place as she passed over the threshold.

“Silencing charms? Your game is up, Potter. Dobby tells me you don’t even try to sleep until well after midnight. Then you get up most nights around four A.M. The Aurors tell me you’re up early, jogging around the grounds, and then you go for your morning swim. You’re not getting enough sleep and I want to know why.”

Harry sat up on the bed and looked at her for a long moment. Hermione was like a badger when she was working on a problem and he knew she wasn’t going to let him brush her off. Sighing, he looked away from her before he started to explain.

“It’s the nightmares, Hermione. They’re always the same, every night, even if I nap during the day. I can’t get rid of them, so I just try to avoid sleeping, that’s all, no big deal.”

Hermione sat on the bed next to him. “Everyone has nightmares, Harry…”

“NO! Not like this! Every damn night, it’s always the same things. Sirius falling into the veil, then watching you get hurt by Dolohov, then watching friends and family members willingly walk into the veil but, before they do, they stop to accuse me of causing their deaths. Every time I sleep. I’ve tried lucid dreaming, I’ve tried directed dreaming, and I’ve even tried magical methods. Short of getting myself addicted on dreamless sleep potions, there doesn’t seem to be a solution. Bloody Merlin, Hermione, I can’t even be a normal teenage boy and dream about girls. No, all I can dream about is death.”

Hermione watched him impassively as he got more agitated while he described the problem. Then she reached up to touch the back of his neck with her hand. He flinched from her touch for a moment before relaxing into it.

“Harry, you have a house full of people who want to help you, but you have to let us in to help. Will you promise me that you’ll stop using the silencing charms? We can’t help you if we don’t know you need it.”

“Mmmm hmmm,” he responded.

Hermione realized that her simple caress on his neck was relaxing him into sleep. She helped him get back into the bed and pulled off his shoes. A few minutes later, he was sound asleep.

Hermione remained at his side for half an hour, watching him. She desperately wanted to help him, but she couldn't do it alone. As much as she might be willing to admit to herself that climbing into his bed and holding him might help, she doubted her parents would approve. No, this was something she needed to get the other women involved in. Tomorrow, she'd speak to Tonks and her Mum.

The next morning while Harry was doing his laps, Hermione explained his problem to the adults. Emma suggested Harry try a dream journal, where he could describe the dreams and the emotions behind them. Hermione warned them that with the silencing charm gone, he'd probably wake people up at night.

Later that day, Hermione gave Harry a journal and explained to him that it would be private and no one would read it without his permission. She told him what they hoped he'd do with it and how it might help with the nightmares if, when he woke up, he'd record his dreams before trying to go back to sleep.

Since nothing he'd tried before seemed to help, he told her he was willing to try the journal.

---

### Tripping with the Dursley's...

In the Dursley's bedroom, Vernon Dursley pried up a loose floorboard and pulled out a neatly bound bundle of money. Petunia looked at him, questioningly.

Vernon shrugged. "Can't hand it over to a bank Pet, then we'd have to report it and have it taxed. It's safe here. I'm going to pull out enough to arrange for us to have a nice holiday. Why don't you and Dudley start packing while I see about arranging a week at Euro Disney?"

Petunia smiled broadly, knowing that Dudley would be pleased! Nodding she went to break the news to her son while Vernon went downstairs. He had a travel agent to see.

---

### Grimmauld Place...

Dumbledore rapped his knuckles on the table, gaining the attention of those around him.

"Please everyone, settle down so we can get on with this. The first item I need to discuss tonight is, once again, the issue of Harry Potter. Young Harry has been missing since mid June. To further cloud matters, Remus Lupin was spotted in the company of the Brotherhood of Druidic Knights in Diagon Alley. Therefore, I believe it's safe to assume that they have Harry Potter.

"The Brotherhood is an ancient order predating Merlin and is made up entirely of Wizards and

Witches, trained in the arts of war both magical and muggle. Their membership is unknown, but is undoubtedly extremely powerful. I must caution everyone present. Their methods can be extremely brutal. When confronted in battle, they do not take prisoners. It is vital that we make contact with the Brotherhood and get them to release Harry Potter back to us.”

Dumbledore conjured an image of a gray cloak with a Celtic cross on the right breast. The image floated down the long table, rotating slowly.

“As you can see, a Druidic Knight can be identified by their characteristic cloak. Note the design over the right breast. That’s the symbol for their organization. If you spot someone wearing that cloak, approach him or her cautiously. Do not make any hostile moves! We want young Harry back and, beyond that, we’d like them to join us in our cause,” Dumbledore concluded.

Tonks sat in the back of the room, puzzled about this ‘Brotherhood’ business, until she saw the image of the cloak. Putting the pieces together, she knew she had to get out of the room quickly before laughter got the better of her. She motioned to Kingsley Shacklebolt that the Ministry was summoning her. He nodded and made way for her to move by and out the door.

---

Ministry of Magic, Department of Magical Law Enforcement...

“Auror Tonks is here asking to see you, Madam Director.”

“Please send her in,” replied Amelia.

Tonks walked into the room carrying a cloak and trying very hard not to laugh. She took a seat when the Director motioned for her to do so.

Amelia looked at the young woman strangely. “What is so funny this evening, Auror Tonks?” Amelia asked, clearly confused.

“I’m sorry, Director. As you know, I’ve just come from an Order meeting and something rather amusing has happened. Do you remember my report about meeting Snape in Diagon Alley?”

Amelia thought for a second before recalling the written report. Nodding, she motioned for Tonks to continue.

“Well, it seems the Order took Dr. Granger’s a little too seriously. He told Snape that the ‘Brotherhood’ protected Harry Potter now. That simple word, and these cloaks that Harry charmed with a simple protective rune, has the Order believing that some mysterious, ancient cult is now protecting the young man! Dumbledore is instructing the Order membership to seek out the Brotherhood to get Harry back, and to get them to join their side!”

Amelia chuckled and looked at the cloak Tonks offered her. It never ceased to amaze her how

simple coincidences could make all sorts of things happen in her line of work.

“I think I will borrow this cloak for a while, Tonks. We can work this mistake to our own advantage. Now, tell me, how fares Harry?”

“He’s well, Director, but he’s been plagued with nightmares. His responsibilities weigh heavily on his conscious, I think. We’ve been trying to help him as much as possible, and it seems to be helping, but I dare say it will be some time before his nightmares go away altogether. Mrs. Granger has been especially helpful in this, as well as her daughter, although I suspect for different reasons. I do think he likes Hermione quite a lot, he just isn’t sure what to do about it yet.

“The protective detail has settled in quite nicely. Both Harry and Hermione often spend part of the afternoon training, with the help of at least one Auror. It’s tougher on Harry because the power behind his spells is truly remarkable. He has to practice using dummies for targets when using offensive spells. When he’s dueling with one of us, he relies strictly on defensive magic.

“As I’m sure you know, Miles Pickerton has been to the manor house several times now. He’s been tutoring Hermione and Susan in the basics of Occlumency and helping Harry improve his existing techniques. Miles is also teaching Harry two new techniques, Reflective and Deflective Occlumency. According to Miles, he’s been picking up the technique at an astonishing rate.

“Harry’s been getting owls every other day from Dumbledore. Each letter is getting more and more demanding. He’s annoyed that he can’t reply to them. I’ll ask him if it’s all right for us to start screening out those owls.

“Finally, he’d like to know when it would be alright for him to assume ownership of Grimmauld Place. His birthday’s in three days and he’d like to assume ownership by then, if possible. Remus Lupin seems to think that, once Gringotts issues the eviction notice, Dumbledore’s spells on the place will be superceded by older, far stronger spells from the Black family,” she concluded.

Amelia considered the information for a few moments. “You know... I have an idea that would really throw some confusion into Dumbledore and his Order. Ask Harry to wait a few days. He’ll definitely be able to take ownership before the first week of August is out, but I think that, with your Metamorphmagus ability, and a cloak, we can really sow some useful confusion...”

---

Privet Drive, two nights later...

With Harry still missing, the Order had removed its watchers from Privet Drive. There was no one around to notice when ten Death Eaters apparated to the location. Sealing all the windows and doors, they set fire to the house. Once the blaze was solidly burning, the Death Eaters apparated away.

The second floor of Privet Drive had collapsed into the first by the time the fire department had arrived on the scene. An hour and a half later, the fire was extinguished.

As with all structure fires, the burned out home was examined for hot spots, flare-ups, and the cause of the blaze. Tearing through some of the debris, one of the firemen noticed something strange; neatly bound bundles of money, which had suffered only mild fire and water damage. He quickly called his supervisor, who examined the money briefly before grabbing his radio and calling in a request for police investigative support.

By morning, technicians from the National Crime Squad were examining the burned out building. All in all, some 130,000 pounds of currency had been found in the wreckage.

---

## A Subdued Birthday...

Harry awoke feeling better than he had in weeks. Emma's idea of a dream journal seemed to be helping. So was the fact that, for the first couple of nights after he had taken the silencing charm off his bed, someone would check on him if he awoke from a bad nightmare.

After he had his morning swim he went back upstairs to change. The Grangers had made some changes to the pool to keep it clean and Harry disliked the smell of the chemicals they had used in it. It wasn't bad when he swam in it, but afterwards it seemed to cling to him.

Harry changed into one of his bright yellow t-shirts and a black pair of jeans. He thought about the t-shirt for a moment, and then cast an imprinting charm on it, adding his own personal touch to the shirt. Hermione actually suggested that his personalizing the t-shirts was a form of release for him that might also be helping with the nightmares. However, she did make him promise never to wear one of the yellow monstrosities while out in public with her.

Exiting the house and heading to the table out back, it was Remus who first spotted him. Remus nearly choked on his tea when he read the words, 'Voldemort 0, Potter 5' stretched across Harry's chest in fiery red letters.

Hermione rolled her eyes when she spotted the shirt. She admitted, to herself at least, that it wasn't as bad as the shirt that read, 'Harry Potter, Boy Hero, Reasonable Rates, Available for Weddings, Bar mitzvahs and Dark Lord Slaying'.

"So, what books am I to read today, Hermione?" he asked innocently. Every morning Hermione would rummage through their Shelf of Requirement and pick out four books for him to read. He didn't mind her selecting the reading material as she usually picked out some good books. Shortly after he told her about the shelf, she had picked out books in spell creation, Arithmancy and Ancient Runes, which he found fascinating. He had advanced to the point of making his own spells, mostly charms and a few hexes so far.

Amelia had arranged for him to take his OWL tests in Arithmancy and Ancient Runes in early August. If he passed them, he'd be allowed to take those subjects when he returned to Hogwarts. Hermione was sure he'd pass since he was already doing post NEWT work in both subjects.

Hermione looked at Harry strangely. "Harry, don't you remember? We're not going to study today. I thought I told you about that yesterday."

"Oh... I thought you were putting one on me. So why aren't we studying today?" he asked perplexed.

"It's your birthday. We all thought you might like to do something special today, like maybe go to muggle London for a movie, and dinner?"

"I don't know, Hermione. It's not like it's something special," he replied, trying not to grimace.

"HARRY..."

"Alright, alright. But instead of a movie, how about going to the British Museum? One of the books I read said they have an excellent magical section..." he stopped talking as both Emma and Hermione grinned and Dan buried his face into his hands.

"Harry," Dan said from between his hands, "you are truly doomed, did you know that?" Looking up at the young man and seeing his puzzled expression, he explained. "You've heard the old saying about the quickest way to a man's heart? Well, the quickest way to a bookworm's heart is through the museum. I made a similar comment over twenty years ago and look where I ended up..."

Harry stared at Dan in horror while everyone laughed. Everyone, that is, but Hermione, who looked at the adults as if they'd gone insane. As far as she was concerned, a museum trip was a wonderful idea! And that the suggestion came from Harry warmed her to the core.

After breakfast everyone, including the two extra Aurors, donned the gray concealment cloaks. Tonks was officially in charge of the security detail, so she checked everyone before they entering the foyer of the Manor to portkey to the Leaky Cauldron. She had Harry add Celtic crosses to the cloaks of the two Aurors before they left. Tonks had explained to Harry and his friends what the Order thought, causing a great deal of amusement.

From the Leaky Cauldron they entered Muggle London and used the Underground to make their way to the museum. Standing in front of the building, Harry had to admit to being awed by the sheer size of it. Hogwarts was impressive, but the muggles had built a building of enormous size!

They spent nearly the entire day in the museum, with Hermione dragging Harry from one exhibit to another. The magical exhibit was fun, especially when they got to view the remains of Samuel Splinch, the first and worst case of an apparation accident recorded.

The Egyptian exhibit, however, fascinated Harry. Had it not been for Remus and Tonks, he and

Hermione would have had a rather loud debate over whether the Egyptian gods were real or merely wizards, pretending. Harry was convinced they were wizards and Hermione was sure they were mythical.

At the end of the day, they returned to Padfoot Manor to change into their evening clothes for dinner, as the restaurant's dress code required wizarding robes. Remus had reserved a private room at Starry Knights, the most famous Wizarding Restaurant in all of England.

Harry frowned seeing his robe laid out for him. Dobby selected the robe of the head of the Black Family. It was made of acromantula silk, jet black with silver trim. The Black family crest was embroidered over the right breast, with his rank marking along both sleeves. Harry had protested to Remus about the robe, but older man was firm. He was not allowed to wear his Potter family colors until he had returned to Hogwarts, at the earliest.

From the noises coming from the rest of the household, Harry was sure he wasn't the only one having trouble with his robe. Emma had gone into Hermione's room seeking help putting on the complex garment. And Remus had to come to the aid of Dan, who, from the sounds of things, was clueless. It really wasn't that the robes were all that difficult to wear but, without magic, both Emma and Dan needed minor sticking charms to help the robes stay on. On a wizard or witch, the built in sticking charms activated automatically when worn.

Tonks and the two Aurors had the least amount of trouble finding something to wear. They had only to change into their official uniforms for the trip.

Harry waited for his friend in the foyer, having dressed quickly to escape the chaos of muggles trying to put on Wizarding robes. Tonks and the two Aurors joined him a few minutes later.

Tonks looked him up and down and whistled in appreciation. She then tried fixing his hair. He was used to people, especially women, trying to fix what he knew wasn't fixable. "You know Harry, another inch or two and you'll be able to tie it off into a pony tail. Without the added weight, I don't think your hair will ever be presentable. It seems to have a mind of its own," she complained, giving up on his hair in disgust.

"It's always been like that, Tonks. I'm beginning to think I'd look better in a buzz cut," he replied.

"Nah, Harry. Long hair is very wizard-ish, and the girls think It's really dishy," she said with a sly grin.

Harry rolled his eyes and grimaced.

Remus came down next, dressed in a metallic gray robe that made him look younger than he was. Harry couldn't help but laugh as he watched Tonks eye Remus and bite her lip. Dan and Emma followed, both in matching dark blue robes.

All of the adults laughed when Hermione appeared at the top of the staircase. Harry and Hermione had spotted each other simultaneously and had frozen in shock. Hermione was the first to move

and she descended the stairs nervously. Just before she reached the last few steps, Harry reached up shyly, offering her his hand. She accepted it with a smile and stepped down into the foyer.

With everyone present, they donned their concealment cloaks once again and portkeyed to the Leaky Cauldron for the short walk to Starry Knights. The restaurant was unique in England. The ceilings were charmed to show a starry night sky and each table within the restaurant looked as though it floated over a rolling landscape on its own cloud. When the Maitre d' escorted them to their private room and opened the door, Hermione gasped and paled. She had not yet overcome her fear of heights.

Harry removed her cloak and hung it next to his. Then, he took her hand and forced her to meet his eyes. "Hermione, don't look down. It's just an illusion. There's a solid floor. Concentrate on keeping your head level or look up at the stars," he said softly.

He stepped out onto nothingness while she stood in the doorway. He felt her hand tremble in his grasp, so he stepped back into the doorway and wrapped an arm around her waist. Then he tilted her head so she was looking at him again.

"Trust me, Hermione. I'll hold onto you and steer you to your chair. You'll be fine once you are at the table," he whispered to her encouragingly. She nodded and let him guide her to her chair.

The meal was excellent. Hermione was fully relaxed throughout the dinner, even before her parents allowed her some wine. Harry thought about having a glass as well, maybe even something stronger, but something his Occlumency tutor told him kept running through his head.

"Magic," Miles had said, "is powered by the mind. A very strong wizard or witch like yourself should avoid anything that would impair your thinking or judgment." Remembering that advice he stuck to Pumpkin juice and tea.

Remus arched an eyebrow at Harry when he turned down the alcohol. Harry shook his head, feeling as though he was turning down a Marauder tradition. "It's the Occlumency, Remus..."

Remus nodded and stopped him with a sad smile. "No need to go further, cub. I'm sure Lily would approve."

Remus, like Sirius before him, was finally coming to realize that Harry wasn't James, but a balance of both his parents and a tremendous sense of responsibility.

Later that evening back in Padfoot Manor, Hermione joined Harry for a cup of tea in one of the upstairs sitting rooms, before turning in. She sat on the couch while he stood, staring out the window. The only light in the room came from the flickering of the flames in the fireplace.

"What's bothering you, Harry?" she asked gently.

"I'm not sure. I look out the window and sometimes I have to ask myself if the world I'm supposed to save is worth it."



Harry ran a hand through his hair, a sure sign of his tension. “Look at our world, Hermione. Everyone looks up to the great Albus Dumbledore, yet we know him to be a scheming, dangerous man, little better than Voldemort in his manipulations. Corrupt politicians, rampant racism, ethnic purging of ‘tainted’ creatures like Remus... Is it worth saving? I don’t know, and I wish someone could tell me. Sometimes... sometimes I wish I could take all my friends and run away to someplace safe.”

Hermione stood and walked over to the window to stand with him. She placed a hand on his shoulder. “I’m not sure what to tell you, Harry. I know you’ll be at risk if you face Voldemort, even with your additional power. I don’t want you to fight him. I’m selfish. I don’t want to lose you. It’s something you need to decide for yourself. But don’t let the actions of a few cause you to condemn everyone to death and misery. You’re so very strong Harry, and you have this ‘people saving’ thing. But you don’t want to face him until you’re ready and on your terms, not his,” she said, looking up at him.

He smiled gently down at her and slid one arm around her waist.

The next morning, Hermione awoke to a horrible sound. It sounded as though someone was slowly feeding Crookshanks into a meat grinder. Crookshanks, however, was laying on the bottom of her bed, looking up at her, as annoyed by the sound as she was.

Throwing on her robe, she walked to the door of her bedroom and stuck her head out. She noted that her mother was also looking out her door. The sound seemed to be coming from Harry’s room.

Steeling her nerve and wondering what Harry had gotten himself into this time, she walked over to his door and opened it. She didn’t bother knocking, there was no way he could hear her over the screeching.

Harry sat on the floor holding a strange looking metal pipe in his hands and he seemed to be blowing through one end of it. She walked over to him and he looked up at her in surprise.

“Harry, it’s almost seven o’clock in the morning! What are you doing? And where did you get that thing from?” she asked in an annoyed tone.

“I’m sorry Hermione,” he said. “It came a few days ago from Hagrid, but I forgot to open it until this morning. He sent it for my birthday. He said he was cleaning up some boxes for Mr. Filch when he found this. It belonged to Sirius and he thought I’d like to have it. It’s a flute of some kind, but Hagrid says it’s called an Irish Tinwhistle.”

Hermione stared at him a moment. “Don’t move and don’t play that thing until I get back!”

With that, she dashed from the room. She returned a few minutes later, after having visited the Shelf of Requirement, and handed him a book.

“Read that before you blow through that thing again, Harry. Oh and two words. Silencing Charms.

When you practice at seven A.M. use silencing charms,” she snipped before walking out of the room and back to her bed for another hour or two of sleep.

---

Heathrow Airport, London...

Air France, flight 47, Paris to London to New York, set down at Heathrow for its hour layover while the aircraft was prepped for the overseas flight. Quite a few people used the flight as a quick means of getting from Paris to London and the Dursley’s were no exception.

Vernon, Petunia and Dudley stood in line with their luggage, passports in hand, waiting for their turn at the customs gate, when a man dressed in a customs uniform approached Vernon.

“Passport, please,” the man said.

Vernon handed his passport to the man and tried to look important.

The customs agent looked it over, and then consulted a list on a clipboard. He shot Vernon a quick smile.

“I’ll be right back, Mister Dursley. Won’t be a moment.”

The man walked to a door and quickly stepped in while Vernon, Petunia and Dudley shuffled forward in line. A moment later, the man returned with two other customs agents, one in a much more ornately decorated uniform.

“Mister Dursley, would you and your family follow me, please? It appears there is a discrepancy on your passport and we’d like to iron it out. Don’t worry about your luggage, one of my men will see to it.”

Bewildered the Dursley’s followed the man back through the door. Inside they found a typical office. One man sat behind a desk, with several other people standing about the room, watching as the family entered. A door to their right led deeper into the building and, glancing around, Vernon became annoyed.

“Vernon C. Dursley, of number 4 Privet Drive, Little Whinging, Surrey?” asked the man from behind the desk.

“Yes. Now see here, I’m a loyal subject of her Majesty! I have a right to know what’s going on.” Vernon sputtered, finally losing his patience with these low-level government flunkies.

The man looked up, his expression cold. Vernon swallowed hard and fidgeted nervously. Obviously the man behind the desk wasn’t going to be intimidated.

“Mr. Dursley, Mrs. Dursley, I am Inspector Boffington from the NCS. You and your wife are under arrest for possession of counterfeit money with intent to launder. I suggest you cooperate

fully. Right now, you're looking at twenty-five year sentences.

"I should also warn you that we are investigating the disappearance of your nephew, whom we understand was ill while under your care," the man said coldly. Crimes against the state were bad enough, but crimes against children were the absolute worst, as far as the inspector was concerned.

Two other men in the room moved to put handcuffs on the Dursley's.

---

More Plans in motion...

At the Ministry of Magic, a secretary placed a file in front of a Child Protective Services Magistrate.

Due to an ongoing criminal investigation involving this particular child, his or her name was magically obscured from the document. The Magistrate saw that the request for emancipation came originally from the child's guardian, now deceased and that the child was currently under the protection of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. His eyes widened when he saw a personal note in the file from Minister Fudge himself, urging prompt cooperation to all department heads in dealing with the case.

He checked that the documents were properly filled out, going through each page thoroughly. Then, picking up the self inking stamp on his desk, he used it to mark the documents as approved before placing them in his outbox, where they shimmered briefly before disappearing, as they were magically filed away.

---

4 Privet Drive...

A policeman was still on the scene of the burned out building. He sat, trying not to doze in his car and drinking black coffee, trying to stay awake. Guarding a crime scene was, in his opinion, one of the most boring duties a policeman could draw.

When the wards around 4 Privet Drive came crashing down, the policeman, being a muggle, never noticed the light blue shimmer in the bright sunshine.

---

Hogwarts, School of Witchcraft and Wizardry...

A lone figure walked slowly up the approach road from Hogsmeade. He was an old man, tall and thin and he carried a staff with a glowing gem embedded in the top. Hung from one shoulder was a leather carrying case. The cloak concealed his face, but his hands were withered and gnarled with

age.

As he approached the Entrance Hall of Hogwarts, the massive doors swung open. If Minerva McGonagall seemed surprised to see the tall, cloaked visitor, she didn't show it. She stepped up to him firmly.

"I am Minerva McGonagall, Deputy Headmistress of Hogwarts. How may I assist you?" she asked in her usual stern tone.

"I bring a letter," the tall figure intoned in a hollow voice. With those simple words, he reached into his leather carrying case and removed one sealed envelope, handing it to her.

As he turned away, McGonagall tried to stop him. "Wait... Please, how can we contact your Brotherhood?"

The hooded figure turned back towards her for a moment. "If there is further need for communication, the Brotherhood will initiate it," he said coldly.

With that, he turned and walked back down the approach road, leaving a very frustrated Deputy Headmistress behind.

Minerva quickly looked at the letter. It was addressed to her.

She spun on her heel and moved as fast as she could back into the castle, heading for the Headmaster's office.

---

Grimmauld Place...

Arabella Figg, Mrs. Weasley, Ron, Moody and Mundungus Fletcher sat at the kitchen table of Grimmauld Place. The Weasley's had relocated to Grimmauld at the beginning of August so that Molly could better provide for the needs of Order members cycling in and out of the old building.

Arabella had been called off her watch duty on Privet Drive since Harry had gone missing. She and her cats had relocated to Grimmauld Place in order to help out the Order in the search for the boy.

They were sitting down for a noonday meal when all of the portraits in the building suddenly started screaming. Alarmed, Ron ran out to the foyer to look around. The front door slammed open and Ron found himself flying over the threshold. A few moments later Moody, Mundungus and his mum joined him. Arabella, it seems, was thrown out the back door.

As they picked themselves up painfully, they turned and were shocked to find the house snap into sight. Several second story windows banged open and twelve howling cats were ejected from the

upper floors.

Gasping, they watched as first the Fidelis charm, then the wards, came crashing down one by one in a brilliant display of magical pyrotechnics. Ron charged back up the stairs to the front door, only to be thrown a good twenty feet into the street.

With a sudden tearing sound, the house started to shimmer like a heat mirage. The shimmering grew more violent and the house slowly faded from sight, leaving the Order members staring at a vacant lot.

“What the bloody hell was that all about?” shouted Ron.

His mother ignored him and turned to Moody. “We must contact Albus, immediately.”

---

Headmaster’s office, Hogwarts...

Dumbledore sat going over some dispatches from Order members when Minerva interrupted him. An owl had just arrived with a new letter for him so he waved at her to take a seat.

“Albus, we just had a visitor from the Brotherhood. He stayed only long enough to deliver a letter addressed to me. I tried to find a way to communicate with them, but he brushed me off entirely,” she said.

Dumbledore nodded and motioned for her to open the letter while he removed the letter from the owl.

She was surprised to discover the communication was from Harry Potter.

*Dear Professor McGonagall,  
I hope this letter finds you fully recovered from your ordeal at the end of last year, and I hope you are enjoying your holiday as much as I am. Enclosed you will find my course selections for my coming two years at Hogwarts. You will also find copies of additional OWL results, which I took recently, allowing me more course choices.*

*I regret that I will not be able to play Quidditch this year, even if my lifetime ban is lifted. I would appreciate if you could see fit to return to me the Firebolt that was confiscated by Delores Umbridge, however. It is one of the few things I have from my godfather and I treasure it, for sentimental reasons.*

*My course selections for this coming year are as follows:*

*(NEWT) Potions*

*(NEWT) Defense Against the Dark Arts*

*(NEWT) Transfiguration  
(NEWT) Charms  
(NEWT) Arithmancy  
(NEWT) Ancient Runes*

*I look forward to seeing you again this coming September. Until such time, I hope you enjoy your holiday.*

*Harry James Potter*

Scanning the extra papers, she could see that they were Ministry documents, showing Harry had achieved Outstandings in his Arithmancy and Ancient Runes OWL tests.

“It’s a letter from Harry Potter, Albus. He’s writing about his course selections for next term and he asks for us to locate his broom, which Umbridge had confiscated last year,” she said, handing the note over to the Headmaster.

Dumbledore read quickly and gave it back to her, smiling. This was the first piece of good news he had heard all summer!

Looking over the letter from the owl he noted it was from Gringotts, Department of Property Management. Tearing it open, his smile vanished. Reading further, his expression grew stormy.

## NOTICE OF EVICTION

*Sirs,*

*This notice of eviction is hereby given to the occupants of 12 Grimmauld Place. Since you hold no lease, verbal, written or magical, there is no course of appeal available to you. Said property is to be vacated forthwith of all persons and other entities.*

*The owner of the property does retain the right to contact you further to discuss payment for any damages that might have been incurred to the property during your occupancy. The owner will arrange for any belongings to be sent to a suitable storage facility for you to recover.*

*Sincerely,*

*Ripgut, Properties Manager  
Gringotts Wizarding Bank*

Dumbledore moved back in his chair to stand when his floo erupted in green flame and Moody and Molly Weasley entered his office.

“Albus,” Moody began, “we’ve been thrown out of headquarters and can’t get back in! The building ejected us, the wards went down, and then new ones came up.”

Dumbledore slumped back in his chair. “It is as I feared, then,” he said heavily, passing the eviction notice over to Moody.

The old man quickly read the notice, then passed it to Molly before facing Dumbledore again.

“How is this possible, Albus? What are we going to do? All our records, our agent reports, they’re all in there,” Moody growled, concerned about the lost information.

“If Sirius did not leave a will, and I do not believe he did as I would have known about it, then his mother’s will must have gone into effect. She probably left the building to Narcissa Malfoy, as the last remaining Black family member. Moody, we must take steps to see our undercover agents are protected. I will call for an emergency general meeting this evening to discuss the matter...” he trailed off as alarm started shrieking in the office.

Looking surprised, Dumbledore stood and walked to a shelf where he kept his gadgets. One of them was spinning madly, making a shrill, hooting sound. He waved his wand over another device, which shot up a puff of black smoke. Shocked by the result, he staggered backwards until he hit his desk.

“Albus, what’s wrong?” asked Molly. She couldn’t remember ever seeing Dumbledore looking so ashen faced before.

“The blood wards on Privet Drive have fallen,” he gasped.

“How is that possible?” asked Minerva, her face paling.

“There is only one way. Harry Potter has been declared an adult in both the muggle and Wizarding worlds. I think it’s time to send someone to see what’s happening at Privet Drive and find out why the Dursley’s have done this,” Dumbledore replied.

Turning quickly, he addressed those in the room. “Minerva, please check on the Dursley’s. Molly, I’ll need your help getting a classroom ready for tonight’s meeting. Moody, get messages sent off to our people while I summon the others to a meeting here tonight.”

Everyone jumped into action, leaving Dumbledore alone in his office.

*Harry, he thought, what have you done? How did you manage this? And what role does the Brotherhood play in all this? They are the unknown and perhaps most dangerous element in all this...*

---

Padfoot Manor...

Over the next few days, things progressed as normal. Tonks had sent in Hermione’s course selections for her via a regular post owl. Hermione continued to select books for Harry to read and he went through them at a tremendous speed. Harry’s list of learned spells was growing rapidly, and he was crafting some truly unique spells of his own

He surprised Hermione one day out by the pool. Giving her an old hat and telling her to put it on, he then reached for an old Cleansweep 5 leaning against the table. Pulling a ragged old hat from

his back pocket, he told her to sit down. Once she'd done so, he mounted the broom and placed his hat on his head. With a wicked grin, he kicked off from the ground and shot upwards, quickly. Over the roar of the wind in his ears, he heard Hermione scream.

Bringing the broom into a hover, he looked down to see Hermione clutching the arms of her chair and staring at him in horror. Ripping the hat from his head and descending quickly to the ground, he dropped the broom and rushed to her side.

"Hermione! Are you alright?" he asked, panicked.

"What was that?" she whispered.

"Um, well...I charmed the hats." At her puzzled look, he grimaced. "I should have warned you first, but I wanted it to be a surprise. I know how much you hate to fly, so I charmed the hats to transfer what I saw and felt to you. I thought that, if you could feel what it was like to fly without actually leaving the ground, it would help you get over your fear of it."

"And you didn't warn me?" she asked, still ashen.

"I wanted it to be a surprise," he mumbled, watching her hands tremble as she took off the hat. "I guess it wasn't such a great idea."

"It surprised me, I'll give you that," she said with a shaky laugh.

Taking the hat from her, he removed the charm from both. When he apologized for frightening her, she waved it off, but stared at the two hats on the table with mistrust.

The Occlumency lessons were going well for Harry, Hermione and Susan. Susan joined them three days a week for the lessons, then usually stayed at the Manor the rest of the day, enjoying the pool or training with them. In the beginning, there was an unspoken rivalry between Susan and Hermione, which left Harry confused and dazed, especially when they both hugged him for the silliest of reasons. Eventually, the two girls became fast friends. Susan seemed to think that Hermione had laid her claim and she didn't intend to poach on that territory.

While the two girls learned regular Occlumency, Harry was taught two new techniques and he had started to practice Legilimency as well. That led to a minor fight between Harry and Hermione as she wanted him to help her with her Occlumency in the evenings and Harry refused.

"I don't see why you won't help me with this, Harry. Miles said you're one of the best Legilimency students he's ever seen," she said one evening.

"Hermione, you don't understand. I know you've been learning Occlumency, but I won't ever use Legilimency on you. Not now, not ever," he replied heatedly.

"Then why are you learning it if you refuse to use it?" she asked, throwing up her arms. She paced a few steps away from him. Remus and Tonks, as well as her parents, were sitting nearby, listening.



“I’m learning it,” he said through gritted teeth, “so that I can understand it and avoid a repeat of last year!”

“But you would be able to help me, Harry. It would be so much easier,” she pleaded.

Remus was about to say something when Tonks placed a hand on his arm, stopping him. He looked at her and she shook her head slightly.

“Hermione, you don’t understand. I’ll do anything to help you, but please, not this…”

Hermione paused and looked at Harry curiously. He wasn’t angry anymore but he was clearly upset about something. Walking to him, she stopped a foot away and looked up at him and saw the pain in his gaze.

“Alright, I won’t ask you to help me with this. But please help me understand why… Please?” she asked softly.

She led him over to a love seat and curled up next to him. He sat so long without speaking that she wasn’t sure he would say anything at all.

“Last year,” he began suddenly, speaking softly, “just after Christmas when Snape was supposed to teach me Occlumency, he didn’t do it the way Miles does it, with meditation and exercises. Miles is a gentle teacher. He’s patient and careful. Snape simple shouts ‘Clear your mind’ and attacks with the full brunt of his Legilimency abilities.

“Every night I’d attend those sessions and make no progress. He never told me how to clear my mind. He just said I had to do it. And every night he’d dredge through my mind, looking up memories I had buried so deep I had forgotten them.

“You remember how I’d be after those ‘lessons’, Hermione, weak, shaky, what little mental defenses I had managed to build were destroyed every night by Snape. I think he was doing it on purpose to make Voldemort’s job easier.

“But that wasn’t the worst part of it. The worst part is the feeling of being violated. The Legilimencer can’t control which thought he brings to the fore, so he looks for them by group. Snape saw every memory that embarrassed me, every memory of being hurt, or betrayed. If I helped you and went looking for, say, a happy memory, I’d see them all, including ones that might embarrass you to know I’ve seen it. And as I see those memories, you relive them. You feel what you felt then, be it pain, or joy, shame, anger or fear. When I backed out of your mind, you’d feel violated, even from happy memories.

“It’s… it’s kind of a mental rape, Hermione. I won’t do that to you. Ever. So please don’t ask. You know I’ll help you anyway I can. But I will never willingly put you through that,” he finished, staring into the fire.

Remus and Tonks both looked angry after listening to Harry. Hermione reached out and took his

hand, squeezing it gently. "It's alright, Harry. There are plenty of other things you can help me with."

Dan Granger exploded. "RAPE! Well, it's the right word for it! How the hell Dumbledore allows that man to continue to teach at that school is a mystery to me. That man might be useful as a spy for the Order, but he's a bloody rotten teacher with a cruel streak in him."

Remus nodded in agreement, "Snape does have a mean streak in him, but I didn't think it was that bad. What he did to Harry was unforgivable. Almost as bad as the generations of student's he's ruined career choices for."

Harry stood, announcing he was going to go check on Hedwig. Hermione offered to join him, but he told her to stay and enjoy the time with her parents. He hadn't spent much time with Hedwig of late. She watched his retreating back worriedly as he headed out of the room.

Up in the owlery, Hedwig flew to his shoulder in greeting and playfully nipped at his ear. Like most female Snowy Owls, Hedwig rarely hooted, although she would make doglike woofing sounds when greeting those she was fond of. There was a unique bond between Harry and Hedwig. Her intelligence seemed to far outstrip other owls.

During some of Harry's darker days among the Dursley's, the one shining beacon of light in his life was his Snowy Owl. She was the one creature on the planet that loved him unconditionally during those dark days.

He sat on the top step of the stairway talking gently to Hedwig and playing with her. And she, sensing her friends' melancholy mood, sat on his shoulder, nudging him playfully until he broke into a smile. From a darkened corner further down the stairs, Hermione watched him for a few minutes more before creeping back down stairs.

Later that evening, Harry was sitting at the table in his bedroom when Hermione knocked at the door. He was in what he liked to call his pre-bed attire. Cut off jeans, a tight t-shirt and no shoes.

He smiled at her when she stepped into the room. Like him, she had taken to the habit of wearing more comfortable clothing before going to bed.

He waved her to a seat at the table. Something he had read had sparked an idea and he wanted to bounce it off her. The two were getting used to meeting like this for an hour or two before bedtime. They'd sit and talk about the day, or the things they had learned. Hermione was a little jealous of Harry's newfound ability to absorb the contents of a book at such incredible speeds, but he made sure to lessen that by continuing to rely on her judgment and opinions. He knew she took pride in her intellect, and so did he for that matter. His boost seemed artificial, while hers was due to her own fierce determination to be the best she could be.

"Hermione, I ran across an interesting light ritual in a book of ancient rites yesterday. It's been driving me barmy. It's not something I think I should use for myself, but we might want to consider it for you," he said.

“What kind of ritual, Harry?”

“It’s a power boosting ritual. If it works, it would increase your power by half again.”

She arched an eyebrow at him in question. “Why would I want that? Those rituals can be dangerous. If you make a single mistake you can end up dying, or worse.”

He fidgeted nervously. “I know. All I’m suggesting at the moment is that you read the book and tell me what you think. I’m worried about you. We’re going back to Hogwarts, surrounded by people who aren’t one hundred percent friendly and, while I can do a lot to protect you, I can’t protect you all the time. You’re a powerful witch, but there are stronger people at school. Read the book, and then ask Remus for his opinion. You’d be surprised how smart he is.”

Hermione took the book he offered her and nodded after thinking about it. She flipped it open and started to read, while Harry pulled a book from the pile on the table.. Neither of them really noticed when she reached out to hold his hand.

---

Emergency Order Meeting at Hogwarts, that same evening...

After seeing the number of people streaming into Hogwarts that evening, Dumbledore opted to move the meeting from a classroom they’d prepared to the Great Hall. He sat impassively as people continued to file into the hall and noted that some people, like Tonks, were missing.

At the appointed time, Dumbledore stood and a hush fell over the crowd. “Thank you all for coming on such short notice. We have several important reports that everyone needs to know about. First and foremost, it appears that, with the Ministry’s recognition of the death of Sirius Black, his mother’s will has gone into effect. As a result, we have been evicted from Grimmauld Place, leaving behind all our records and potions, as well as other equipment.

“While we do not know for sure who the new owner is, we suspect it was ceded to Narcissa Malfoy, which means the Malfoy family now controls our former headquarters.” He paused for a few moments, allowing the whispers and nervous shifting to die out.

“According to Arabella Figg, 4 Privet Drive, Harry’s old home, has been completely destroyed by fire. Strangely enough, muggle authorities are now investigating the location. From what we know, muggle authorities are now holding the Dursley’s on serious charges. We have been unable to locate them.

“Also today, the blood wards that remained on Privet Drive collapsed. That can only mean one thing. Harry Potter has been emancipated in both the wizard and muggle worlds. How and why this has happened, we do not know. What this means is, if we find Harry, he must come willingly. Any attempt to take him and he will be within his legal rights to use magic to defend himself and press charges against you.

“I must stress caution here. Harry is now legally an adult, despite what we might think.”

Dumbledore stopped to let the Order digest the information. He didn't notice that in one corner of the room Bill, Fred and George were all grinning at each other.

“Headmaster, this is preposterous. Let's just find the Potter brat and stun him,” exclaimed Snape.

“Now Severus, we talked about this. If he's truly under the protection and influence of the Brotherhood, and I firmly believe he is, we would end up with a major fight on our hands,” replied Dumbledore.

“What reason would this Brotherhood have to protect the brat, Headmaster? Sure, Lupin was with them, but that's not proof that he's under their protection. No, find him and drag him back here. If necessary, snap his wand. But get him back if he's that important. Once in Hogwarts, we can keep him locked up with little difficulty,” sneered Snape.

“Today we received a letter from Harry. It was hand delivered to the castle by a member of the Brotherhood, Severus. His letter contained little information, other than wishing Professor McGonagall a nice holiday and his course selections for the coming years. It should please you to note that Harry will be attending your NEWT level potions class,” the Headmaster said with a twinkle in his eye.

“Potter received an outstanding? IMPOSSIBLE! I will not permit it! I refuse to have that arrogant Gryffindor in my class!”

Minerva, sitting next to Snape, bristled at his comments. She might not have been happy with Harry's behavior this summer, but his marks were a matter of record. The more she heard about Harry and what was being done, the less happy she was. She couldn't quite shake the feeling that Dumbledore was treating Harry extremely harshly.

“Severus,” Dumbledore said sharply, “he will attend your class and that is my final word on the subject. Harry Potter will be returning to Hogwarts this year and, once he returns, we can take steps to make sure he is adequately protected and under our influence from that point on.”

Dumbledore looked over to Kingsley Shacklebolt. “I notice you're alone tonight. Do you think it would help if we requested assistance from the Ministry in locating Harry?”

Kingsley scratched his bald head for a moment, “I suppose you could file a missing persons report. That might get some help on our side. And as to Tonks, she's on assignment tonight, from what I understand. It's part of that secret investigation they're running. She's been assigned to it full time. No one who isn't involved in the investigation knows what it's about.”

“I will speak with Amelia tomorrow then about filing a missing persons report,” replied Dumbledore.

“Now if there is no further business, let us all return to our homes...”

---

Padfoot Manor...

“Remus,” Harry said, “I’ve been thinking about Grimmauld Place. Once Hermione and I head back to school, Dan and Emma need a safe place they can stay and it’s close to their surgery. The problem is Grimmauld is about as pleasant as a graveyard. Why don’t we start fixing it up? You and Tonks can stay there as well, while we’re in school.”

Tonks eyed Harry, while Hermione started choking on her tea. Harry had told her about Tonks and Remus, but she’d never expected him to bring it up as breakfast conversation.

“Harry, why would I want to stay with Remus? Once you’re back in Hogwarts, I’ll be freed up,” Tonks said archly.

Harry snickered before answering, “Tonks, not only have I seen you sneaking into Remus’s room, but when I’m doing my meditations, I can sense your presence there. I’m not a kid anymore, so don’t tell me you’re visiting him to play exploding snap,” he said with a grin.

Remus blushed and tried to look away from Tonks while she stammered and her hair fluctuated wildly between blond and black. Dan leaned over to Emma, saying, “Someone is busted!”

“So what do you think, Remus? I’m sure that Emma here wouldn’t mind helping decorate the place. Dobby and Winky can do most of the work,” Harry asked.

Hermione frowned at the names of the two house elves. Harry could see she was winding up for another house elf lecture when he cut her off at the pass. “Hermione, you and I both know they are paid employees, and magical as well. It’s not like they’ll be physically moving beds. They’ll levitate them. They get time off and they get paid, so they aren’t slaves.”

Hermione huffed at him a few times before settling down. Everything Harry said about the two house elves was true.

Harry turned back to the Grangers. “Well, would you be interested in helping redecorate a place you’ll be able to stay in safely and still go to work? I imagine it won’t require much more than looking through catalogs and picking colors. Hermione and I will look into powering muggle technology so we have a TV, stereo, that sort of stuff.”

Emma looked positively ecstatic over the idea. Dan, on the other hand, seemed more interested in the idea of running muggle technology with magic.

Later that same day Tonks was helping Harry, Hermione and Susan. She was teaching them the basics of apparation. Harry had already read the book on wizarding transportation and understood the theory behind apparation and other methods like Portkeys and the Floo network, but he had never purposely tried it before.

“Alright gang, I know you’ve all read the book, but let’s go over this again. There are two types of apparation, memory and coordinate apparation. Both are essentially the same, the big difference is memory apparation is easier because you’re apparating to a spot you already know. Coordinate is harder because you are going to a place you’ve never been. Don’t worry about the sound you make when you apparate for now. Everyone makes a loud noise in the beginning and it takes concentration and practice to reduce it.

“Now, I want everyone to think carefully about the pool in the back. Picture it firmly in your mind. Try to remember every detail. When you’re ready, picture yourself in that location and make the jump.”

Tonks watched the three teens close their eyes. Susan seemed to be struggling with it. Hermione shimmered for a moment and then solidified again. As a first attempt, it was wonderful. Although she had failed to apparate, the attempt nearly worked.

Tonks turned to look at Harry. Harry?

“HARRY!” Tonks shouted and sprinted towards the back of the house with the two girls on her heels. Coming around the back, she skidded to a halt when she saw Harry climbing out of the pool. Then she doubled over, laughing.

Scowling at her, he cast a drying charm on himself.

“Harry, when I said picture the pool, I figured you’d picture yourself on one side or the other, not in the pool!” she said, as her knees buckled and she fell to the ground trying to control her laughter.

The girls weren’t much better. They leaned against each other, laughing merrily.

Harry grinned evilly at the three of them, and then conjured a large balloon filled with water. In a split second, he had apparated to a spot right next to Tonks and dropped the water balloon on her head, then apparated back to the poolside. There, he conjured two more water balloons. Susan shrieked and dove for cover, while Hermione whipped out her wand and sent a spray of water hurtling in his direction.

Laughing, Harry apparated out of the way of Hermione’s water spray, dousing her with a water balloon in the process. Then he nailed Susan with his last balloon before apparating back to the pool. Tonks hit Harry with a blast of wind from her wand, pushing him backwards into the pool again. Then she called for a timeout in the water war.

Dragging the two girls with her, they went to the poolside and waited for Harry to climb out again.

“Harry, I want to try something. Apparate to the front of the house, then come back please,” said Tonks.

He nodded and vanished, only to reappear a moment later.

“That’s amazing. You make no noise at all! Even Dumbledore can’t do a soundless apparation!” she exclaimed.

“Hermione, you nearly succeeded with your attempt. I bet you’ll be apparating in a few days with no problems. Susan, I’m afraid you’re going to be like me and take a bit longer. It took me nearly two weeks before I could do it. I’ll work with you now on some exercises. Harry you work with Hermione, since she’s nearly there.”

By late afternoon Hermione was apparating around the house, although, to her annoyance, she made a rather large popping sound when she did. Susan had come close a few times, but still hadn’t achieved a successful apparition. Tonks promised she’d continue to work with her on it.

---

Azkaban Prison, a few days later...

It happened so swiftly that the human guard force was overwhelmed in minutes. One moment all was quiet on the island, and the next, over two hundred dementors attacked and kissed the thirty human guards.

Afterwards, it was a simple matter for Voldemort to send in a few of his Death Eaters by boat to release his followers. Once done, they offered the chance of escape to the remaining prisoners. A surprising number agreed to join Voldemort, rather than remain behind. All in all, some ten Death Eaters and nearly forty condemned prisoners escaped to join the Dark Lord’s ranks.

---

Padfoot Manor, Morning...

It was the sound of laughter that brought Harry down to the main dining room, Hermione close on his heels. Remus was literally rolling on the floor, laughing uncontrollably. Tonks was watching him, grinning widely. Dan and Emma sat looking at the two, completely perplexed by the sudden turn of events.

Spotting Harry, Tonks shoved a muggle newspaper at him. He started to scan it, Hermione reading over his shoulder. One small headline caught his eye.

### *Surrey Couple Charged in Counterfeit Laundering*

*A couple from Little Whinging, Surrey were charged today in her Majesty’s court with the crime of possession and laundering counterfeit money.*

*Vernon Dursley, age 40, and his wife, Petunia Dursley, age 39, pleaded not guilty despite the discovery of over 130,000 pounds of counterfeit money found in their home shortly after the home was destroyed in a fire.*

*Investigators from Scotland Yard are also looking into the mysterious disappearance of their fifteen-year-old nephew. Neighbors claim that, for years, the Dursley's had told them that the boy attended St. Brutus' School for Criminal Boys. The school has informed investigators that the boy is not listed as a student. In fact, a national record check shows that their nephew, Harry, has not attended any school...*

Harry grinned. While it was poetic justice, he still didn't understand why Remus was laughing so hard.

"I don't understand... Remus, it's good news in my book, although I don't know why they are being charged. Wasn't the money we gave them any good?" he asked.

Remus looked up at Harry from the floor and wiped the tears of mirth from his eyes. "Harry, don't you see? Sirius pulled his last and greatest prank! When he was on the run he probably got his hands on a single one hundred pound note. Then he used magic to replicate it, one note at a time. The Dursley's are being charged with counterfeiting because we never bothered to really look at the money. Every note we gave them had the same identical serial number!"

Harry's lips twitched and he looked down. A single tear rolled down his cheek as he thought about his Godfather again and his last prank. Hermione put an arm around his waist and smiled up at him. He wiped away the tear and smiled back. Sirius was gone, but he'd never be forgotten.

Later that evening, Harry and Hermione were once again in his bedroom, reading. Dobby had returned from Grimmauld Place and had just served them tea and biscuits. Harry was reading an ancient book on spell creation when he glanced up at Hermione. She was staring out the window instead of reading her book.

"Hermione, what's wrong?" he asked her gently.

She shook her head slightly and refocused on him. "I guess I'm just worried, Harry. No, 'worried' is an understatement. For the first time in my life, I'm afraid to return to school. Ron's going to try to slip me a potion and I don't know who I can or can't trust, other than you, Ginny and Neville. We go back in less than two weeks and suddenly school seems like it's not that safe a place anymore..."

Harry looked at her carefully. He could see the fear in her eyes, and it forced him to make a decision. Standing, he went to the dresser and pulled out a small, gift wrapped package.

She watched him curiously as he approached her and held out the package. Harry now seemed to be the one worried.

"I got this for your birthday, Hermione, but I think it's best you know about it now. I was going to give this to you on the Express, which is still early for your birthday..."

She grinned at him and carefully undid one end of the wrapping paper. Then she slid out a long velvet covered box. Opening it, she gasped, for within the box was a heavy gold bracelet with two



charms, a book and a snitch, attached to it. She looked up at him in surprise.

“I had Tonks pick it up for me, Hermione. I then enchanted the bracelet with several spells. There’s a minor shield and minor healing charm, like a pepper up potion. Both need to be recharged after they’re used. There’s also a tracking charm that you can activate just by thinking the words, ‘Harry Help’. It will tell me that you’re in trouble and need me. I promise you, if you need help, I’ll be there as quickly as I can. The little book and snitch don’t do anything, except perhaps remind you of some of the good times we’ve had this summer...” he finished, feeling foolish with himself.

He looked at her, expecting some sort of reaction. Maybe anger for buying her an expensive gift, or annoyance because he’d mastered the difficult art of enchanting objects with spells.

She fumbled with the catch for moment when she put the bracelet on. She could feel the magic pulsing through the metal and it was a comfortable warm feeling for her. Once she had it secured, she looked up at him and her eyes were wet with tears. He blinked in surprise at her reaction, but before he could say anything she hurled herself at him.

She completely bowled him over and they both fell to the soft carpet. Not quite sure what to do, he did what come naturally when a man had a soft, comfortable woman lying on top of him. He wrapped his arms around her, holding her tightly to him. A minute of comfortable silence led to the realization of their positions.

In an embarrassed rush, Hermione rolled away from him. He stood up and helped her climb to her feet.

Both were blushing furiously and neither knew how to talk about what had just happened. Hermione grabbed her book and the box, and then dashed over to Harry. She gave him a quick hug and whispered, “Thank you,” in his ear. Then, to his surprise, she kissed him lightly on the lips before running from the room.

Harry stood, his mind blank. It was another few minutes before the shock wore off and he climbed into bed.

His last thought of the evening was one echoed around the world by teenage boys everywhere. *I’ll never understand girls!*

---

Authors Notes:

How did Snape see Remus through the concealment cloak? As Ollivander said, the cloaks are nice, but cannot fool a keen mind. Snape may be a bastard, but he’s not lacking intelligence (at least in most things!). Remus was closest to him, and by the time Snape tried to see through the other cloaks, he had a few other things on his mind.

Mental Note: Don’t quote movie lines in the Author’s Notes anymore! Dumbledore’s Schwartz?

Nope, we're NOT going there. Bad mental image...baaadddd!

We know some of you aren't thrilled with the ship, but let's be fair, folks. Several people who hate the Harry/Ginny ship read our other stories. You can do the same, right? We promise to make it as pain free as possible for you.

Why are Ron and the others so hateful, and why wasn't it known before now? You'll learn that later in the form of a back-story included in a coming chapter. However, we'd like to point out that Ron's turned against Harry before, if you'll remember. As for Harry not knowing about the theft from his trust account? Why would he? He's only visited and taken money from his Gringotts account twice (first and second year). For the past three years, someone else has made the trip to Diagon Alley for him. He's never been told where the money comes from, or how much he has. We put a slight twist on it and made the vault he visited a trust account, not the Potter account. Hope that clears it up for you.

For the many people asking about Dumbledore going "dark", I'd like to quote a reviewer, Princess-Fictoria – "...one does not have to be dark, read evil, to be and do wrong". Thank you, Princess-Fictoria, for understanding what we are trying to do with Dumbledore!

How will we portray Draco? Yes, it's true we hate him, but we're not going to tell you our plans for the little ferret. Patience, dear readers! It will be a surprise. Perhaps we'll enroll him into a Tibetan convent.

Charlie's still in Romania and unaware of what's going on at home. That may or may not change.

Harry's trust in Amelia at the meeting was kind of an interesting situation. First, he trusted her because she brought Susan along. She wouldn't have done anything to him with her niece there. Second, Harry's come to the realization that he has to trust someone other than the people around him at Padfoot Manor. He trusted Tonks because Remus did. He trusts Amelia, at least marginally, because she's Susan's aunt, and he trusts Susan. Tonks trusts Amelia, and Harry's learned to trust Tonks. Time will tell if that trust has been misplaced.

Don't worry about the Brotherhood comment. As you can see from this chapter, it's causing a bit of chaos for the Order. I think we should all thank Dan for that, don't you?

Professor Sprout wasn't at the Head of House meeting. She's off collecting rare plants in Borneo. :D

Sirius is dead and we're not bringing him back. It's difficult to do in an original, yet believable way, and we have too much going on in the story to throw that into the mix. Sorry!

Dumbledore the Gray? The next thing you know, we'll have elves running around. Oh, wait. We DO have elves running around. Hmmm. A few Hobbits, a Ringwraith or two and perhaps a cameo by Wormtongue? No, no, we're not going there. This isn't an HP crossover! Personally Dumbledore the Pink sounds nice to me.

Will I take a second husband? Do I strike you as an insane person? I have my hands full with the one I have, thank you very much. It took me years to train him, but at least he now takes the dishes out of the sink BEFORE he pee's in it! (I think I'm going to be in trouble for that remark!) (Bob here, GRRRR Woman!)

Longhaired Harry being "cool"? Long or shorthaired, Harry isn't cool. He's awkward, shy, can be bad tempered (with reason, granted), solitary and often brooding. Cool? We think not. He IS endearing though, isn't he? However, if it makes you feel any better, his hair won't be THAT long. He's simply grown it out a bit so it doesn't stick up in the back all the time. The whole "ragged and unkempt" thing was getting a bit tiresome for us. Besides, it's a great way to annoy the hell out of the teachers of a stuffy school like Hogwarts :D (Bob again, Personally I thought he was cool with his sharpened toes from our disclaimer)

SeekerTLK: Boo, hiss. Bad pun, there :p

That's it folks. Sorry for the long AN, but we wanted to address your questions. I'll (Alyx) be editing the next chapter (it's already written) as soon as I'm done typing this. HBP comes out tomorrow and we know many of you will leave us to read it. We hope it brings you a few hours of pleasure and you return to us when you're through.

Pet Peeves:

This chapter's pet peeves. Stories with author's notes interspersed in the text. If you have to put an author's note into the middle of your storytext to explain something, you've not done your job right. If you're putting a note in to make a snide comment, then you must think your story is pretty boring.

~Bob and Alyx~

**Sunset Over Britain**  
**The Lazy Final Days of Summer**

Standard Disclaimer:

Harry: “B-B-But look what you’ve done to me! I’m supposed to be in the Half Blood Prince now!”

Bob: “Listen, JK Rowling says she doesn’t mind if I decide to roast you over a slow fire. Now shut up and keep cooking!”

---

Sunset over Britain  
Chapter 4

---

Padfoot Manor...

Hermione was taking a walk on the grounds of the Manor. Harry had left the dinner table as he usually did, leaving the adults and Hermione to sit and talk. She enjoyed the conversations with her parents. Tonks and Remus rarely stayed long after Harry left. But tonight her parents were flirting a bit too much with each other and she decided to discreetly slip away.

She walked the same path that she and Harry had taken many times and thinking about him. She knew their relationship was changing slowly, becoming deeper and more meaningful. It surprised her that it seemed to happen all by it self. There had been no grand plan, no master book outlining the process. She had always thought that when she got involved with someone, it would be something she’d plan out carefully in advance.

She stopped walking and tilted her head slightly, listening. From somewhere nearby she heard music, sweet and pure music. Quickening her pace, she followed the sound. Coming out into a clearing, she saw Harry sitting on the ground with his back against a tree. He was playing the tin whistle that Hagrid had given him.

Taken aback by the sight, she stood still and listened. She hadn’t heard him play since the morning he’d woken her up. She’d figured he’d either taken her advice about the silencing charm, or had given up playing altogether. If his current skill was an indication, he’d obviously used the charm.

Slipping a little closer, she smiled when she saw Harry wasn’t alone. He had an audience. She wasn’t certain, but the squirrel watching him seemed most appreciative of his music. Gathering her courage, she moved up to a nearby tree and sat down to listen. Harry seemed oblivious to

everything as he played the small instrument.

When he finally stopped playing, he opened his eyes and looked down at his furry friend. “Well Nutters? What do you think?” he asked softly. The squirrel tilted its head and looked at him sideways, but didn’t reply.

“I think you play wonderfully,” Hermione replied softly for Nutters.

Nutters jumped and whirled to face her, tail twitching madly. Harry looked over at her in astonishment.

“Aren’t you going to introduce me to your friend, Harry?” she asked, laughter in her eyes.

“Um... well... Nutters, meet Hermione. Hermione, this is Nutters,” Harry said, a little sheepishly. “I named him that because it’s what he likes.”

Hermione smiled at the both of them, then she drew her wand, conjured a small bag of peanuts and offered one to Nutters.

“Play something for us, Harry?” she asked in a voice Harry could never refuse.

He nodded and lifted his tin whistle to his lips to play an old Irish ballad, his eyes closing as he slipped into his music. Hermione offered some peanuts to Nutters, and then leaned back to watch and listen to Harry. She marveled at this wonderful new discovery about her friend.

---

Ministry of Magic...

“Albus Dumbledore is here to see you, Director.”

“Please send him in.”

The door opened to admit the Headmaster of Hogwarts. Amelia sat behind her desk wondering what brought the great wizard down from his lair.

“Albus! So nice to see you again. Please, take a seat,” offered Amelia.

“Thank you, Amelia,” replied Dumbledore, lowering himself into a chair before her desk.

“So what brings the illustrious Headmaster of Hogwarts to my little corner of the Ministry today?” asked Amelia in a light tone.

“Amelia, I am concerned about a student of mine. He has been missing for some time. I would like to file a missing persons report on him,” Dumbledore said in a grave voice.

“Missing? You’ve not heard from him at all?”

“Well to be honest, we did receive a letter a week back or so in which he gave us his course selections for the coming year. But other than that, no. No one has seen him all summer.”

“What is this student’s name, Albus?”

“Potter, Harry James Potter.”

Amelia frowned, then signaled for an aide. When the aide poked his head in through the open door, she said, “Jeffery, would you be so kind as to bring me the Potter file please?”

A moment later she was pouring over a specially prepared file she had created for exactly this purpose. Finally, she closed the file and turned to the patiently waiting Dumbledore.

“I’m sorry Albus, but I’m quite afraid there is nothing we can do.”

“But Amelia, this is a student...”

“Who happens to be legally classed as an adult in both the muggle and wizarding worlds, Albus. He may merely be on vacation. Besides, we have record of him appearing here in the Ministry in early August, where he took his Arithmancy and Ancient Rune OWL tests. We also have him qualifying for his apparation license only a few days ago. No, I’m sorry Albus, but as far as the Ministry is concerned, he simply isn’t missing. Even if he were, you know as well as I do that only a family member can report a missing person.”

Dumbledore looked irritated. This was not an answer he had expected! Time to try a different tack.

“Amelia, I believe the boy should be taken into custody. According to his dorm mate, Ronald Weasley, he has been experimenting in dark arts.”

Amelia rocked back in her chair in shock. Her Aurors had kept a very close watch on Harry and there was no hint of the dark arts in anything he did. *It’s time to nip this one in the bud*, she thought.

“Albus, that is quite a serious accusation. I will assign some Aurors to investigate it, but until they have reported, I will not issue a bench warrant for Harry Potter. In the meantime, you will have to file a formal statement, attesting your claims,” she said firmly, producing a form for him to fill out.

Dumbledore nodded in defeat for Amelia’s benefit, but he already had an alternate plan. He’d simply go over her head. After filling out Amelia’s forms, he thanked her for her time. When he left, he headed straight for the Minister’s office.

A few minutes later, he was seated before Minister Fudge.

“Now Albus, what can I help you with today?” asked Fudge politely.

“Minister, I am hoping that you can help me with a problem I am having with your Magical Law Enforcement department. I wanted to file a missing persons report, but Director Bones refused me.”

Fudge shot him an oily smile before replying. “I’m sorry Headmaster, but I’m sure Director Bones had perfectly legal reasons for doing what she did. No, I have every confidence in her. I’m sure you see my position. I cannot simply run roughshod over my department heads, and it would destroy their confidence. Now, if you will excuse me, I’m meeting with an American delegation this morning.”

Dumbledore blinked as he found himself being ushered out of the Minister’s office, his grand plan of gaining Ministry aid in finding Harry having been shot down.

*Perhaps there is another way of doing this*, he mused.

---

Padfoot Manor...

Harry, Hermione, Dan, Emma and Remus were just sitting down to dinner when Tonks joined them, looking serious.

Turning to Harry, she said, “I have something I need to tell you and I want you to hold on to your temper. We’ve actually got some ideas of how to turn this to our advantage...”

Harry looked at her worriedly, but nodded for her to continue.

“Today, Dumbledore came into the office and tried to get the MLE to issue a missing persons report on you. When Amelia refused, he tossed an accusation against you of using dark arts and pressed for your being taken into protective custody.”

Harry’s green eyes glowed eerily and he gripped the table edge so hard his arms were trembling. Tonks knelt down and wrapped her arms around him.

“Harry, relax... we’re taking care of it. Amelia has reports from every Auror who’s watched you this summer, plus the reports from Miles. We know you’re not using dark arts.”

Taking deep, slow breaths, he managed to squash the urge to turn the table into paste, and let his body relax.

“Now, by law, Amelia is forced to investigate Dumbledore’s claims, but everyone is sure you will be cleared without any difficulties. So what we intend to do is...ahem... a little unethical... but it’s going to be arranged to release the report of the accusations to the press. We’ve managed to obtain the cooperation of the Managing Editor of the Daily Prophet on this. He’ll not print the article about the accusations against you until such time as we’ve cleared your name.

“Amelia wants you to understand that, we, that is, the Ministry, don’t believe these accusations,

but she has to investigate them. By having an article about the accusations appear in the same edition as an article about your name being cleared will discredit Dumbledore,” finished Tonks with a feral grin.

Harry looked around at the encouraging faces and nodded to Tonks. “Alright then,” he said. Silently he wondered if he’d come to regret the decision.

“Cheer up, Harry. At least you don’t need to hear the howlers that Molly’s been sending you. COR! That woman has a set of lungs on her. Nearly every morning there’s a Howler from her demanding that you come to the Burrow.”

Dan leaned across the dinner table and stared at Tonks intently. “What are you going to do about that?” he asked.

Tonks shrugged and her hair spilled down her back, then changed back to a bob cut. “We’ve been ignoring them so far. Why? Do you think we should do something?” she asked.

“Well, check my thinking on this. We find ourselves suddenly maintaining the fiction of the ‘Brotherhood’, correct?”

When everyone had nodded in agreement, he continued. “Well then it would strike me as odd that the ‘Brotherhood’ would ignore the howlers she’s sending. Oh sure, they might ignore a few of them, but not if they became a nuisance.”

Tonks looked at the ceiling for a moment. “So you’re suggesting that the ‘Brotherhood’ should tell Molly to knock it off or else?” she said with a grin.

“I think if you want to keep the pretense up, yes, there should be a measured response to this.”

“I’ll talk to Amelia about it tomorrow, Dan. I think you’re on to something and we should start replying to some of the more annoying pieces of mail we’re getting.”

---

The Burrow...

Preston Davidson apparated to the edge of the wards and walked up the path to the Burrow. Knocking on the door, he looked around curiously. When the door opened, he turned and looked down at the short, matronly woman.

“May I help you?” she asked.

“Mrs. Weasley?” asked Davidson politely.

“Yes, that’s correct.”

“My name is Preston Davidson. I’m an Auror for the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. We’re currently holding an investigation and I’d like the chance to talk to you, your son Ronald



and your daughter Ginevra, if I may.”

Several hours later, Davidson left with three interviews. Each person had been interviewed privately. He was inclined to believe the young girl, Ginevra, who told him that any idea of Harry Potter turning to the dark arts was absolute rubbish.

---

The Burrow, several days later...

A lone figure walked slowly up the road from Ottery St. Catchpole. His cloak concealed his face, but the hand gripping the tall staff was clearly that of an old man. At a fork in the road, he turned unerringly and headed for the ramshackle house.

Stopping at the door, the old man used his staff to knock loudly. It opened and Ginny Weasley blinked in surprise at the sight of the hooded figure.

“Sir? May I help you?” she asked.

“Yes child, may I speak with your mother?” asked the old man in a kindly voice.

“I’ll get her, please wait a moment,” replied Ginny. She couldn’t see the old man’s face, but something about his manner put her at ease.

A moment later Molly, Ginny and Ron appeared at the door.

“Molly Weasley?” asked the old man, his tone taking a cold tone.

“Yes, how can I be of service to you?” asked Molly. She recognized the cloak and wondered why they were contacting her. *Perhaps Harry wants to get in touch with us*, she thought.

“You will cease sending howlers to Harry Potter, or you will earn the enmity of the Brotherhood. Not your family, not your friends, not your little ‘Order’, only you. As foolish as Albus Dumbledore is, we are sure that he has explained to you that it is dangerous to cross the Brotherhood,” the old man said coldly.

“You can’t threaten me!” sputtered Molly.

“The Brotherhood does not make threats, Molly Weasley. We merely state our intentions. This is your only warning. Heed it, or pay the price for your actions,” the old man replied. With one last, long look, he turned and walked from the house.

As the old man walked away, Ron, enraged by what he had just witnessed, lunged at his back. In an uncharacteristically spry movement for one so old, the man side stepped Ron and used his staff to trip him. Ron sprawled to the ground and skidded for a few feet until his head smacked into a garden fence post.

The old man paused for the moment and looked at Ron. Molly and Ginny, still in the doorway

heard the old man chuckle and say, “Foolish child.” before continuing his trek off their property.

Molly rushed forward to help her son. Ginny stood, her fist planted firmly in her mouth, trying very hard stifle the sound of her laughter.

---

Hogwarts, Headmaster’s office...

Dumbledore welcomed Rita Skeeter into his office with a twinkle in his eyes and motioned her to a chair. Next to her sat two young men, both clearly students.

“So nice to see you again, Headmaster,” Rita said.

“Rita, it’s always a pleasure to talk to the press. I’m glad you got my message. I’ve invited two of my students here who are also willing to talk to you about some of the things I have to tell you,” Dumbledore replied with a smile.

Skeeter pulled out several pieces of parchment and her Ever Quote Quill. “Please begin, Headmaster. I’m sure I’ll find this fascinating!”

---

Padfoot Returns...

With just over a week to go before Harry and Hermione returned to Hogwarts, it was decided that they would go to Diagon Alley and then, instead of returning to Padfoot Manor, they would go on to Grimmauld Place. The house elves would move their belongings while they were gone.

Dobby and Winky had been spending a good deal of each day redecorating Grimmauld Place, with the help of Emma and Hermione. They’d started by removing all of the dark arts material and cleaning the place from top to bottom. Harry had tried to inquire about Keacher, but all Dobby would say was that the bad elf had died.

Once Dobby had announced that Grimmauld was safe and redecorated, there was no reason not to move in for the remaining days of summer. Harry asked the little elf to assign rooms for everyone, making sure that Dobby knew to put Emma and Dan in one room, and Remus and Tonks in another.

Remus insisted that, since Harry was legally emancipated, he would wear his Black family robe on their trip to Diagon Alley. Hermione would also go without her cloak, since the Order was not looking for her. The Granger’s, Remus, Tonks and the two Aurors dressed in the concealment cloaks would be enough deterrent for any Order members they happened upon.

Harry and the others assembled in the main foyer. They were supposed to meet up with their Auror escort outside, then portkey to the Leaky Cauldron.

The group exited the building with Tonks in the lead, scanning the grounds for their escort. As

Harry pass from the darkness of the manor's interior to the sun-drenched light of the terrace, he suddenly hissed in pain and pitched to his knees, clutching his left arm. Hermione and Remus rushed to his side.

Harry leaned against Hermione, clutching his arm and breathing raggedly. Remus carefully opened the young man's robe and pulled the cloth down his left arm. Surprised, he sat back on his heels and blinked.

"Harry, are you alright?" asked Hermione, her voice full of worry.

He nodded at her, his breathing evening out. "I think so. As soon as I stepped out the door, I felt this burning pain in my arm. I've never felt anything like it before."

"Take a look at your arm, cub, and you'll see why. I guess this explains why Sirius had the wards over his properties reworked during his stay at Grimmauld," said Remus with a soft chuckle. "The modifications he had Gringotts make were quite extensive."

"I think he wanted you to have something to remember him by, Harry," added Tonks, leaning over Remus' shoulder and staring at Harry's arm.

Harry looked at his arm and his eyes widened when he saw a tattoo of the Grim on his bicep. Hermione gasped in shock and reached out to gently touch the tattoo. As she did, the Grim turned its head and looked at her, then walked down his arm.

Harry smiled fondly at the tattoo. "I would have been happier if he warned me, but I think I like it. This way he's not completely gone," he said softly.

"It's nice Harry, but don't you get the idea that I approve of tattoos. You might not have had a choice about this one," Hermione said firmly. Emma shot Dan a knowing look and grinned at her daughter.

Harry looked embarrassed, "Um...actually I was thinking about getting a magical tattoo, something to annoy Dumbledore. You know magical tattoos can be removed, don't you?"

Hermione looked sternly at him, her arms folded across his chest. "Where and what kind of tattoo, Harry?"

"I was thinking a Celtic Knot. It would cover the scar on my hand..." came the hesitant reply.

"Are you sure it's removable?" she asked.

"Cor Hermione! All magical tats are removable. Besides, a Celtic Knot would drive Dumbledore barmy," Tonks said, grinning. "Harry's been talking to me for couple days about it. We just want to give Dumbledore something else to worry about. And I know just the bloke to take him to. Right good artist, he is."

"Hermione, I understand what your trying to say I think. But how is it different than you wearing

makeup?” asked Harry.

“Makeup isn’t permanent,” replied Hermione, shocked that Harry had really noticed that she occasionally did wear makeup.

“Neither is this, Hermione,” came his reply.

Stumped, Hermione reluctantly nodded in agreement. She could see the logic, even if she didn’t particularly like the idea of Harry marking up his body like that. As far as she was concerned, it was fine without any markings, but she’d not admit that to Harry. The quick kiss they’d shared a few nights back had opened a door for both of them. But it had closed just as quickly, almost as if they were both afraid to see what might lie beyond it. While their feelings for each other were obvious to the adults, they weren’t quite ready to admit to themselves or each other that there was something more than friendship between them.

Harry stood up and started to straighten out his robe when Remus stopped him and pulled his robe open far enough to read the t-shirt he wore beneath.

“‘Who peed in Voldemort’s gene pool?’ Oh, Harry,” he said, laughing.

Harry grinned sheepishly.

Still chuckling, Remus helped Harry with his robe, while Tonks, Dan, Emma and Hermione laughed. The two Aurors, being full bloods, had no clue what it meant.

---

Malfoy Manor...

The tall blond man hurried into the room. He wore a black robe, but had not donned his mask as yet. Kneeling before the seated figure, he bowed low enough to touch his forehead to the floor.

“Ah, welcome my servant. I trust your stay in Azkaban was comfortable?” asked Voldemort.

“Your servant is grateful to be back in your presence again, my Lord,” said Lucius Malfoy.

“Lucius, I would talk to you about your wife and son. I ordered him to take the mark this summer and he refused me. I am most disappointed in that,” said Voldemort in a terrible whisper.

“I’m sorry, my Lord. My wife and son have vanished and I do not know where they are.”

“You are to find them and bring your son to me. He will take the mark, or die by my hand. Your wife is of little use to me. She is to be given to your brothers to play with. When they are done, you will...dispose of her. Do you understand?”

“It will be as you command, my Lord,” replied Lucius, bowing low once more.

As he left his master’s presence, he made his plans. *My dear Narcissa, you will regret making a*

*fool of me. You will watch our son take the Mark or die, before being given to my brothers. Then you will beg for death before I am through with you...*

---

Diagon Alley...

Harry waved to Tom, the innkeeper of the Leaky Cauldron, as he passed through on his way to Diagon Alley. Tonks was going to take him to a shop she knew in Knockturn Alley after they had picked up their books.

He felt silly wearing his formal robes, but he understood that it was time for him to be seen again. Hermione, much to his chagrin, was wearing muggle clothes. Walking into Flourishes and Blott's, they quickly selected all of their sixth-year books. To Hermione's surprise, Harry followed her around, pulling out copies of the seventh-year books just as she was doing. She smiled, knowing he really intended to read them.

At Madam Malkin's, Harry picked up new school robes, then waited patiently while Hermione did the same, although she included two dress robes. Harry wasn't getting dress robes this year as Remus had already procured self fitting family robes for him. It had taken a fair amount of convincing to get Harry to agree with it. He didn't mind the Potter family robes so much, although they were more ornate than the Black family robes. Even though he had legal claim to the head of household for both lines, he felt it was absurd to consider a single person as the head of a family that no longer existed.

Hermione kept her dress robe selection a secret from Harry, which was driving him to distraction. The few robes she had tried on were enough to make him drool, much to Remus and Dan's amusement. Emma and Tonks just laughed and dragged Hermione into a back room for more fittings. Harry was having a hard time concentrating on anything around him as he tried to imagine which robes Hermione would choose and what she'd look like wearing them.

After Madam Malkin's, Tonks and an Auror split off to take Harry to the tattoo shop, while Hermione went and got quills, ink and more parchment. They agreed to meet at the ice cream parlor.

Entering Knockturn Alley, Harry remembered his first trip there and being surrounded by strange looking people. He fidgeted nervously.

"Remember who you are supposed to be, Harry, and no one will touch you," hissed Tonks.

Straightening up and walking with an air of importance, Harry followed Tonks, ignoring the looks people were shooting him. Tonks led him unerringly to a small shop near the end of Knockturn Alley that specialized in tattoos and jewelry.

Inside the dingy shop, Harry looked around curiously. A wall was covered with sample tattoo designs. The counters displayed jewelry under charmed, anti-theft glass. His eye was immediately drawn to one item.

A small, wizened old man stepped out from behind a curtain and took in Harry's attire and rank markings. He scuttled forward and gave a bob of his head.

"Do you see something that interests you, my Lord?" he asked in a gravelly voice.

"Yes," Harry replied. "I would like to cover a scar with a tattoo of a Celtic knot. I assume you can handle that?"

"Of course, my Lord. May I see the scarred area?"

Harry held out his hand where 'I will not tell lies' had been engraved into his flesh and allowed the older man to examine it.

"Hmmm, Blood quills. They're a nasty bit of business, they are. Now sir," he said, pulling out a big book, "I have a variety of Celtic symbols we can use, but I believe your selection is the correct one. I have one which represents long life, love and virility and is charmed with a minor shield that might suit you."

Harry shot Tonks a warning glare as she snickered, hearing the description.

"Will it completely cover the scar?"

"Yes, my lord, it will."

"Very well, let's use that one then."

The man thumbed through his book looking for the exact design, and then showed it to Harry, who nodded in approval.

Twenty painful minutes later, the old man finished engraving the blue and silver Celtic knot over the scar on his hand. Pleased with the results, Harry walked out of the backroom and over to the counter, where he made two more purchases, one of which including a piercing.

Tonks looked him over and nodded in approval before letting him exit the shop. The trio made their way out of Knockturn Alley and back into Diagon Alley proper, heading for Florean's Ice Cream shop. Tonks had a broad smile on her face. She'd made a bet with herself that Hermione would notice Harry's additional purchase in less than a minute.

Harry smiled and slid into a seat across from Hermione, while Tonks mentally counted the seconds. She wasn't the only one who centered their attention on his new tattoo. The Grim had wandered over from his left arm and was prodding it as well, which Harry thought was rather funny. Hermione looked at Harry's tattoo carefully, her brow furrowing as she recognized the pattern.

She arched an eyebrow at him. "Long life, love and VIRILITY, Harry?"

He immediately turned red and started to stammer a reply, but Hermione wasn't listening. She

was staring at the Celtic cross earring he had just gotten. Dan took one look and started to laugh at Hermione and her expression.

“Sweetie, don’t be upset with Harry. He’s trying to portray a bad boy image…” he stated with a chuckle.

“I only got the one earring Hermione. You got both,” he said, sliding a small box across to her with two Celtic cross earrings. “I want to make it clear that, while I might be under the protection of the Brotherhood, you are too. Oh, it’s too subtle for Ron to pick up. But I can promise you, Dumbledore will spot them quickly enough.”

Ordering an ice cream for himself and Tonks, he sat back to enjoy it while Hermione admired her new earrings. She wasn’t a fashion hound like a Lavender Brown or Parvati, but she could admire the quality workmanship that had gone in to making the small adornments.

A scream from outside the shop pierced the happy chatter of the group and the two Aurors dropped into a crouching position. Harry looked out the window in time to see a young woman, running down the street, falter and scream as her robes burst into flames. With a twitch of his wrist, his wand was out and he was walking quickly towards the door, ignoring the pleas from the adults for him to stay put.

Tonks placed a shield over the door and locked it, but he dispelled the shield with a small motion of his wand.

Stepping out of the shop, Harry could see a dozen Death Eaters walking up the Alley, shooting at anyone and anything that moved. Harry cast a rebounding shield on himself and stepped into the center of the street to face them.

“So, wittle Potter has decided he wants to pway,” said one figure in a recognizable and hated voice.

“Why Bellatrix, I would have thought your little fiasco at the Department of Mysteries would have taught you that I don’t play well with Death Eaters. But then, from what Sirius told me, you never were very smart,” Harry said coldly as his magic roared within him.

Bellatrix raised her wand to aim. Harry crouched down and fired off a *Reducto* curse. Bellatrix cursed and cast a shield. Harry’s *Reducto* r hit her shield and blew right through it. Bella barely had enough time to throw herself to one side.

Harry didn’t miss, but he didn’t get a clean shot either. Bella rolled on the ground in agony, her arm blasted from her shoulder in a gory spray and her wand shattered by the impacting spell. With her other hand, she reached into a pocket and vanished as she portkeyed away.

Harry swore and started firing curses at the remaining Death Eaters. Three managed to portkey away in time, the others were stupid enough to remain and try to fight it out. One *Reducto* r curse, deliberately aimed a few feet in front of them at the street itself, sent sheets of razor sharp rock

fragments slicing through them.

The only curse to make it through his shield came at the end of the fight, as the shield had weakened enough to allow it through. The cutting curse sliced a deep gouge in his left shoulder.

There was a moment of silence in the street as people were in shock. Then, slowly, came the sounds of the wounded and those crying over lost loved ones. Harry stood a bit dazed for a moment, as he surveyed the carnage he had created. He had severely wounded Bellatrix LeStrange, and wounded or killed eight others.

Harry shook off the shock as he realized he was surrounded by Hermione, her parents, Remus and Tonks. The two Aurors had immediately gone to disarm the wounded Death Eaters. Tonks reached into her bag and pulled out a field bandage, which she used to bind Harry's shoulder.

"HARRY!" Remus shouted trying to get his attention. "Come on Harry, snap out of it. We have to get you and Hermione out of here before the Order shows up."

The six of them left the Auror's behind and made their way towards the Leaky Cauldron and it's the apparation point. They'd just reached the exit when Moody, Arthur Weasley and Kingsley Shacklebolt apparated in.

The two groups stared at each other for a moment, in shock. Then Hermione glanced at Harry. He seemed to know exactly what she was thinking. The two of them vanished, him silently, her with a sharp pop.

Tonks breathed a sigh of relief and pulled out a portkey for the others. Before Moody or any of the other Order members could respond, they, too, had vanished.

Harry sat on a chair in the kitchen of Grimmauld Place. The bandage Tonks had applied was already sodden with blood. Emma and Dan took one look at it and decided that it needed to be taken care of immediately.

Hermione, Remus and Tonks were of an entirely different mind. Remus stormed into the kitchen and glared at Harry.

"What the bloody hell were you trying to do out there, Harry? Do you know what kind of risks you were taking? You could have been killed, for Merlin's sake!" he shouted while he paced in front of Harry.

As he paced, his hands flew in wild gestures. He blamed Sirius for being a bad influence, he blamed himself, he blamed Harry's father and he even placed blame on Godric Gryffindor for making his house rely on bravery as a prime quality!

Emma and Dan removed the bandage and helped Harry peel down to his waist so they could work on the wound in his shoulder. He watched Remus with a blank expression on his face. As Remus wore himself out, Tonks stepped up to take over the lecturing.



“Damnit Harry, it’s my job to fight Death Eaters, not yours! You endangered yourself, Hermione, all of us with your foolhardy stunt today!” she ranted.

Harry watched Tonks for a moment, and then he glanced at Hermione, who stood near him. Her arms were folded across her chest and she was glaring at him. He knew if he didn’t do something soon, Hermione would pick up where Tonks left off. Nodding in thanks to Dan and Emma, who had cleaned his wound, he stood.

Tonks stopped in her tracks and looked at him. Harry’s eyes blazed with power as he stared her down, then he turned his gaze to Remus, then finally Hermione. The amount of magic radiating off him was so intense, all three staggered back a bit.

“Can any of you kill Voldemort?” he asked in a cold, steely voice. “You can not have it both ways. This is either my fight, or it isn’t. And if it isn’t my fight, then I’m out of here. I’ll leave England in a flash, because I’m not so sure this society is worth saving.

“What do you expect of me? Am I to sit quietly in a corner and wait until you place me before Voldemort and order me to kill him? I am no more your puppet than I am Dumbledore’s! No, this is my fight and I’m going to fight it my way. If you believe I can’t handle it, then perhaps you should be supporting Dumbledore. Get this through your heads, all of you. I will not sit idly by and watch innocents killed when I can do something about it.”

Harry laid a hand on his open wound and his hand flared briefly as he wandlessly healed it. Then he left the kitchen without a saying another word.

Into the shocked silence, came Emma’s voice.

“I hate to say this, but Harry was absolutely correct. All three of you were ready to rip into him for getting involved, but none of you got involved. He saved lives, got hurt in the process and not a single one of you thought to heal his wound. You yell at him because he does exactly what the Boy-Who-Lived is expected to do. Which is it? Is he Harry, or the Boy-Who-Lived? Is he the hero of legend and prophecy, or is he just a young, powerful wizard. He doesn’t know and your reactions are confusing him!

“He wants nothing more than to be plain old Harry, a young man who’s falling in love with my daughter. But you people won’t let him do that! He’s got a reputation he feels necessary to live up to, and when he tries to, what do you do? YOU YELL AT HIM!

“I can assure you he’s upstairs now questioning your loyalty because of your actions today. He needs your support, not your lectures or your anger. That young man has the weight of the world resting on his shoulders. He feels every death, every injury. And what do you three do? Scold him and tell he how foolish he is,” she ended in a scathing tone.

Dan stared down at his daughter. “I’m disappointed, pumpkin...”

“But Daddy... I didn’t say anything,” she protested.

“Hermione Jane Granger, I know you. If Harry hadn’t started talking, you would have jumped in right behind Tonks. And what’s worse, Harry knew it as well, which is exactly why he cut Tonks off so abruptly. Coming from you, it would have hurt him all the more,” Dan said sadly.

Tonks and Hermione looked down, ashamed of what they had done.

Remus sighed. “I think we’d better go have a talk with Harry,” he said softly.

When Remus turned and left the kitchen, Tonks and Hermione followed.

They found Harry laying on the bed in what used to be Sirius’ room. He hadn’t bothered to change. When they filed into the room he looked to be almost dozing.

Remus looked at him for a moment. He noticed Harry crack an eye open to look at them.

“Harry... I... we’re sorry. We shouldn’t have gone off on you like that. It’s just that you scared the hell out of us when you stepped into that fight. You’re too important to us. Not because you’re the one to kill Voldemort, but because of who you are...”

“I know Moony...I can’t help it if it hurts though. I’m sorry I yelled,” Harry said quietly.

After the two adults filed out of the room, Hermione sat down on the bed next to him. He had healed the wound in his shoulder leaving yet another scar.

“Alright there, Harry?” she asked softly, eyeing him in his still bloody clothes.

He smiled weakly up at her. “I’m just tired and lightheaded, Hermione. It’ll pass.”

She sat up straight and smacked herself in the head. “Of course! What fools we are! DOBBY!”

There was a popping sound and Dobby appeared. “Yous call me, Miss?”

“Dobby, Harry needs a blood replenishing potion. Are there any left over from when the Order was using the building?” she asked.

Dobby nodded, snapped his fingers and a potion appeared in his hands. He handed it to Hermione and she smiled, thanking him. As she turned to give Harry the potion, she asked him to prepare Harry some soup and a sandwich. The little elf nodded eagerly and vanished with a pop.

Helping Harry sit up, she said, “You’re lightheaded because you lost a lot of blood. This should take care of it for you. The exhaustion you feel is probably just left over from the fight itself.”

Harry drank a quarter of the potion before he felt the strange, gagging sensation, which indicated he didn’t need any more. He ate most of what Dobby brought him, then laid back down on the bed. He was almost asleep when he noticed Hermione still sitting on the bed staring at him.

“Hermione?”

She reached out a trembling hand to him. “Harry... when you ran out into that fight... I was so scared I was going to lose you. I know you’re not used to people caring what happens to you, but I was terrified...”

Harry took her hand and gently pulled her down beside him where he could wrap his arms around her. She lay next to him with her head on his shoulder. He ran his fingers through her hair until she relaxed into his embrace.

“Harry, are we becoming a couple?” she asked shyly.

He blinked in surprise, and then decided to ask the question he’d been wanting to ask since he woke from his illness. “Would you like to?” he whispered back.

“I think I’d like that, but what about school?” she asked.

“I’d like it too, Hermione. As far as school is concerned, I have no intention of hiding how I feel about you from anyone. I’m going to need your help this year, now more than ever. Every time I think about returning there, my blood boils with a rage I can barely control. I’m not sure who I can trust or how to act around those I can’t. Suddenly things like house points and Quidditch don’t seem important anymore. And with Ron turning my own house against me? How am I supposed to react to that?”

It was a question neither of them had an answer to.

---

Malfoy Manor...

The three escaped Death Eater trainees from the attack on Diagon Alley found Bellatrix at the portkey point, just outside the Malfoy Manor wards. She had collapsed there and bled out. Shuddering at the sight of the body, two of them picked up her corpse and the three proceeded to the manor.

Lucius stopped in the foyer when he noticed the three Death Eaters enter and frowned. There were supposed to be a dozen Death Eaters involved in the attack. If only three came back, then something had gone terribly wrong. He hadn’t yet noticed the identity of the body they carried.

Hurrying down to the special chamber he had constructed for his Lord, he arrived in time to beat the others to the room.

Bowing low, he took his place among the other inner circle members. A moment later, the three Death Eaters walked slowly into the room carrying their gruesome burden. They placed the body on the floor and one bent down to remove the cloak that concealed the identity of the body.

Voldemort hissed in anger. “Bellatrix! What is the meaning of this?” he snarled.

One of the men dropped to his knees, bowed until his forehead touched the ground and started to

stammer out the story about being attacked in Diagon Alley. After listening to the tale, Voldemort had but one question for the Death Eater.

“Who was the man who killed my Bellatrix and disrupted your attack?” he growled.

“I think it was Harry Potter, my Lord...”

“POTTER!!!! I WILL KILL YOU YET,” shouted Voldemort, suddenly standing. He turned to his inner circle and hissed, “Eliminate these failures...”

With multiple death curses flying, the three new Death Eaters became three dead Death Eaters.

“Rudolphus,” hissed Voldemort.

One inner circle member rushed forward and knelt down. “Yes, my Lord?”

“I want you to avenge your wife, Rudolphus. Find a way to kill Harry Potter.”

“With pleasure, my Lord.”

---

Headmaster’s Office, Hogwarts...

Dumbledore was startled when his floo flared to life and the face of Mad-Eye Moody appeared in the fireplace.

“Ah, Alastor. How did we do in the attack?” Dumbledore asked cordially.

“It was over before we arrived, Albus. Arthur, Kingsley and myself arrived in time to see Harry Potter and that Granger girl! They were both surrounded by Brotherhood members. Before we could do anything, Harry and the girl apparated away,” he exclaimed.

“Yes, I had heard that Harry had received his apparation license, but Miss Granger as well? Now that is puzzling,” replied Dumbledore. “Tell me about the attack itself. How did that fare?”

“According to Aurors on the scene, Albus, the attack started and was almost immediately put down by Potter. He blew the wand arm right off one Death Eater and incapacitated eight others. The Death Eater whose arm he blew off probably didn’t survive, but did manage to portkey away. Three others escaped entirely.”

Dumbledore leaned back and considered the odds. *Twelve against one? How is this possible?* He thought. *Harry wasn’t that strong when he left school at the end of term.*

“Alastor, did the Aurors say anything about the spells Harry used?”

“Multiple *Reducto* r spells and a shielding charm. Low level stuff if you ask me, but I have to admit to being impressed.”

“Thank you for the information. I will consider it carefully,” replied Dumbledore, dismissing him.

---

## Ritual of Amplification...

Two days after the attack on Diagon Alley, Remus approached Harry and Hermione.

“Hermione, I’ve read the book about the ritual you inquired about. I’d say it’s a low risk ritual and it does offer you the best chance to increase your power. If you’re willing, we can get Tonks’ help and perform it this evening,” Remus said in his usual soft voice.

Hermione looked at Harry and chewed on her lower lip. It was a characteristic gesture of hers when she was unsure of something. Harry stepped closer to her and took her hand in his.

“Remus wouldn’t offer to do it if he thought it was unsafe, and I’ll be there to help, Hermione,” he said softly.

Reluctantly, she nodded.

Later that evening, Harry and Remus were preparing an empty room to use as the ritual chamber. Remus was directing Harry in the drawing of the necessary runes around the room, while Remus drew the white pentagram needed for the ritual and conjured the proper candles.

Tonks was helping Hermione with the pre-ritual purification. Once done, she’d bring the young woman back to the ritual chamber. Her parents could not participate, although they would watch from a shielded corner.

Half an hour before midnight, Tonks led a trembling Hermione into the chamber. She was dressed in a simple white gown tied at the waist with a cord. Harry was struck by her simple beauty. He went over to her to offer some comfort, she was scared.

She stood outside the pentagram and watched Harry approach her. She gave him a weak smile.

“It will be alright, Hermione,” he said softly, wrapping one arm around her waist.

Remus looked at his watch. “Alright, we’re just about ready to begin. When I call for you, come forward.”

Remus led Hermione into the center of the pentagram and decided to cheer her up a bit. “You know Hermione, two hundred years ago, you’d be naked in the center of the pentagram for this ritual. Aren’t you glad we’re more civilized now? Although I suspect Harry wouldn’t have minded one bit,” he said, smiling.

She grinned weakly at him while he pulled out a small ritual blade. Its ornate ivory handle was finely carved with runes. Slicing his thumb, he drew a line in blood on her right cheek.

“Blood of the Mentor,” he intoned and one set of runes on the walls started to glow brightly.

Remus motioned to Tonks, who stepped forward. Remus stepped back into his position as Tonks took the knife and sliced across her thumb, and then drew a line across Hermione's left cheek.

"Blood of the Protector," Remus intoned, igniting another set of runes on the walls as Tonks stepped out of the pentagram.

Remus motioned to Harry, who blushed furiously but stepped forward anyway. Taking the knife from Tonks, he stepped into the pentagram and sliced across his thumb, then drew a line across her forehead.

"Blood of a Beloved one," Remus intoned and the unlit runes flared with light as Harry stepped out of the pentagram.

Hermione's eyes widened for a moment, then they softened as she looked at Harry. He smiled back, shyly. She had read the ritual, but no one had told her who would fill each role. She had assumed one of her parents would take the Beloved role, which meant for a slightly weaker ritual. That Harry assumed the role would make for a stronger result, but it risked the entire ritual on feelings neither of them had the courage to express as yet.

Remus cast a spell igniting all of the candles positioned about the pentagram.

"By the blood of the Mentor, Postulatio amplio!" he said and his wand flared with magic. A bright beam hit Hermione in the chest and she seemed enveloped in a soft glow.

Remus nodded to Tonks.

"By the blood of the Protector, Postulatio amplio!" she said. Her wand flared and a second beam hit Hermione, causing her to glow brightly.

Remus nodded to Harry.

"By the blood of the Beloved, Postulatio amplio!" he said. When the third beam struck Hermione, it was like looking into the heart of the sun. Those in the room flinched away from the blinding light, blinking rapidly.

Every candle erupted in a pillar of flame. The pillars flared for over a minute. Then all of the wands stopped glowing and the light died. The candles were puddles of wax on the floor and the pentagram had turned a dull, dingy brown.

Hermione stood swaying in the center of the pentagram. Remus collapsed the shield protecting Dan and Emma, while Harry rushed into the center of the pentagram and grabbed Hermione about her waist. She smiled weakly at him.

"Are you alright, Hermione?" he asked breathlessly, clearly worried about her. She nodded weakly at him. Remus joined them both and returned Hermione's wand.

Hermione smiled her thanks and tried a simple *Lumos* with her wand. The normally bright tip now

sent out a strong beam of light. Canceling the spell, she swayed again. Harry didn't think, he simply scooped her up in his arms and motioned for Tonks to open the door. Hermione protested softly, but her heart wasn't in it. With everyone following, he carried her to her bedroom and placed her on her bed.

Remus turned to her concerned parents. "She's tired, but she'll be fine. She needs to sleep tonight, but by morning she'll be fully recovered."

Harry, ignoring the knowing smiles from the adults, smoothed the duvet he had used to cover Hermione. Once she'd drifted off to sleep, he returned to his room to practice playing his tin whistle. Precautions at Grimmauld Place...

Over the next few days, Harry prepared for his return to Hogwarts. He enchanted both of their trunks to be feather light, then added security enchantments on them to prevent anyone from accessing their contents. Hermione could open Harry's trunk and he could open hers, anyone else would receive a nasty surprise if they tried.

Tonks supplied both Hermione and Harry with a generous supply of the Ministry controlled Neutralizing Potion. Then she taught them both the standard detection spell, used by Aurors to check food and drink for foreign substances. With Hermione's power boost she had managed, with Harry's help, to pick up a little bit of wandless magic. It wasn't powerful enough to stun, but she could cast the detection spell and other simple charms with it.

Tonks informed Harry that the Ministry investigation into Dumbledore's accusations had ended with his name cleared of any possible charges. She told him that the Ministry was holding the Prophet off from publishing the stories until September first, the day they were due to leave on the Express.

Harry's proclamation of his feelings for Hermione had throw confusion into their budding relationship. It was further compounded by the simple fact that, had the two not loved each other, the ritual would have failed. Harry was unsure how to react to the knowledge. There were times he wanted to kiss her until her toes snapped from curling. The problem for Harry was a simple one. He didn't know what to do or what she'd allow him to do, so he did nothing. It wasn't an optimal solution, but it was the best he could come up with. The one thing he didn't want to do was mess up their friendship. It was too important to him to endanger it with some stupid hormone driven mistake.

Hermione's reaction was subtler and more devastating to Harry. She wanted desperately to keep their friendship, but now she wanted more from him. His lack of action frustrated her, so she had taken to occasionally teasing him. It was a first for the young woman, to know that the most powerful wizard in the world was smitten with her, yet afraid of her. It gave her a sense power. The problem was his reaction to flirtatious teasing left her even more frustrated. Unlike normal boys, he usually ended up very shy and bolting for the nearest exit.

Finally, the day before they were due to return to Hogwarts, Hermione sought out her mother for a little advice. She found her in the first floor study reading a potions book. Emma was fascinated

by some of the potions, which she felt might be applicable in her field.

Closing the door quietly behind her, Hermione walked to the couch where her mother was reading and sat down. Emma looked up and recognized the look on her daughter's face. Sighing, she marked her place in the book and smiled at Hermione.

"What's bothering you, dear? Is it the fact that your father and I won't be accompanying you to the station tomorrow?" she asked.

"Oh no, Mum. I realize you need to get back to your surgery, that's not what bothering me."

"Then what is it?"

"Harry," came the flat reply.

"Oh... I thought that might be the case."

Hermione looked at her mother, then blushed and looked down at her feet.

"Let me guess, despite admitting how you both feel about each other, he still does nothing about it?"

Hermione nodded and refused to meet her mother's eyes.

"Hermione, look at me."

Hermione looked up, her anguish plainly visible on her face.

"Love, your young man is a fine individual, but look at it from his point of view for a moment."

"What do you mean, Mum?"

"From what I understand of his past, he's never had a real relationship. And now he's found himself not just liking someone, but loving someone. Remus told me your ritual would not have worked if you both didn't feel that way about each other. Now put yourself in his shoes. Growing up, no one ever showed him love. A large group of people, who he thought loved him, has betrayed him. He has so little experience with the emotion that he's lost. He just doesn't know what to do and, if I know him and I think I do, he's decided to do nothing because he's afraid of stepping over some line he doesn't know about."

"So you're saying he's doing nothing because he's afraid of offending me or making me angry?" she asked incredulously.

"I think that's the case, honey. He doesn't know what he can and can't do, so he does nothing. It's going to be up to you to gently guide him through this. That young man wants so badly to be loved, and to love, but he doesn't know how or even why. In a way, I envy you. You are probably at the beginning of the relationship that will last your lifetime and you'll have to be the one who



shows him how to give and, more importantly, receive love.”

“So you’re saying I should forget the usual boy/girl protocol and make the first moves?”

“Well dear, I’m not suggesting you strip starkers and offer to shag him. I daresay if you did, he’d probably run in fright from you. All I’m suggesting is that a few opening moves on your part will help break through to him. There is an awful lot of fun to be had at the beginning stages of a relationship. But you need to go slow with him.”

Hermione thought about it for a moment, and then smiled her thanks.

“I think I’ll go see if I can find Harry,” she said firmly, her Gryffindor courage running high.

Emma smiled. “I do believe I saw in him in the library earlier. Don’t scare him too badly, dear” she called as her daughter quickly left the room.

Hermione was a witch on a mission as she checked all the first floor rooms before heading upstairs to the second floor and the library. There, she found Harry sitting on a comfortable loveseat with a book. He looked up and smiled as she approached. His smile faded to puzzlement as she gently pulled the book from his hands and placed it on the table next to the loveseat. Then she carefully sat down in his lap.

She felt Harry freeze in surprise and she chuckled to herself. “Harry, we need to talk. After the ritual, we now both know how we feel about each other and we can’t hide that fact. Yet you seem paralyzed by fear of what I might think,” she said, and then she frowned in thought.

“Harry, when I sit in your lap, it’s alright for you to put your arms around my waist,” she said softly. He slowly wrapped his arms around her.

“There, that’s more comfortable, isn’t it? Right then, I’ve been thinking, Harry, and I realize you don’t know much about relationships or what you can and can’t do. Well, there are places on me you can touch and places you’re not allowed to touch without permission. Though I daresay someday you might have that permission...”

She paused as he made a choking sound and turned redder than all of the Weasleys combined, then she could have sworn she heard a popping sound as his blush bulb exploded and his face drained of all color.

She sighed and suppressed a giggle. “Harry, that’s a necessary culmination to a successful relationship, but let’s worry about that later. For now, I want you to know it’s all right for us to sit like this. That’s one of the advantages of having a relationship. It’s also alright for you to kiss me. Try it, Harry. I think we’ll both find it enjoyable.”

Harry shook himself out of the daze he was in and tried to go for a peck on the cheek but she turned her face full on to his. Lips met lips. And even though the kiss was very short both pulled back from the other with a glassy look.

“I’m not going to push you on this sort of stuff, Harry, but it’s ok. I’m not going to get mad at you if you kiss me, or hold me. In fact, I find this very comfortable. Consider this your first lesson in relationships. They can be a lot of fun. Don’t you agree?” she asked softly.

Harry, having lost his ability to speak several minutes earlier, could only nod and grin goofily at the question.

Hermione chuckled to herself, as she was sure she’d made her point, even if she had shocked him to his very core. Then he surprised her by pulling her even closer so he could bury his face in her hair. Smugly, she wrapped an arm around his neck and held him. *Maybe he isn’t all that dense after all*, she thought

“Hermione?”

She was leaning against his chest, enjoying the hard feel of his muscles against her. “Hmmmm?”

“W-W-Would you like... to be my g-g-girlfriend?” he asked, then turned away afraid to see her face.

She leaned closer to him and whispered in his ear, “I’d thought you’d never ask, Harry. Yes, I would.”

He tilted her head up and brushed his lips across hers, kissing her gently. She deepened the kiss and, when he didn’t flinch or pull away, she did a mental victory dance that would have put Lavender to shame.

---

Grimmauld and Newspaper articles...

Harry got up early on September 1st. He quickly showered and got dressed, then shrunk his trunk down to pocket size and slipped it into his robes. Today he was wearing the royal blue robes of the Potter family. It was a first for him and, like the Black family, the robes signified the same rank and title. With his trunk in a pocket, and Hedwig sent off to Hogwarts, he left his room and went down to the kitchen for breakfast.

He entered the kitchen and was surprised to note he was the last one down. Pausing in the doorway, he took in the tense atmosphere and his stomach twisted. Hermione tried to smile up at him, but her smile was weak at best. Something had disturbed them all and Harry was afraid he wasn’t going to like it.

“Harry,” Tonks said, “do you remember that I told you that the Prophet would publish those articles today?”

Harry nodded. The twisting sensation in his gut turned to lead.

“Well, it turns out there’s a third article. Rita Skeeter did an interview with Dumbledore and a few

of your classmates in a bid to bolster his case in the public's eye. While our article is on page one, Dumbledore's interview is bound to attract a few supporters. I'm sorry Harry, we didn't know he gave the interview until today's Prophet came out."

Harry sat at the table next to Hermione and picked up the Prophet, quickly scanning the headlines.

*Albus Dumbledore Falsely accuses Boy-Who-Lived of Practicing Dark Arts.  
Ministry of Magic clears Boy-Who-Lived of Dark Art allegations.  
Dumbledore grants exclusive interview, reveals intimate details.*

Harry made a growling sound in the back of throat and quickly flipped to page three which contained Dumbledore's interview.

*Dumbledore Grants Exclusive Interview,  
Reveals Intimate Details.  
By Rita Skeeter*

In a surprise interview, Albus Dumbledore explained to this reported why he believed the Boy-Who-Lived is currently at risk of turning to the dark arts. "Harry Potter's life has been one of hardship and privation. He is an intensely private individual who refuses to let people know how badly he's hurting. He was raised in an environment where he was abused by muggles, starved, beaten and even occasionally raped by them. It is nearly identical to the upbringing of ... (You-Know-Who)," said Dumbledore.

Harry gasped. He was awash with emotions; embarrassment warred with anger and shame. His hands trembled slightly and he blinked back tears. He could feel Hermione gently rubbing his back, trying to soothe him. Angrily, he wiped his eyes and returned to reading the paper.

"Over the years I have watched this boy personally break more school rules than any other student. He lacks any respect for authority or for others," Dumbledore said.

A dorm mate of his is quoted as saying, "Harry Potter caring about others? Nonsense! The last two years in the dorms with him he'd routinely disrupt our sleep, he's terribly moody and his temper is unbelievable," said Seamus Finnigan.

Dumbledore went on to state that he was left wondering if Mr. Potter survived his attack by You-Know-Who as an infant because his parents might have used some dark protective spell. "I know nearly every light spell there is and I can't survive a killing curse. What could they have possibly used? I don't know, but it probably isn't a light art," Dumbledore theorized.

A cold calm descended on him as he read Dumbledore's allegations against his parents. It was almost as if his emotions were shutting down, one by one, leaving only a pure, white hot flame of anger burning. But it was controlled, tightly bound. He felt no need to rage like he had during the summer when Hermione questioned him about his life with the Dursley's. No, this anger fed a steely determination.

One of Mr. Potter's closest friends had this to say about him. "He's totally arrogant! He's more concerned about being at the forefront of the news than he is about his friends. Last year his actions directly led to the death of his own Godfather, and he got the rest of us injured! He flaunts his wealth and his fame all the time," said Ron Weasley, Harry Potter's oldest and best friend..

He laid the paper carefully aside and started to eat his breakfast without any further comment. The others watched him worriedly.

"Alright there, Harry?" Remus asked, concerned.

"I'm fine," came Harry's emotionless reply.

Hermione bit her lip when she saw his eyes. In the past, she could see how he was feeling by looking in his eyes. His pain, grief, happiness and joy were always plain to see for anyone who bothered to look. But now, there was nothing. He was pulling away from them and suppressing his emotions. She knew she'd have to do something drastic, otherwise she'd lose him.

She waited until he'd finished eating and got up to leave the table. They still had two hours before they had to leave for the station, so she followed him out of the kitchen. The adults, unsure how to break through to him, watched as he left the room, then looked at each other, concerned.

As he started to pass the study, she pushed him through the doors and closed them loudly behind her. He spun to look at her. The only emotion showing through his emerald gaze was mild curiosity, but his body language was stiff with tension.

She turned to him and poked him hard in the chest. "Don't you dare shut me out, Harry Potter! That article hurt you terribly and you're pretending it didn't."

"What do you want me to say, Hermione?" he asked coldly.

"I want you," she said, punctuating every word with another poke to his chest, "to stop being a bloody arse! Every time you bottle up these emotions, a little piece of you dies!"

Harry blinked in surprise at her. Did Hermione just curse?

Suddenly she threw herself at him, wrapping her arms about him tightly. "Oh Harry, it's alright for you to hurt, but if you can't share your feelings with someone it's going to eat you alive. I don't want to lose you, but I can't bear to see you like this. Be angry, be hurt, be something! But don't suppress and smother your feelings."

Slowly his arms went around her and he held her tightly to him. Silently, she thanked every god she could think of as she felt the tension drain from him. Then his shoulders hitched a few times and she felt the wetness as a few tears rolling off his cheek to fall on the top of her head.

"How could he say that, Hermione?" he whispered in anguish. "About the... Dursley's... my parents."

She stepped away from him and led him to a couch. Sitting him down, she sat on his lap and looked deeply into his eyes. All she could see was a deep pain that would take a lifetime to recover from.

“It’s true then, what he said about the rape?” she asked him gently.

“NO! Never Hermione, I swear! The Dursley’s were a nightmare, but they never did that!”

She pulled his face back so he was looking at her. “Shhh... relax Harry. I know he’s hurt you and he’s lied about you, but you’re better than he is. You’ll get through this. If you want to hide your feelings, fine. But don’t hide them from those that care for you. I... we... love you and don’t like to see you hurting.” she said quietly.

He blinked rapidly, trying to force the tears away, but they were too strong. He wrapped both arms around her, buried his head in her shoulders and gave up fighting. She held him tightly while he cried. She could only marvel at how anyone could have survived those experiences.

Ten minutes later, he managed to gain control of his emotions. He lifted his head and smiled weakly at her and she kissed his forehead. He let one arm slip off her waist and slid it up her arm. His touch left a trail of fire up her bare arm and she shivered slightly as his hand came to rest, cupping the back of her neck. Gently, he pulled her head closer to his and kissed her. It was a gentle kiss, soft and, in a way, healing for both of them. She ran a hand through his hair and their kiss deepened. Breaking away, his lips drifted, trailing soft kisses across her cheek and down the side of her neck. Her mind spun wildly and she gasped as his hot breath on her neck and the feel of his lips made her whole body tingle delightfully.

Stopping at the base of her neck, he looked up at her and smiled. This time, his smile reached his eyes. She knew he was still incredibly angry about what had been said about him, but at least he wasn’t hiding it from her any longer.

“I’d say you’re picking up my lessons very well, Mr. Potter,” she said, playfully roughing up his hair. Then she reached into a pocket and pulled out a tissue to wipe away the tear streaks on his cheek, while he chuckled and hugged her again.

---

Transfiguration Office, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry...

Minerva McGonagall threw the newspaper away in disgust.

How dare he say that about James and Lily! She couldn’t believe it! First he made very serious accusations, then, to back them up, he offered a damaging interview in which he laid bare Harry’s most personal secrets? He even got her Gryffindors to publicly turn against him!

In a burst of anger, she hurled her teacup against the wall, where it shattered into hundreds of pieces.

“Minerva...” came a small, squeaky voice.

McGonagall looked away from the tea running down her wall as Professor Flitwick came into view. She blinked as he cast several privacy charms.

“I take it you’ve read today’s Prophet,” Flitwick commented dryly.

“Aye, I dinna know what he’s up to, but he’s made himself an enemy today in young Harry,” she snarled.

Filius blinked. Minerva’s accent rarely came through so strongly unless she was very upset. He nodded and tried to smile. “Yes, I daresay Mr. Potter may be quite angry with us all because of this article. I don’t know what Albus could have possibly be thinking of, but this is not going to be an easy year for us, I fear.”

The color drained from McGonagall’s face. “Filius,” she said, barely above a whisper. “What have I done? I went along with this; even helping him set my own house against the boy. I know Harry Potter. James, Lily and I were quite close and he’s inherited his parent’s stubborn streak. He is going to be so hurt by this and it’s partly my fault.”

Filius nodded. “I think it’s going to be up to us to show Harry that not everyone supports the Headmaster’s viewpoints.”

Minerva sighed. “That, I’m afraid, will depend on how difficult the Headmaster decides to make his year.”

Filius nodded sadly in agreement before dispelling the privacy charms and heading for the door.

---

## The Leaky Cauldron...

Draco Malfoy looked across the room to the bed where his mother lay. She had been like this all summer. He and his mother had fled the Manor house during the early part of the summer when they heard Voldemort was moving into their home.

Arriving in Diagon Alley, Draco had removed all the money from his allowance account. By his standards, three thousand galleons wasn’t much, but it kept them fed and a roof over their head for the summer. Now he had little more than two thousand galleons and he was starting to get very worried. His mother was ill. After years of being abused by his father, Narcissa was a wreck, and the Malfoy family arrogance had earned them few friends he could turn to.

He had arranged with Tom, the innkeeper at the Leaky Cauldron, to take care of his mother and make sure she was fed and got her medicines, but that had taken nearly one third of his available money. He was due to return to Hogwarts today and he didn’t know who he could turn to. Fortunately, his education was paid for the next year. If that hadn’t been the case, he would have been completely broke. He didn’t want to think as far ahead as his seventh year. He’d cross that

bridge when he came to it.

Packing his trunk, he wondered about his options and considered how few he had available to him. He couldn't turn to Dumbledore for aid. That idiot had already suggested to him once, at the end of last year, that he accept the dark mark and become a spy for him. That was out of the question.

He also considered some of the rumors he had heard about Potter over the summer and wondered if he could approach him. Not for himself, but for his mother. He had prepared a note that he hoped to slip to Potter, if the Gryffindor didn't hex him into oblivion first.

The thought of his mother made him frown and glance over at her again. Lucius was never a kindly husband to her. She had made the classic mistake that so many Slytherin women made, marry into a powerful family and end up miserable. In Narcissa's case, it went far deeper than being miserable. From her brief, lucid moments, Draco learned her father had controlled her, using a mix of addictive potions, the *Imperio* us curse and, on a few occasions, physical beatings or the Cruciatus curse.

He had strong memories of a loving mother who enjoyed her son and played often with him. But as he got older, Lucius became more demanding and more controlling. He'd often embarrass her by bringing home his current mistress and making her watch. It wasn't until he entered Hogwarts that the real damage was done. She'd been making noises about leaving Lucius and taking Draco with her. When he returned from school over that first year Christmas holiday, he'd found his mother little more than a drugged zombie.

With Voldemort's return, this past year had been especially bad. When Nott had informed him that Voldemort would be moving into their home, he'd taken his mother and fled.

Draco pulled his trunk to the door and looked with regret at his sleeping mother. He'd have to trust Tom to hold to his word in caring for her.

"I'll find us help somehow, Mother," Draco vowed to the sleeping figure. With one last look, he turned and dragged his trunk from the room.

---

The Hogwarts Express...

Harry shrunk down Hermione's trunk so the only thing she had to carry was Crookshanks in his carrier. He then purposely checked to make sure she was wearing the charm bracelet he gave her. She grinned at him and shook her head.

From Grimmauld Place Harry, Hermione, Remus and Tonks, plus the two Aurors of the security detail, apparated to the railway station. Tonks was feeling melodramatic today so she had every one wearing their concealment cloaks. She had coached all of them carefully on what she wanted them to do.

The Aurors entered platform 9 ¾ first. There, they took up station in front of the entrance. No one

really paid any attention to them until Remus and Tonks went next. Hermione followed a moment later, having removed her concealment cloak and handing it to Harry. Harry shrunk Hermione's cloak and placed it in a pocket, then he followed the others onto the platform.

The five, cloaked figures formed a ring around Hermione as they moved towards the Hogwarts Express. The students and their families gave the cloaked figure a wide berth as they walked slowly, almost ritualistically, up the platform towards the forward carriages.

As they passed a column, a hand snapped out and grabbed Hermione. She gave a frightened yelp of pain as she was pulled out of the group. The four whirled to see Severus Snape. He had an arm around Hermione's neck and a wand at her throat.

"Move, and she dies," he snarled. "Now, where is Harry Potter?"

Snape blinked as one of the figures vanished only to reappear a second later, snatch his wand out of his hand, then vanish again. Hermione, taking advantage of Snape's inattention, leaned backwards hard, slamming him against the wall.

Stunned, Snape staggered and releasing her. Free, she darted behind the protection of the others. Snape slumped against the wall and looked up as a crowd formed to watch the spectacle. The figure with Snape's wand snapped it and tossed it at his feet. Four of the cloaked figures raised their wands and pointed them at the greasy man's chest.

"No... let it live... for now," said a very familiar voice.

Then the crowd gasped in shock as the figure that had broken the Professor's wand pushed back his hood and removed his cloak. Harry Potter stood in the royal blue house robes of the Potter family. He draped his cloak over his arm, turned to his fellows and bowed low with a hand over his heart. The changes in Harry's physical appearance caused a number of the Hogwarts girls to start whispering.

"For a spy, Snape, Dumbledore and the Order of the Phoenix must be quite disappointed with your performance. This is the second time you have interfered with our business. You will not survive a third," said another cloaked figure in a voice that carried throughout the platform. A murmur ran through the crowd as what the figure said sunk in. Nearby, a small beetle sat unnoticed in a pile of trash.

Harry started to turn towards the train when Hermione stopped him, smiling sweetly.

She turned to Professor Snape, who was still sitting on the ground looking around in shock and said, "I'm so sorry, Professor Snape. I didn't realize it was you who was assaulting me so rudely. Please, forgive me," she said, smiling innocently, but her voice mocking him.

Harry quickly surveyed the crowd between him and the train. He spotted the Weasley's, and, in particular Molly Weasley, bearing down on him like an avalanche.



Molly bounced to a halt about ten feet away when she encountered his unseen shield. Harry could see Ginny not far behind her mother looking at him with a predatory hunger in her eyes. His eyes crinkled as he tried not to grin. He wrapped an arm around Hermione, pulling her close to him.

Smiling down at her upturned face, he gave her a quick kiss on the forehead and helped her up the high step onto the train. Harry was grateful that there had been no sign of Ron. He wasn't sure if he could have maintained his temper after dealing with Snape.

Making his way up the carriage, Harry soon noticed two distinct things. Very few students were willing to look him in the eye, and most seemed to be afraid of him. Scowling, he led Hermione to an empty compartment. He sighed as he sat down and shook his head.

"What's wrong?" Hermione asked, sitting next to him.

"Did you see? Most of the students are afraid of me now," he replied heavily.

"It will be alright, Harry. Not everyone is going to believe Dumbledore," she replied softly.

"No, you're probably right, but a majority of them will, Hermione..."

As the train pulled out of the station, they talked of lighter things, the enjoyable summer they'd spent together, and their plans for the Christmas holiday. Half an hour later, the door to the compartment opened and Ginny walked in, followed by Neville. Ginny clutched a copy of the Prophet in one hand and, although she smiled in greeting, her anger was obvious.

"All right there, Harry?" asked Neville.

"Fine, Nev. How come you're so late?"

"I was waiting for Ginny to finish with the prefect meeting."

"Oh, I'd forgotten about that," Harry said with a frown.

"Where were you, Hermione?" Ginny asked, puzzled.

"I think I'm going to give up my prefect badge, Ginny," she said.

"What?" Neville and Ginny asked, together.

Harry turned in his seat, placed a hand on Hermione's chin and gently turned her to face him. "Are you sure?" he asked quietly, staring into her eyes.

"Yes, I'm sure. There was a time when being a prefect and Head Girl meant everything to me. But it all seems rather pointless now, you know? There are more important things to spend my time on...and more important people to spend it with," she said, smiling.

"That means Ginny has to deal with Draco and Ron by herself," Neville said with a frown.

“I’m not so sure about that,” Ginny said, still eyeing Hermione carefully, as if attempting to wrap her mind around her friend’s sudden decision.

“What do you mean?” Harry asked.

“Well,” Ginny said, turning to look at him, “I don’t think Draco’s a prefect any longer. He wasn’t at the prefect meeting. A Slytherin I’ve never met seems to have taken his place.”

“So that just leaves that prat of a brother of yours,” Neville said with a growl.

Ginny laughed. “Oh, didn’t I tell you? The bloody git’s not a prefect anymore either. His grades were so bad that they took his badge from him. Mum was so mad, she threatened to take his broom away from him. She didn’t of course, but you should have seen his face when she said it.”

So how was your summer, Nev?” Harry asked as the laughter ebbed away.

Neville looked around nervously for a moment. “It was fine until Ron asked me to turn rat on my friend,” he said in an even tone that belied his anger.

Harry reached over and clapped Neville on the shoulder, “You’re a good man, Nev. I don’t think I ever told you or Ginny how much your support means to me.”

As Neville started to stammer, Ginny grinned and looked at Harry, who was holding Hermione’s hand. “Harry, if I didn’t think of Hermione as a sister, she and I would be pulling each other’s eyes out right about now. But because it’s Hermione, I suppose I’m happy for you both,” she said with a wink.

Harry blushed to his roots, while Hermione laughed throatily and snuggled a little closer to him.

Ginny watched them for a moment before turning serious. “I’m terribly sorry about what’s going on, Harry. I wish I could say I understand it, but I don’t. As far as I’m concerned, Ron hurt us more than Percy...”

“Ginny,” Harry interrupted, “I understand. Tonks has kept me informed about the situation and both Hermione and I really appreciate the warning you sent. I’m afraid there’s a lot more going on here than you know. And I should warn you both,” he added, “being my friend this year is going to be hard on anyone. You might want to think about that before being seen with me too often.”

“You’re not getting rid of me that easy, Harry. I know Ron’s turned most of our mates against you, but I’m still on your side,” Neville said hotly.

“Same here, Harry,” Ginny added, after flashing Neville a calculating look.

Harry smiled gratefully and Hermione squeezed his hand tighter. All four heads turned as the compartment opened again and Susan Bones walked in, followed by Luna Lovegood. Susan spotted Hermione holding Harry’s hand and her eyes lit up. Once they were seated. She leaned over and hugged Hermione briefly.

“Hermione, I hope you realize just how many girls are going to hate you this year,” Susan said, grinning.

Hermione’s eyes narrowed and she looked at Susan questioningly. “What are you talking about?” she finally asked.

Susan and Ginny both laughed before Ginny replied. “Hermione, every girl above third year is going to be jealous of you being with Harry. Look at him! The dreamy eyes, the muscles, his tight butt...”

Neville snickered when Harry paled. Hermione shot a glance at the other girls, then looked at Harry for a moment, the wheels turning in her head.

“Do you mind not talking about me like I’m something on display? I am right here, you know,” Harry said grumpily. “Besides,” he added a moment later, “she doesn’t have me, we have each other.”

Hermione beamed a smile at him while the Ginny and Susan sighed. Ginny changed the subject then, asking the one question that had been on her mind for the past three months.

“So Harry, where were you this summer?”

Harry was about to answer the question when the door to the compartment slid open again. Ron Weasley stood in the door with a goofy grin on his face. He spotted Hermione and smiled broadly. Then he spotted her holding Harry’s hand and his smiled slipped into a mask of rage.

“Hermione, get away from him!” he shouted.

Hermione glared at him, her face a mask of disgust. “No Ron, I’m not going anywhere,” she said firmly.

“Hermione, sweetheart, you must come away from him. He’s dangerous. He’s going to get you killed,” he whined.

As Ron spoke, a crowd was forming in the aisle, watching and cheering him on. He took courage from the number of people supporting him.

“I told you I’m not moving, Ron. Now go away. I have no wish to talk to you further.”

“Hermione, I insist you come away from him right now!”

“You insist, do you? By what right do you insist I do anything?” she stormed. When Harry squeezed her hand, she calmed somewhat. “I’ll tell you what, Ron,” she said staring at him from her seat. “I’ll make room so you can sit if you want, alright?”

With that, she stood and reseated herself in Harry’s lap. His arms automatically wrapped around her, pulling her closer, then she leaned down and kissed him softly.

Ron's face twisted in rage and he spat, "So Potter, you bought yourself a whore then? How typical. Snape was right about you. You're nothing but a fucking arrogant glory seeker."

Hermione felt Harry stiffen in rage, but before he could respond, Ginny bounced out of her seat and kicked Ron in the balls.

He sucked in air and crumpled to his knees. Ginny kicked him once in the ribs before pushing him from the compartment and slamming the door shut. She then pulled the curtains closed, blocking the compartment from view.

"Merlin, I've been wanting to do that all summer!" Ginny exclaimed, baring her teeth in a mockery of a grin.

Both Harry and Neville winced and Neville eyed Ginny warily as she bounced back to her seat next to him.

Hermione locked the door wandlessly then turned her attention back to Harry. She whispered something in his ear and then wiggled a bit in his lap. Harry's anger suddenly drained, only to be replaced by embarrassment. He looked at her and arched an eyebrow, then grinned wickedly.

"I know why you said that, Hermione, and it had the effect you wanted it to have. But I should warn you, say that again and I will take you up on the offer," he said quietly. She blushed and buried her head in his shoulder.

Ginny, Neville, Luna and Susan looked on with amusement. "Well Harry, are you going to tell us where you've been all this time?"

Harry looked up and frowned for a moment. "Well guys, I'll give you a real brief outline, but I'll hold the more detailed explanations for another time. The long and short of it is, at the beginning of the summer holiday I got sick, really sick. I was rescued by some people who love me and taken to a place of safety. There, I got better, stronger, had decent food and people around me who really cared about my welfare. Mind you guys, I'm not saying you don't care, it's just that you weren't in a position to do what these people did for me."

Ginny smirked at him, "Why do I have the feeling that Hermione might have been one of those people, Harry?"

Neville snickered, then he leaned towards Ginny and muttered, "Either that or he's learned to work really fast."

"I don't think Harry's all that fast, but with his green eyes he was obviously bitten by a three toed Knicker when he was younger. Knicker poison always has that effect on people," Luna said airily, before going back to reading her Quibbler.

Everyone in the compartment stared at Luna. She ignored them and hummed to herself while continuing to read. She was, after all, used to people staring at her.

Hermione turned to Ginny, asking, “So Ginny are you wearing your three toed knickers today?”

Neville blushed and Ginny giggled. “That’s a mighty personal question, Hermione,” she said pertly.

Harry rolled his eyes and started to laugh. He felt better, lighter somehow, with his close friends near him. Maybe this year wouldn’t be so bad after all.

---

### **Author Notes:**

**A Warning:** In our story, the plight of the wizarding world will get darker as time goes on. This is not a light, fluffy, humorous fic, although there may be some of those elements in a few chapters. The over-all tone of the story however, will get darker and darker.

We knew when we began this story that the HBP would be released while we were writing it. As a lot of you know, our story is now even more AU than when we started it. We won’t be using anything that happened in HBP in this story, so let’s all pretend that JKR’s latest book hasn’t been released yet, shall we?

We won’t be answering any specific questions about the Brotherhood. All we’ll say is, read and you’ll find out! Aren’t we annoying?

Percy will appear, never fear. The breach between him and his family hasn’t been mended, though, so any Percy fans out there, sorry! Percy fans? Isn’t that a contradiction in terms? That’s like those poor people that look at Snape and see Alan Rickman instead of the crusty thong wearing grease ball he really is.

Harry is the Head of House for both the Potter and Black families. In our version of the wizarding world, the Head of any House is addressed as ‘My Lord’. The class system in muggle Britain is different than in wizarding Britain (Harry’s not a Lord of some place, he’s the Lord of House Potter, and House Black). Hope that helps!

Yep, we’re American’s. No need to blush. I doubt mail versus post will be our only mistakes, though we can hope. We’re trying very hard not to Americanize the Harry Potter universe, but it can be difficult to wrap one’s mind around a culture one’s never experienced except in literature! To our British readers, we humbly beg forgiveness for any mistakes we may make, and asked that you not pummel us too severely when you find them.

Yes, you can borrow our Pet Peeves section if you’d like.

Yes, we know we're not accepting anonymous reviews. It was done purposely.

Ridiculing people for their love of a particular ship (canon or not) is a waste of time. People will believe what they wish and, in this case, there's no harm in it. We're H/G shippers for the most part, but we read any good story out there, regardless of ship, although we stay away from slash stories. While they may not be to our liking, we know that others enjoy them and that's what fanfic's about, isn't it?

Mr. Granger's comment on "the Brotherhood" was off-hand and meaningless, to him at least. Dumbledore doesn't know that though. (Evil Cackle!)

Yes, Minerva has her doubts. But will she turn on Dumbledore? Read and see!

Yes, we switch from scene to scene quite often, which is why we use headers at the beginning of each scene, in the hope that our readers will be able to follow along easier. Occasionally we'll use arrows for the really confused readers.

We thought about having Harry play the bagpipes, but they're a bit over the top. We needed something fairly small and simple, hence the Irish tin whistle. I considered also him playing kettle drums, but they didn't seem all that musical if you ask me.

Harry's mental health isn't as bad as it was in our last two fics. He's spent the summer with a group of people who've put him as their first priority. He's loved and cared for, something he's always wanted. He may have some setbacks once he's back at Hogwarts, but not many and they won't last long. Hermione, however, may have some problems...

How do we come up with our ideas? Brainstorming and having a twisted sense of humor helps. Sick? Twisted? Speak for yourself wife! :D

Severus isn't evil, he's just misunderstood....just like Voldemort. Yeah, right. Snape may not be as bad, but he's not very good in this story. I (Alyx) happen to like Snape, and we redeemed him in our last stories. As for this one, you'll just have to read and see.

That's all for the A/N. Thanks for the reviews, everyone. We hope you enjoy the new chapter!

~Bob and Alyx~

## **Pet Peeves:**

Plot Devices!!! Ok plot devices are really simple. Normally a plot device is designed to give you something to write about. So as an example, we created a rich Super Powered Harry. What we're not going to do is load him up with more gear than Bobba Fet. I don't mind Super Harry stories, but it's not necessary to make him super powered AND geared to the hilt with all sorts of goodies he finds in his vaults. Normally you use very few plot devices with a story.

So having said that, this chapter's pet peeve is awarded to all those authors that make a super powered Harry, then load him up with more gear than an M1A2 Abrams Battle Tank.

## Sunset Over Britain The First Day of School and Snape!

Standard Disclaimer:

Ron: “How come you’ve turned me into an ass in this story?”

Bob: “Because JKR says we’re allowed to write stories in her universe. Do you like the scenery from up here Ron?”

Ron: “Ummm... it’s awful high up here, how high up are we? AAAAAAA!!!!”

Bob: “High enough to find out if Ron’s bounce”

Bob: “Nope, we don’t own it.”

---

Sunset over Britain  
Chapter 5

---

Hogwarts, School of Witchcraft and Wizardry...

The rest of the trip on the Express was uneventful and in a few hours they were piling out of the car and heading towards the carriages that would take them to the castle. Harry spotted Hagrid collecting the first years, but he refrained from greeting his old friend. He just wasn’t sure whom among the staff he could trust.

He helped Hermione into the carriage before joining her. Neville and Ginny followed, taking the opposite seat, while Susan and Luna claimed the carriage behind them. Once Harry was seated, he pulled a small vial from his robes and passed it to Hermione. She looked at it for a moment, and then smiled at him in thanks.

Ginny and Neville watched, confused, as Hermione opened the vial and drank the contents. Her face screwed up in disgust at the bitter taste it left behind. Harry chuckled and flexed his wrist, which released his wand into his hand. With a wave, he conjured a small glass of pumpkin juice, Hermione’s favorite drink, and passed it to her. Her eyes lit up in gratitude as she took the glass and washed the bitter flavor away. Another flex of his wrist and his wand vanished from sight again.

Neville gasped when Harry’s wand disappeared. “How did you do that, Harry?” he asked.

Harry grinned and pulled up his sleeve, revealing the wrist holster. Neville leaned closer for a



better look. “That’s an Auror model, that is!” he exclaimed.

“That’s right, Nev. Hermione and I both have them. If things work out, I’ll be able to get more of them for you guys,” Harry replied softly.

As the carriage slowed, Harry looked out the window. In the gathering twilight, he could see the castle looming over him as they pulled into the main courtyard and stopped. Stepping out of the carriage, he whispered to Hermione, reminding her to use the wards he had taught her for her dorm room.

Hermione nodded, grinning to herself. Harry had taught her a number of wards she planned to place around her bed as protection at night. She was also pleased that he trusted her with doing this, rather than insisting on doing it himself. Most of what needed to be done would only take a few minutes and no one would notice.

Harry had also mentioned something about a ‘surprise’ during the trip, but hadn’t elaborated on it. He’d said he wanted to check out Hogwarts’s wards first, before he could be sure his plan would work.

Stepping into the entrance hall, Harry found himself grabbed from behind, spun and flung bodily against a wall. He shook his head to clear the dizziness and straightened his glasses, only to find himself facing Professor Snape.

“That will be 50 points from Gryffindor for breaking my wand, Potter. And a month’s detention with me,” Snape snapped at him.

Harry brushed the dirt off his school robe casually and looked the Professor in the eye. For a brief moment he was surprised to discover that he was as tall as Snape was, but he brushed that off as unimportant.

“No, Sir. I don’t think so. Under Article 16, paragraph B, published in 1751, Hogwarts Teacher’s Rules, you may not deduct points or assign detentions for anything that happens before the beginning of school term. Technically, what you did on platform 9 ¾’s happened before the start of term. In addition, *SIR*, as a legal adult, I am within my rights to have you arrested for making threats to me and my friends. Now I ask you, how can I possibly serve detention while you’re in a Ministry holding cell awaiting your trial, Professor?” Harry asked in wide-eyed innocence.

Snape stared at him for a moment longer, but Harry’s growth spurt over the summer meant he had lost the ability to loom over him in an intimidating manner. Snape spun on his heel and started to move away.

Harry called after him. “One more thing, Sir. I can assure you that I will press those charges if you try punishing me unjustly.”

Snape paused for a moment before continued to walk from the entrance hall. The rest of his friends and a number of other students gaped at him.

Harry took a quick look around. In some eyes, far too few in his opinion, he saw admiration for standing up to Snape. In most eyes, however, all he saw was fear and mistrust.

With a resigned sigh, he turned back to his friends. “Come on guys, let’s get to the feast.”

Leading them to the Great Hall, Harry and his friends sat near the doors instead of up by the Head table. Luna and Susan split from the group when they entered to join their own tables. Hermione sat next to Harry and a third year Gryffindor girl she didn’t know very well. Ron sauntered in and sat across from them, next to Ginny. All four eyed him warily and Hermione slipped her hand under the table to rest it on Harry’s thigh.

“Look mate,” Ron began, “I want to apologize for everything. I’m sorry, I was being an idiot…”

Harry cut him off harshly. “You’re right about one thing, Weasley. You *are* an idiot. And you’re not my mate so don’t call me that again. Your barney if you think an apology will cover for what you said about me in the papers. The only reason I don’t hex you right here and now is because you’re Ginny’s brother, and unlike you, she’s my friend.”

“Don’t hold back on my account,” Ginny muttered under her breath, staring at her brother with hard, fierce eyes.

Ron stared at him for a moment, but shrugged off the impression of power radiating from Harry’s cold emerald gaze and turned to Hermione with a slight smile. He ignored the new first years as they were marched past him in the aisle.

Ron was about to say something when Hermione waved him to be silent. He frowned at her until he realized she wanted to hear the sorting hat.

Harry and Hermione craned their necks to see the sorting. The group of first years seemed awful short to Harry this year. He leaned over to whisper that to Hermione when she shushed him.

Professor McGonagall walked over to the side of the Great Hall and picked up a stool and a rumpled old hat. Placing the stool before the main table in front of Headmaster Dumbledore, she placed the hat on the stool and stepped back to allow the hat to sing its traditional, opening feast song.

The hat stirred and appeared to look around. Satisfied that the hall was full and it had everyone’s attention, it began to sing.

*A warning, united I told last year,  
Ignore you did, my words so clear.  
And now light dims and darkness falls,  
Hogwarts to ashes ‘tis the end o’ all.*

Hermione appeared startled and quickly conjured a quill and parchment to write down the song as the hat continued to sing. Harry watched over her shoulder. Like her, he realized this song was

different and needed to be examined carefully, not just by the students.

*The sunset comes, it looms so near  
Evil will spread with rule and fear.  
The light falters, and hope undone.  
Sunset comes with a darkening sun.*

*From blackest night will beacon burn,  
To an emerald land all hope will turn.  
The land will burn and death bells ring,  
From the ashes of all will a hero spring,*

*Brotherhood arising, legends of yore,  
Old power awakes and so much more.  
Legends renewed, his spirit unbroken,  
The evil's bane these words are spoken.*

Silence reigned in the Great Hall as the last words echoed away. McGonagall looked up at Dumbledore, but he had apparently been reading a note passed to him by Professor Snape. Looking up from the parchment in his hand, he motioned for his deputy Headmistress to begin the sorting ceremony, before he went back to his reading.

Minerva McGonagall was badly shaken. In the more than fifty years she had spent at Hogwarts, she had never heard such a foreboding song. She unrolled the parchment nervously and began the sorting ceremony.

Meanwhile, Harry had finished rereading Hermione's transcription of the song. He nodded to her and handed it back.

Ron turned away from the sorting to look at Hermione and his expression softened. "'Mione, I want to apologize for what I called you earlier on the Express. I was upset and angry..."

Hermione bristled at the nickname. "Don't ever call me 'Mione, Ron," she hissed at him.

"Um... well, I'm sorry. I just wanted to tell you that. I was confused. I thought you might be going out with Harry, you know?"

"Did you take a stupid potion today, Ron? I *am* going out with Harry," she replied acidly.

Harry was about to interrupt but didn't when she squeezed his thigh. The conversation was cut short as the sorting ceremony ended and Dumbledore stood up.

"Welcome! Welcome one and all! And so we begin another fine year at Hogwarts. I have a few words I would like to say before we begin our fine feast. Orange Snappers. Now, tuck in!"

As the tables filled with food, Harry glanced over to Hermione. He could see her eyeing the food carefully, but the slight tremble in her hand on his leg told him how afraid she was. He casually

ran a hand over a platter of roast beef and casting the detection charm. Feeling no response, he picked up the platter and placed thick slices on both their plates.

She shot him a grateful glance and copied his action, carefully testing the food before putting anything on her plate. Because she was doing the charm wandlessly, and nearly silently, no one knew why she hesitated over a dish before taking something.

Harry ate and watched her closely as she picked at her food. His aunt had beaten proper table manners into him, but he wanted to double check her plate so he could tell her it was alright to eat. He stretched slowly across her, reaching for a salt shaker. He felt nothing as he passed her plate, but once he passed over her goblet, his hand burned. He grabbed the salt and pulled his hand back. As he did, he whispered, "Goblet."

She nodded slightly and moved her goblet to the other side of her plate, closer to Harry. Ron's eyes lit up in anticipation when she picked up the goblet, then his expression fell when she set it down again. Needing a bit of a diversion, Harry looked up the table at the area where the first years were seated.

He smiled and silently sent a cracking hex up the table. One of the pitcher's near the end of the table exploded, showering everyone around it with pumpkin juice. Like so many of the spells Harry could cast, it was very nearly invisible, unless he wanted it to be seen. Several of the first years jumped up and a few started to cry, causing heads to turn towards the disturbance.

Professor McGonagall got up from the Head table to calm the first year students, thinking it was a burst of accidental magic from one of them.

Only Hermione, Neville and Ginny saw Harry place a hand on Hermione's goblet. Only the three saw his hand glow faintly. Harry shot a warning look to Ginny and Neville. Both nodded. This was something he'd explain another time.

Harry leaned over to Hermione and whispered, "It's all safe now, Hermione. You can drink your pumpkin juice."

As he started to pull back from her, she kissed him on the cheek. She knew the potion she took would have protected her, but had been concerned anyway. Somehow, she thought, Harry had replaced the potion laced juice with untainted juice.

Harry smiled and lifted his goblet. She lifted hers and they clinked them together before each took a drink.

Across the table, Ron watched Hermione, a smile of satisfaction on his face. He leaned back from the table and crossed his arms across his chest as if waiting expectantly for something to happen.

Harry and Hermione finished their meal and sat back, satisfied. Under the table, Hermione laid her hand on Harry's leg once more. They knew that Ron was supposed to slip some kind of potion to Hermione, with Dumbledore's approval, and that the potion was supposed to control her in some

way, but they didn't know what type of potion it was. There were several different options to choose from, according to Tonks. The one Tonks seemed to believe they would use was the *Liquid Imperio*, which turned the drinker into a mindless automaton.

Turning to Neville and Ginny, Harry asked, "So what's the rumor on the new Defense Teacher? Anyone know?"

Ginny shook her head, but Neville spoke up. "My Gran says that we have another Government appointee this year. Gran's a substitute member of the Board of Governors. She was present when Minister Fudge offered the services of a former Ministry employee."

Ron snorted. "Sounds like another Umbridge, if you ask me."

Ginny muttered, "Just your type, Ronald."

Harry frowned. Another government employee? He rubbed a finger over the covered scars on his hand.

As people finished their meals, plates, goblets and platters vanished, one at a time, from the tables. When the last of the tables was finally cleared, all heads turned expectantly to the Head table.

Professor Dumbledore stood and waited for the students to quiet down.

"I have a few start of term announcements which I should like to make before you all run off to your dorms. First of all, the Forbidden Forest is just that, forbidden, to all who wish to survive for another school year. Mr. Filch informs me that he has added all of the product line of Weasley Wizarding Wheezes to the banned items list and asks me to remind all students that there is no casting of magic within the school hallways unless under direct teacher supervision.

"Our latest Defense Against the Dark Arts Teacher had been delayed, but assures me she will arrive for tomorrow's class.

"Last year, an illegal club was formed within the school for the express purpose of teaching the defense subject. While I cannot condone unsanctioned clubs within the school, I am pleased to note that the members of that group achieved the highest defense scores seen by this school in over two hundred years.

"This year, I intend to legitimize that club and opening it's membership up to anyone interested. Professor Snape has graciously consented to sponsor the club. Mr. Harry Potter will be its leader..."

Harry's head snapped up and his eyes turned hard.

"And finally..." Dumbledore trailed off as a disturbance at the Slytherin table caused heads to whip around.

“Ronald! Where is he? I can’t see him!” a voice cried out, the words reverberating around the hall. A figure scrambled from the Slytherin bench and started climbing over the Ravenclaw table in a bid to reach the Gryffindor table.

Ron paled as Millicent Bulstrode kicked a fourth year Ravenclaw out of her way and jumped to the floor.

Dumbledore frowned as the corpulent Slytherin reached Ron. Snape stood up, his expression darkening. Millicent grabbed Ron and pulled him out of his seat. Tossing him to the floor, she started fumbling with his belt, while shouting how much she adored him.

“That explains much,” Harry murmured quietly, while an astonished Hermione watched Ron try to get away, her jaw nearly on the table.

Ron scrambled frantically as his pants were pulled off his legs. He managed to push her off long enough to spring to his feet, sans pants and other under garments. There was a flash of light as Colin Creevey took a photo of the couple.

Screaming, Ron ran from the Great Hall with Millicent close behind. The students sat, shocked for a moment. From the entrance to the hall came a piercing scream, followed by Millicent’s shout of, “Ron! Don’t run. Don’t leave me. I love you! Come back!”

“Blimey! I never knew Millicent could move that fast,” Seamus said loudly.

His comment was heard throughout the hall and everyone erupted into laughter. Harry suddenly found himself holding Hermione, who had tears of mirth running down her face. When Harry had calmed himself, he glanced up at the Head table. Most of the teachers seemed to be trying to control their own laughter, but two people in particular did not seem to find it funny. Albus Dumbledore and Severus Snape.

Dumbledore nodded to Minerva and she shouted over the sound of the students. “Prefects, escort your students to their houses, please!”

Ginny and Colin, the fifth year prefects, marched up the table to collect the first years. Ginny glanced back at Hermione for a moment with a questioning look. Hermione shook her head and left the hall with Harry.

“All right, you lot of midgets, follow me!” Ginny yelled, trying to round up the first years.

Harry walked with Hermione up to the common room. “Well now we know what they were going to slip you Hermione,” he murmured softly.

She nodded bleakly, upset that they were going to slip her a love potion, and at the same time amused at the way Harry turned it around on Ron.

“Millicent...” she murmured. “You know, Harry Potter... You are truly evil and, more importantly, you are your father’s son. I expected to rely on the neutralizer, not have you swap the

potion to someone else's goblet."

"I'm sorry, Hermione, but if I can help you, I'll do it. Maybe I'm too overprotective..."

She stopped him and pulled him into a darkened corner. "Harry, you've given me all sorts of ways to protecting myself. I'm glad you believe in me enough to give me what I need to do it, but it's not overprotective to want to shield someone you love from harm. Now, let's get up to our dorms and cast those wards."

Harry nodded. "After I cast my wards I want to see what I can figure out about the wards around Hogwarts. If what I sense is right, I might be able to surprise you tonight, so keep your curtains closed."

Hermione nodded and wondered what he was up to as he led her to the portrait hole. Stepping up to the portrait, Harry gave the password and the door swung open. He stepped aside to let Hermione enter first. Starting to follow her into the common room, he spotted Ron running, several staircases below, with Millicent still on his heels. Chuckling, he stepped through the hole and closed the portrait behind him.

Looking up, Harry's heart sank as he saw head after head turn his way and watch him with distrust and, in some cases, fear.

"See you in a half hour or so?" he asked Hermione.

She nodded to him worriedly. She had not expected him to have to deal with the level of open fear displayed by his housemates. She watched his retreating back for a moment before going up to her own dorm room.

Up in the empty sixth year boys dorm, he pulled his trunk from his pocket, expanded it back to normal size, and then he double-checked its wards. Opening the trunk he pulled Hermione's concealment cloak and returned it to normal size before placing it in the trunk next to his own.

He then turned to his bed and started casting wards over it. He had chosen a multi-layered ward approach, with the last ward allowing very few people through. If someone weren't on his list of people allowed through, the last ward would be just short of lethal for anyone trying to breach it.

Heading back down to the common room, he found Hermione scribbling a quick note on the parchment containing the sorting hat's song. She looked up as he approached.

"Can I borrow Hedwig for a letter run?"

"Of course you can. We still have an hour to curfew, do you want to send that letter now?"

She nodded and folded the note carefully, sealing it with wax. Together, they left the common room and walked up to the owlery. Once there, Harry slipped Hedwig a few treats, then asked if she would like to deliver a letter for Hermione. The large bird blinked owlshly at him, then she sprang from her perch to land on Hermione's shoulder.

Chuckling, Harry said, “I think she likes you.”

“She’s the smartest owl I’ve ever met. Even when I first met her, she made me feel like she could tell what I was thinking. You’re lucky to own her, Harry,” replied Hermione.

Harry frowned. “I don’t own her, Hermione. She’s my friend. In some ways, I think she does know what I’m feeling and thinking. I owe her my life. I can’t owe that kind of debt and still own her,” he said softly, while stroking the bird on her shoulder.

With a smile of understanding, Hermione attached the letter to Hedwig’s leg and the bird took flight. Holding hands, they returned to their common room.

Shortly after they left the owlery, another owl took to wing, flying south, towards Malfoy Manor.

---

Breakfast in the Great Hall...

Harry was eating breakfast when Hermione entered the hall. She’d made a quick trip to the library for a potions book before heading down to the Great Hall. Eyeing the book, Harry couldn’t help but comment.

“Potions already, Hermione? We haven’t even gotten our schedules yet.”

She shook her head and flipped open the book then turned it so Harry could read the chapter heading: *Love and Sexual Enhancement Potions* .

Harry blushed. She laughed at his discomfit and laid a hand on his. “No silly, I’m curious how long the love potion will last. As to the others, well they’re mostly to correct certain problems that men occasionally have. I don’t think you’ll need them anytime soon.”

“So how long do they last?” he asked, curious now.

She chewed on her lip for a moment. “Most last less than a day. Two of them last a week, and there’s one that lasts for months. All of them are proscribed by the Ministry as a form of rape.”

“Well, Ron came to bed late last night, so I assume that either Millicent found him, or one of the teachers rescued him. Do any of the longer lasting potions have antidotes?”

“The week long potions do. The last one doesn’t, at least not that I can find.”

Harry nodded.

“By the way, Harry, I found the little note you left me this morning and, while it was sweet, would you mind telling me how you managed to get up the girls stairs?”

“I didn’t go up the stairs. After checking the wards last night, I tried an idea I’ve been working on. It’s a way of apparating by concentrating on a specific person, rather than a location.”



“You can’t apparate in Hogwarts. It says so in *Hogwarts: A History*,” she exclaimed loudly.

Instinctively, Harry hunkered down and looked around for a moment before turning back to her. Fortunately the Great Hall was relatively empty. “Not so loud, Hermione,” he said in a low tone. “The anti-apparation wards are fine, as far as I can determine. But they don’t seem to affect me. So yes, I can apparate in and out of the school. But that’s one skill I don’t want anyone to find out about.”

Hermione sat, stunned for a moment. A long held belief had been shot down and, in the process, it cast doubt on the information contained in her favorite book. She wasn’t sure if she should be mad at him or happy. She was mad that he was casting her book into doubt. On the other hand, if he could do one impossible thing, then killing Voldemort might not be all that dangerous for him. She chewed her lower lip as she considered the possibilities.

Harry looked at her, his eyes narrowing. He knew that look of hers and decided to put her back on track. “He’s still got experience over me, Hermione,” he murmured quietly.

She snapped back into focus, forgetting about books. “Then we’ll just have to give you the time you need to gain the experience,” she said firmly.

Harry looked up as McGonagall escorted Ron to a seat at the Gryffindor table, well away from Harry and his friends. After depositing Ron in a seat, McGonagall walked down the aisle, handing out schedules.

“Your schedules, Mr. Potter, Miss Granger,” said McGonagall, handing them their course lists.

“Professor, thank you for the schedule. Would you please pass a message along to the Headmaster for me?” Harry asked in a respectful tone.

“Of course, Mr. Potter. What would you like me to tell the Headmaster?”

“Please inform him that I will not be able to participate in any defense club this year. He will have to find another to take my place.”

McGonagall blinked in surprise. She had never known Harry to shirk from any responsibility before.

“Are you sure, Mr. Potter? The Headmaster was so set on having you take charge of the group.” she asked, worried now that Harry was deliberately setting himself apart.

“Quite sure, Professor. I seriously doubt he wants someone he believes to be turning dark to run the club. Besides, with my schedule, it simply isn’t possible,” he replied.

Frowning, McGonagall turned to Hermione. “What about you, Miss Granger? I understand you were instrumental in last year’s defense club, nearly as instrumental as Mr. Potter.”

Hermione glanced over at Harry before turning to McGonagall, “Oh no, Professor. I simply don’t

have the time this term. Besides, all I did was advise Harry on which spells to teach. He did all the real work,” she replied breathlessly.

Scowling, McGonagall nodded to the two and went back to handing out schedules. *I’ll have words with the Headmaster as soon as he showed up for the morning meal*, she thought angrily.

The Great Hall slowly filled as more students came down from their houses for breakfast. Hermione and Harry were busy comparing schedules, so they missed seeing Professor Snape escort Millicent into the hall. Millicent kept shooting pleading looks at Ron.

Harry looked up to see Snape forcing Millicent back into her seat and he started to snicker. He nudged Hermione to catch her attention and she had trouble hiding the smile after seeing how pale Ron looked. McGonagall had returned him to the common room well past curfew last night, his clothing torn to shreds and a blanket wrapped round him to cover his nakedness. He had a haunted look in his eyes when he crawled into bed.

Harry was about to slip an arm around Hermione and pull her closer when he noticed Dumbledore motioning him up to the Head table. With a sigh, he nodded and murmured to Hermione, “Wish me luck.”

As he slowly made his way up the aisle, he noted Snape glaring daggers at him. The Headmaster didn’t look all that pleased either. When he stepped up to the table Dumbledore passed him a copy of the Daily Prophet.

“Tell me Harry, what do you know about this article?”

Harry looked at the paper. It was very clear what article had Snape and Dumbledore so upset. As Harry started to read, the students realized that something unusual was in the works at the Head table and turned their attention to it.

### *Hogwarts Professor a Spy?*

*By Rita Skeeter*

*Yesterday, in an altercation on the platform for the Hogwarts Express, this reporter witnessed Hogwarts Professor Severus Snape threaten the life of student. He was then disarmed by a cloaked figure and accused of being a spy for Hogwarts Headmaster Albus Dumbledore and some covert organization called the Order of the Phoenix.*

*The figure that disarmed the Professor turned out to be none other than Harry Potter, the Boy-Who-Lived. After breaking the Professor’s wand, he stepped back amidst a group of mysteriously cloaked figures, where he instructed them to, “let it live”.*

*Mr. Potter had apparently been missing over the summer and this reporter has learned that Headmaster Dumbledore went to great lengths to find him...*

Harry handed the paper back to the Headmaster. “I would say, Sir, that Ms. Skeeter has

considerably improved her journalistic skills. Other than that, it's reasonably accurate," he said with a shrug.

"Harry, do you not understand what damage this does to our side?" asked Dumbledore in an annoyed tone.

"Damage to your plans perhaps, Headmaster. It has no impact on me whatsoever. Tell me, why are you ignoring the fact that one of your Professors assaulted a student in public yesterday, threatening her in front of dozens of witnesses? I wonder what the Board of Governors would say about your leadership when you allow a Professor to assault a student in public?" asked Harry in a cold voice.

"Professor Snape wouldn't hurt Miss Granger, Harry, of that I assure you," replied Dumbledore, somewhat confused by being put on the defensive.

"Unlike you, Sir, I don't share your faith in Snape. Had there been any Auror's present, he would be in a holding cell at the Ministry right now. Besides, he did hurt her. I've seen the bruises for myself, both on her arm, and at the base of her neck. Now, I'll ask you again, why are you bothering me with trivial concerns when you employ a sadist in your school?" he asked again, trying very hard to control his temper.

"That's Professor Snape, Harry, and he is not a sadist. He is a respected member of our faculty and deserves your respect," replied Dumbledore.

"You are avoiding the issue, Headmaster. He injured a student. Might I add, he did it publicly, off school property and before school term began? I assure you, the only reason why charges have not been pressed against him is because Hermione asked me not to," Harry replied flatly.

Snape was livid. He started to stand, but Dumbledore waved him back to his seat. A gasp had gone through the student body with Harry's last comment. Dumbledore looked up and realized he needed to change the subject matter to avoid any further embarrassing comments.

"Professor McGonagall informs me you do not wish to lead the Defense club, is that correct, Harry?" he asked turning his eyes to a maximum twinkle.

"Quite correct, Headmaster. To be honest, I have no desire to cooperate with you in any matter, considering your malicious interview," he replied frostily.

"Ah, I see. You are upset about what I said in the Prophet. I assure you, my boy, Ms. Skeeter badly misquoted me," Dumbledore replied smoothly.

"Perhaps she did, but you volunteered for that interview, she didn't eavesdrop on you. So if I seem less than willing to work with you this year, you'll understand why," Harry replied.

Harry felt a tingle at the back of his head as his warning ward was breached. He slammed his primary Occlumency shields into place and quickly built a deflective shield, mentally thanking

Miles, his tutor.

Dumbledore's vision shifted as he tried to probe Harry's mind.

He looked down a dimly lit hall with torches sputtering on the walls between portraits. A darkened stairway could be seen in the distance. A large group of students walked towards him and he felt his lips curl in a sneer. Oh how he loathed the little brats!

Blinking rapidly, Dumbledore broke himself out of the strange vision. He looked at Harry and thought, just for a moment, that the young man had been smiling.

"Very well Harry, run along to your classes. I would like to see you after the evening meal, however. We still have much to discuss," Dumbledore said, still confused by what he had seen. *What did it mean?* He wondered as he watched Harry walk away.

From one end of the Slytherin table, Draco Malfoy watched Harry as well.

---

Breakfast at Grimmauld Place...

Remus, Tonks and the Grangers were enjoying an early breakfast. Dan and Emma had just finished talking about putting their stuff in storage and their home on the market so they could stay at Grimmauld without worrying about their home, when Hedwig flew into the kitchen and landed near Remus.

A little puzzled, Remus removed the note from her leg, while Tonks fed her choice bits of bacon.

"Gone one day and already he's writing you, Remus. Now if only we could teach Hermione to do that," said Dan with a laugh. Emma smiled, and then poked him in the ribs for making fun of their daughter.

"It's not from Harry, it's from Hermione," Remus said as he quickly read the note.

"Hermione? She wrote a note to you? What's wrong?" asked a worried Emma.

"She asks me to get involved in a research project. It seems that this year's sorting hat song may also involve a bit of prophecy in it. She's concerned because she seems to think it refers to Harry, and all of us," he said, passing the note to Dan, who read it quickly.

"Interesting. It's a bit far fetched, but I can see some similarities," Dan murmured thoughtfully.

Remus scribbled a quick note to Hermione and attached it to Hedwig's leg. Nodding, the bird took another piece of bacon from Tonks before taking flight.

"True, it's farfetched, but it's not like I have a job to go to. I'll start looking into this. If there's one thing I've learned about your daughter, it's to respect her mind," he replied.

“She gets that from her mother,” Emma said smugly.

Dan tried to glare at her, but couldn’t hold it as he started laughing.

---

Malfoy Manor...

Lucius Malfoy bowed low before Voldemort before standing again.

“What news do you bring, Lucius?” asked Voldemort in a low monotone.

“One of our spies in Hogwarts has confirmed several items, my Lord. They have confirmed that my son is attending classes. There are also signs that Harry Potter and one of his friends, a Ronald Weasley, are fighting. The boy is isolating himself from those around him.”

“Is that all, Lucius?”

“No, my Lord. According to newspaper reports, there is a distinct possibility that Severus Snape may be working for Dumbledore as a spy.”

Voldemort pounded a fist on the side of his chair. “A spy? Summon Snape and Prepare some Veritaserum!”

Lucius bowed low. “It shall be as you command, my Lord.”

---

Defense Against the Dark Arts Class...

Hermione and Harry filed into the classroom a few minutes early, taking seats right next to each other. Something about the room disturbed Harry.

A moment later Theodore Nott came in, flanked by Crabbe and Goyle. Nott scowled at Hermione as he passed her, and sat down not far from Harry and Hermione. Nott pulled out a small bottle, which he passed to Goyle.

Goyle looked around carefully, students were still filing into the classroom, but there was no sign of the new Professor. Taking aim, he threw the bottle hard at the back of Hermione’s head. It was a good shot and it would have hit her, but Harry had spotted Goyle’s movement out of the corner of his eye.

Relying on his seeker reflexes, he snapped the bottle out of the air before it could hit her. Holding it in one hand, he spun out of his seat and faced the three Slytherin’s.

Hermione looked around, startled, as the three of them bounced from their chairs and fumbled for their wands. Nott looked up when he felt a vise like grip grab and twist his wrist cruelly. Harry had moved so quickly that no one had seen him. One moment he was in his chair, the next, he was

standing in front of Nott.

“I’m warning you, Nott, I’m not going to put up with any of you Slytherin’s this year, baby Death Nibbler’s or not. If a group of student’s can take on Voldemort’s boot lickers, including your father, and survive, you pose no threat. Pass the word, before you find your House decimated,” Harry hissed. He released his grip on Nott’s wrist and the student staggered back.

Nott glared at him from the floor and finally managed to pull his wand. “You’ll get yours Potter... The Dark Lord will see to that... Look at you, afraid to even draw your wand!” Nott spat.

“If you want to draw your wand in the presence of a Professor and threaten another student, that’s your problem Nott. But then, Voldemort doesn’t exactly recruit intelligent lackeys, does he?” Harry replied nonchalantly as he turned away and walked towards his desk.

With his back turned, Nott figured his chances and snarled at his housemates, “Get him!”

Crabbe and Goyle both raised their wands, and then froze. Harry rolled hard to one side and came up in a crouch, his wand out and aiming at empty space. Hermione had rolled out of her seat and was aiming at Nott.

There was a swish of cloth as an invisibility cloak fell to the floor, revealing the new Defense Against the Dark Arts Professor.

She was a tall woman with black hair, just starting to streak with gray. Her olive complexion glowed in the light of the classroom, and her intense, violet colored eyes took in the scene before her with great interest. No one would ever accuse her of being a great beauty, but her appearance was striking and her movements so graceful that she reminded Harry of some of the Aurors he had known.

“Bravo, Mr. Potter. Not only did you refrain from pulling your wand until necessary, but when you finally did, you correctly aimed it at the greatest threat. Now, may I see the bottle that Mr. Goyle hurled at Miss Granger?”

Harry stood and flexed his wrist slightly, retracting his wand. The Professor’s eyes widened slightly and she nodded in approval. Harry handed her the bottle.

Holding the bottle up and checking the color of the contents, she nodded. Removing the cork, she sniffed it carefully, before replacing it and walking towards the three Slytherin’s.

She removed their wands before releasing them from stasis. “You three, fifty points from Slytherin... each. And a month’s detention with Mr. Filch, I think. Now, I expect you to go straight to the Headmaster’s office and tell him I’ve dismissed you from class for the rest of the year for attempting to cause severe injury to another student. This is NEWT level Defense and I will not have this foolishness in my class. Your Head of House may allow it, but I will not.”

Crabbe, Goyle and Nott blinked at her in surprise. One hundred and fifty points down in their first

class and an automatic failure? No one did that to a Slytherin!

“MOVE IT,” barked the Professor. She watched them run from the room, then she turned and picked up her invisibility cloak and walked to front of the classroom.

“Very well then, I am Professor Romany Blackthorne and this is your NEWT level Defense Against the Dark Arts class. Let me make a few things clear. This class will concentrate on more practical aspects of Defensive magic than theory.

“I will be giving out homework, but the theoretical aspects will constitute a lower portion of your grade than the practical. From what I can see, except for your third year, your previous defense teachers have been all seriously lacking. That’s going to change! We’re at war, and you people are going to learn how to defend yourselves.

“Now that I have your attention, we’re going to start with the basics. Mr. Potter, you knew I was under an invisibility cloak. How?”

“Um... Well, Professor, there were a couple of indicators. First, you made some noise as you moved to cover the three Slytherin students. Second, as you passed by one of the wall torches, you cast a shadow for a brief moment...”

“Excellent, Mr. Potter. Take ten points for Gryffindor. Now, concealment...”

Harry leaned back in relief as Professor Blackthorne continued her lecture. He was glad she had accepted his answer. The real answer, he felt, would have been harder for her to accept. Harry had sensed her presence there as plain as day. Her aura was quite noticeable.

Harry centered himself and reached out with his magical senses. Blackthorne paced in front of the class as she explained some of the basic methods of concealment. She paused for a moment and frowned, as if she felt something, before continuing on with her lecture. Harry quickly pulled back. He had touched the edge of a ward he had never heard about before. He wasn’t sure if he had triggered it, but it was coming from the Professor.

At the end of the class, Harry and Hermione were both surprised to hear Professor Blackthorne call their names. “Mr. Potter and Miss Granger, please stay after class,” she called.

They both nodded and started to pack their bags. Since Defense had been double period, their next stop would have been to the Great Hall for a long lunch before going on to Charms and Ancient Runes in the afternoon. When Harry stood, he felt someone bump into him.

He was startled when he saw it was Draco Malfoy, and even more startled when he felt a hand slip something into his pocket. He looked into Draco’s eyes and saw something he never thought to see in those gray eyes. A plea.

Harry watched Draco pass him and leave the class room. Once the room was emptied, Professor Blackthorne waved her wand, closing the door and locking it. She then cast several privacy and

masking charms before turning her attention to the two students.

Harry and Hermione glanced at each other, puzzled, before facing the smiling Professor.

“I must say Harry, Amelia told me you were good, but I had no idea you were that good,” she said, chuckling.

Harry eyed her suspiciously. Hermione opened her mouth to ask a question, but he stopped her by placing a hand on her arm.

Sitting on the edge of her desk, Professor Blackthorne watched the two students. Hermione looked as if she wanted to trust her, but Harry was clearly suspicious.

Romany sighed. “I guess I owe five galleons to Tonks. She said you wouldn’t trust me without hearing from someone who’d been to Padfoot Manor. Miles, by the way, sends his very best to you both. He told me that he wished he had picked up Occulumency as well as you two did.”

Harry breathed a sigh of relief. “You’re with the MLE?” he asked.

“No, Harry. Actually, I’m on loan from another department at the Ministry. For now, I’m here to help you two if need be. Amelia felt you would be more comfortable if someone was close by. And please, while we’re alone, call me Romany. I’m not comfortable with the title of Professor.”

Harry nodded. “That’s good, because I’ve already got a problem.”

Hermione looked up at Harry. “What do you mean?”

“Draco Malfoy slipped something into my right robe pocket. I don’t know what it is, but I’d hate to find out the hard way it’s a portkey ticket to Voldemort. I can feel the magic on it,” Harry explained with a worried frown.

The atmosphere in the room became tense. Hermione bit her lip as she stared at Harry’s pocket. Romany frowned and stood up.

“Hermione, grab the bottom right hem of his robe and hold it taut,” the new Defense Professor ordered sharply.

Hermione quickly moved closer to Harry’s side and pulled hard on the bottom of his robe. Romany felt carefully around the pocket. Feeling the object within, she cast a minor animation spell on it, causing the parchment inside to crawl out. Once it was out of his pocket, Hermione flipped the robe and the note fluttered to the floor.

When it hit the floor, Harry cast a number of detection Charms on the note, noting that Romany did the same. Detecting nothing, and receiving a nod from the Professor, he relaxed.

“It has some sort of concealment charm on it, but that’s it,” Harry said for Hermione’s benefit.



Scooping down, he picked up the note and unfolded it.

*Potter,  
I need to talk to you. Lucius hunts my mother and me. I have no place to hide and no one else to  
turn to.  
Draco Malfoy.*

Harry passed the note to Hermione, who read it before passing it to Romany.

“I’ll get word to the Ministry to check into the whereabouts of Narcissa Malfoy,” Romany said, frowning at the parchment. “In the meantime, you two should get going. Staying in here too long would look suspicious. Just remember, you can come to me for help.”

Nodding, the two students picked up their bags and left the room.

As they walked to the Great Hall Hermione had to ask, “What are you going to do about Malfoy?”

“What can I do, Hermione? If his mother’s in trouble, I have to help him. She’s family, of a sort. She’s a Black, after all, and I’m the Head of that family. Besides, I’d like to think that if my mum was in trouble, people would help her,” he replied softly.

She smiled in understanding.

---

Headmaster’s Office, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry...

Harry sighed and looked at his now empty dinner plate. Thanks to the potion slipped to Millicent, Ron hadn’t been around to bother them all day. But now, Hermione would return to the common room alone, while he had to go to the Headmaster’s office.

After class, Harry had changed out of his robes. He now wore the casual robes of the Head of the Potter family. He’d also put his earring back in, and Hermione had insisted that he tie off his hair into a ponytail. It was all for dramatic effect he supposed, but it was needed. If he was going to meet with the Headmaster, he was going to do it on his own terms.

He smiled at Hermione and she squeezed his hand in support before he left the Great Hall. Arriving at the Headmaster’s office, he cursed when he realized that no one had given him the password. He extended his magical senses and saw two people in the office above. Concentrating on the Gargoyle, he could see the weaves of magic surrounding it. With a deft twist he shifted the spell slightly and the Gargoyle sprang into action, causing the stairway to rise.

Stepping onto the stairway, he reinforced his mental shields and set up several traps for anyone interested in a little unauthorized peeking. He smiled when the stairway reached the platform in front of the office door. Stepping off the stairs, he knocked.

“Enter,” came a voice from within.

Stepping in, Dumbledore waved him to a comfortable chair in front of the desk. Snape stood, leaning against one wall, looking at him with an expression of disgust.

Dumbledore noted Harry's robe and, in particular, the tattoo and earring, and couldn't quite hide his surprise. He found the tattoo and earring disturbing, and wondered why he hadn't noticed them before.

"Ah, Harry. It was nice of you to arrive so promptly. Might I offer you a lemon drop?" asked Dumbledore benignly.

"No, thank you, Headmaster," Harry replied politely.

"I'd like to ask you where you were this past summer, Harry. Disappearing from Privet Drive left you unprotected from attacks by Voldemort. Your relatives..."

"My relatives are little more than common criminals, Headmaster, now serving extensive prison sentences. Had I stayed with them, there is every chance I would have ended up lost in the muggle child welfare system. As to my whereabouts this past summer, they really are no concern of yours. What I do and where I go during my holidays is no business of yours," Harry interrupted in a cool tone.

"Harry, your disappearance put a significant number of the Order members at risk while they searched for you," countered Dumbledore, while trying to remain calm.

"I didn't ask them to search, Headmaster. I was perfectly safe. If they wish to risk themselves, it's no concern of mine. As a legal adult, I'm free to come and go as I please. I answer to no one," Harry said calmly.

Dumbledore frowned at the boy's uncooperative behavior. "Harry, It's vital to our efforts that we protect you. Voldemort still considers you his prime target," Dumbledore said, trying a different tack.

"I was quite safe over the summer, but since you appear to be stuck in a rut, I'll remind you that your own vaulted bird club couldn't find me. What makes you think Voldemort could? When the time comes, I will deal with Riddle without your help," Harry replied, dismissing Dumbledore's comments as if they were meaningless.

Dumbledore blinked in surprise and decided to try a more direct approach. "Tell me Harry, what do you know about the Brotherhood of Druidic Knights?"

Harry smiled sweetly at the frustrated old man. He repositioned himself on the chair so his tattoo was clearly visible, as was his Celtic cross earring. "The Brotherhood of Druidic Knights, Sir? I've never heard of them," Harry said truthfully.

"Tell me about those cloaked people you were with on the platform."

"I'm sorry, but I fail to see how any friends I have outside of Hogwarts could possibly be any

concern of yours. I would remind you that your authority ends at the walls of this school.”

“Harry, these ‘friends’ of yours could be leading you astray.”

“Leading me astray, Sir? Oh, I see. Yes, you would think that being taught to stand on one’s own feet and demanding one’s rights would constitute being led astray, wouldn’t you?” Harry asked with disdain.

Dumbledore sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose before looking at the hostile youth again. “Harry, you must trust me. I have only your best interests at heart. We want to protect you and see that nothing happens to you. The war with Voldemort has begun and you are still woefully ill prepared.

“Trust you, Headmaster?” Harry asked, cocking his head. “Like my parent’s trusted you with their infant son, who you left on the doorstep of a sadistic man like Vernon Dursley? What was it you said last year? Oh yes, ‘I knew I was condemning you to ten dark and difficult years.’ Did you think I would thank you for that?

“Protect me, you say? Then why was the Sorcerer’s stone so poorly guarded that three first year students were able to find it? Why did I have to face Voldemort at the age of eleven? Where was your ‘protection’ then?” Harry asked, sneering.

“Harry, you don’t understand...”

“Oh, I’m not finished yet, Sir. In my second year, I had to face Voldemort again, or at least his boyhood memory, and face Slytherin’s little pet. Ginny Weasley nearly lost her life and, had it not been for Fawkes, who I see has left your company, I would have lost mine. In a school full of adult wizards, why was the entrance to the Chamber of Secrets never found? I understand that no one on the staff could have opened it, but I find it hard to believe that, with all your vaulted knowledge, you didn’t even know where it was.”

“I don’t know why you’re insisting on bringing up the past,” Dumbledore said harshly. “It can’t be changed...”

“In my fourth year,” Harry continued, ignoring the Headmaster’s comment for the moment, “my name was added to the Goblet of Fire, and you let it stand.”

“I couldn’t have changed it, Harry. You know...”

“What I know,” Harry interrupted, “is that you could have called the competition a draw, thereby nullifying the list of participants. Once done, the submission of names could have been repeated. Oh yes,” Harry said with a fierce grin as he noted Dumbledore’s surprised expression, “I did a little research into the Tournament’s history and found the loophole you insisted didn’t exist. Why was I forced to confront Voldemort a third time, insuring that the Dark Lord became embodied once more? Had you called the Tournament a draw, Cedric Diggory would still be alive.

“Which brings us to last year. Your insistence that Snape teach me Occlumency caused my Godfather’s death by leaving me more open to Voldemort’s mind than I was before he started his so called lessons. The man can’t teach potions to save his life...”

“How dare you, Potter,” interrupted Snape angrily.

“...and that’s a simple subject that requires following directions in a book.” Harry continued, ignoring his potion’s Professor. “He does his best to ridicule and harass anyone not in his house, while allowing his little bunch of snakes and Death Nibbler wannabe’s to harm and sabotage the other student’s efforts.

“And that brings up another point about your precious spy. If he’s so talented at both Occlumency *and* Legilimency, why was a poly-juiced Death Eater able to impersonate an Order member and allowed free run of this school for a full year? Why was it that I had to discover that he wasn’t who and what he said he was?

“Oh no, Headmaster, I’m not asking to change the past, I’m learning from it. Your brand of protection has killed one student, severely harmed or injured others, and put this school and everyone attending it in jeopardy. It’s caused the death of my Godfather and forced me to live with a family that took pleasure in beating and starving me.

“If you can answer all of my questions to my satisfaction, then I might, just might, think about answering yours.”

“I own you nothing, Harry,” Dumbledore said coldly. “My actions were only ever for your own good.” At Harry’s snort of disbelief, he stood angrily and leaned over his desk. “I need explain nothing to you,” he thundered, losing his composure. “My protection has kept you out of far greater danger than any you’ve experienced. I will put up with no more rule breaking or resistance from you, boy! You will re-start your lessons with Professor Snape as soon as possible...”

“Him? He couldn’t teach a newborn babe to dirty his nappies,” Harry said scornfully. “No sir, I have mastered Occlumency on my own this summer and will not accept any extra class work from either of you.”

Harry repressed the urge to grin as he felt the breaching of one of his wards and the tenuous mental tendril coming from Snape. With a covert surge, one of his traps triggered, inserting a dream loop back into Snape’s mind.

*I hope you like dreamless sleep potions, you bastard,* Harry thought.

Turning to Snape, Harry smiled broadly. “You know, Professor, legally I could have you arrested for what you’re doing. I’d suggest you stop now, unless you really want to go to Azkaban.”

Snape glared and hissed, “Let me in, Potter!”

“Why would I want to do that? Trying to make me more vulnerable to your real master again? Tell me, do you enjoy groveling before Voldemort? Do you like licking his boots? No? Oh well, perhaps you should go practice your Legilimency. Your technique is quite sloppy, you know.”

As Snape stalked towards Harry, Dumbledore held up his hand, stopping him.

“Enough, Severus,” the Headmaster said tiredly. Raising an eyebrow in question, he frowned when Snape shook his head and scowled. The Legilimency attempt hadn’t been successful.

Harry turned to face Dumbledore once more. “As you can see, your trusted spy can’t breach my shields, so you’ll understand when I tell you that I will not attend any extra ‘lessons’ with him. Should you attempt to force the issue, I will inform the Board of Governors that you are giving me preferential treatment over the other students.”

Dumbledore’s fists clenched in anger. Taking several deep, calming breaths, he controlled himself with effort. Staring at the belligerent boy before him, he wondered what had taken place during the summer to cause such distrust from a child who’d always looked up to and loved him like a respected grandfather. With a sigh, he tried again.

“Harry, I’m afraid I must insist that you remain on the school grounds this year. It’s the only way we can adequately protect you,” said Dumbledore in a gentle tone.

“Insist all you want, Headmaster. However, as I am considered an adult now, you don’t have any authority over me outside this school.”

“Harry, please try to understand...” Dumbledore began.

*This is getting old, thought Harry. Time to put an end to this interview.*

“Enough! I’ve tried being polite, but that doesn’t seem to be working, so let’s skip the tact and diplomacy. Last year, you broke faith with me. I don’t trust you, I don’t trust the Order, and I certainly don’t trust the greasy git trying to glare a hole in my back! I don’t want your help in any way, except for the matter of providing me with a standard education, as mandated by law. As Headmaster of this school, I will bow to your authority within these walls and only if it pertains strictly to the classes I am already taking. What I do in my own free time and outside of these walls is my business and you will stay out of it!

“Now, if you will excuse me,” Harry said, standing, “I still have homework to do. Goodnight Headmaster, Professor.”

As Harry exited the office, Dumbledore frowned in confusion. Harry had parried every question he had been asked, and Albus wasn’t sure how it had happened. Turning to Snape, he arched an eyebrow questioningly.

Snape stood silent for a moment, rubbing his temples. “Albus, the arrogant prig had shields the likes of which I’ve never seen before. Not only couldn’t I get in, I wasn’t even sure the spell was

working! And now I have this blinding headache,” he snarled.

“The newspaper article about you puts you in a difficult position, Severus. I won’t impose my wishes on you, but I think that you would be safe, for now, if you did not leave the castle, even if Voldemort summons you.”

Snape nodded tiredly at the old man.

Dumbledore sighed in resignation. “Very well, go get yourself a pain relief potion and some sleep. I will think on this tonight and see what we can do to convince Harry to be more cooperative.”

---

The Gryffindor Common Room...

Harry wasn’t surprised to see Millicent standing by the entrance portrait to the common room, but he wasn’t in the mood to wait for her to go away. Giving the password, the door swung open and Millicent bolted into the passageway.

“RONALD!” She bellowed as she barreled into the common room.

Ron, standing near Hermione Ginny and Neville, looked up, startled. Seeing the Slytherin running towards him, he dodged around the couch. They circled the room a few times, weaving between furniture and people before Ron dashed for the exit, Millicent close on his heels.

Spotting Harry, Ginny made room so he could sit next to Hermione. He smiled gratefully at her, and then collapsed on the couch, leaning his head back and closing his eyes. He tried to relax and beat back the anger he’d been suppressing for the past hour.

Exhausted, he opened an eye he looked at his silent friends. They all looked angry.

“Alright, what’s wrong here?” Harry asked with a sigh.

“Ron and the others have been trying to grill us about where you were this summer,” Ginny answered him quietly. He glanced at Hermione and she nodded, still upset.

He rubbed a tired hand over his face. “Look guys, I’m sorry. If I’d known it would be this hard on you, I would have tried harder to convince you to stay away from me.”

Hermione could see how tired he was, and hugged him, trying to offer her support. He wrapped both arms around her, holding her tightly. “I’m sorry,” he whispered.

“This isn’t your fault, Harry. It’s these prats,” she said, waving a hand towards the students watching them, “who’ve decided to believe Ron and Dumbledore’s interview, despite the Ministry clearing you.”

Ginny looked hesitant, but finally cleared her throat and asked what Dumbledore wanted with him.

“He wanted to know where I was this summer. He made some threats, I countered them by reminding him I was a legal adult and therefore not entirely under his control. He tried to make me agree to his idea of protection, Snape tried to break into my mind, you know, the usual stuff,” he said with a sardonic grin. “That reminds me. Hermione? There’s something I’d like you to think about.”

“What’s that?”

“An Occlumency study group. I think we both want to tell our friends what’s going on, but we can’t without putting them at risk,” he replied.

Hermione sat back thinking, while Harry, without really thinking about it, cast a privacy spell around them all, pulled out his tin whistle and started to play. He’d discovered that playing relaxing him and had begun to carry the tin whistle everywhere he went,

Hermione grinned at Ginny and Neville as they stared at Harry in astonishment. In all the years they’d known him, they’d never suspected that he had any sort of musical ability. Neville was about to say something when Ginny hushed him with a look.

Harry’s music moved from a fast paced tune to a slow Irish ballad. His eyes were closed and his face serene as the music lulled him and the others. Hermione snuggled closer to Harry, as the sweet tones of his music filled the privacy sphere.

Neville and Ginny enjoyed the sweet sound of the tin whistle so much, neither noticed they were holding hands.

---

Potions with Snape...

The next morning at breakfast Harry finally broached a topic he had been dreading to bring up with Hermione. “I was sort of wondering... do you think maybe I should just drop potions?” he asked, while buttering some toast.

Hermione froze for a moment and her eyes turned hard. Ginny and Neville glanced at each other and leaned away from Mount Hermione as she erupted.

She turned to Harry slowly and he quailed under her unwavering gaze. “You. Are. Not. Dropping. Potions,” she said slowly.

*OOPS! Harry thought. This was a really bad idea. All right, let’s see if I can fix this.*

“Well, I was sort of wondering, you know, I could just read a few books and take the test. Sort of self study?” He said hopefully.

*WRONG THING TO SAY!* His mind screamed at him. Mount Hermione was close to releasing a full scale pyroclastic cloud.

He sighed under her hard gaze. “Alright, I won’t drop it. I just thought it would be a good way to avoid Snape.”

Her eyes softened a little, but they remained narrowed and fixed firmly on him. He looked down at his hands, and for some reason, Hermione thought he looked like a little boy caught with his hand in the cookie jar. Laughing, she offered him a hand as she stood. They had double Potions first today. Sighing he took her hand and followed her off to class.

Slipping into the classroom, Harry took a seat next to Hermione’s so he could be her partner and looked around the room. There weren’t many in NEWT potions, so few, in fact, that they had combined all of the previous potion classes into one class of just eight students.

Harry whispered a quick warning to Hermione to keep her mental shields up in class. She nodded and went about pulling out her book and parchment

The door slammed open and Snape stormed into the room. “This is sixth year NEWT potions, which means that you all obtained an outstanding on your OWL tests. How some of you managed such a score without resorting to cheating is beyond me,” Snape said, glaring at Harry.

Harry returned his glare with a look of cool indifference.

“First thing we’re going to do is prevent certain persons from cheating any longer. Potter! Swap places with Zabini.”

Harry gathered up his books and smiled weakly at Hermione, before taking Zabini’s position as lab partner to Draco Malfoy. Inwardly, Harry smiled. The change in seats could actually work to his advantage. Nodding coolly to Malfoy, he turned his attention back to Snape.

“Today we will begin a very difficult potion. A single mistake will result in an...unpleasant reaction. Since you will all be testing your own potions on yourselves, I suggest you pay attention,” he sneered.

“On the board you will find directions for brewing the Draught of Knowledge. This particular potion will enable you to enhance your mental abilities for a 24-hour period. Under the potion’s influence, anything you learn will be retained perfectly. This potion is highly addictive, meaning it can only be used infrequently.

“Now copy the brewing instructions and begin.” With a flick of his wand, the board flipped over and the instructions appeared.

Harry turned to Draco and said quietly, “If you trust me, I’ll copy the instructions for us both while you get the ingredients.”

With a slightly puzzled look, Draco nodded and walked off towards the ingredient cabinet.

When he returned to his cauldron, he was surprised to find a parchment, containing the potion’s instructions, on his desk. While Harry was busy preparing the basic ingredients, he quickly



scanned the directions. At the bottom of the parchment was an extra line that caused his eyes to widen.

I read your note. Meet me by the statue of Samantha the Siren in the courtyard tonight at seven pm to talk. Come alone. HP

Draco glanced around nervously for a moment before looking down at the parchment again. Harry's note had vanished from sight. Bending over to work on the potion, he managed to catch Harry's eye long enough to nod at him.

The rest of the class continued without any problems and, surprisingly, Harry didn't lose a single point for Gryffindor.

---

Hogwarts Infirmary...

Madam Pomfrey was busy at her desk when she heard a knock on her open door. Looking up, she smiled at her friend, Minerva McGonagall.

"Minerva, come in. Would you like some tea? I was about to have some for myself."

"Thank you Poppy, some tea would be nice. I stopped by to see if you had finished those requisition forms?"

"I'm finishing them now. If you can wait a few minutes, I'll have them all for you. Honestly, sometimes I think this job is more paperwork than anything else," she exclaimed.

Minerva chuckled. "Tell me about it. At least your beds are empty right now."

"Oh, well, that's because we're only two days into the new term, Minnie. All I see this early in the term are cases of homesickness and the occasional snuffle. Wait 'til Quidditch season starts. The beds will fill up then. I'm sure your lions will be among them, particularly Mr. Potter."

Minerva smiled. Harry had spent more than his fair share of time in the infirmary during his years at school.

"Speaking of Mr. Potter, did you see him yesterday? I barely recognized the lad, Minnie. He's shot up to nearly six foot, if he's grown an inch, and added an incredible amount of upper body mass. His face may be his father's, but James never looked like that. He's going to have every girl in the school chasing him this year."

"Yes... well, I hope you won't see much of him this year, Poppy. The Headmaster has refused to lift his Quidditch ban, so he won't be playing."

Poppy frowned. "Just what's going on between the Headmaster and Harry? I know it's none of my business, but I nearly died when I read that interview."

Minerva looked thoughtful for a moment, and then she cast a privacy charm, causing the Medi-Witch to raise her eyebrows in question.

“Poppy, I can honestly say that I do not understand what Albus is doing. He’s deliberately set himself on a path that will lead to a confrontation between himself and Mr. Potter. I hate to say this, but he’s set most of my own house against the lad. I’m quite afraid for all of them at this point. It’s not going to be a pleasant year.”

Poppy snorted. “Young Harry hasn’t had a pleasant year since attending Hogwarts. In fact, each year has gotten worse. I will say this much though, should he end up under my care, my healer’s oath is more important than my loyalty to the school.”

Minerva leaned back and sighed in relief. She and Poppy had been friends for years, and their friendship had reached the point where things could be left unsaid and still be understood. Smiling gratefully at Poppy, she turned the discussion to the new batch of first years, her true reason for the meeting accomplished.

---

Hogwarts Courtyard, not far from Samantha the Siren...

Harry sat on a nearby bench playing his tin whistle. Being outside, he didn’t put up a privacy charm. One of the nice things about his music was that it allowed him to think while playing. The lighthearted tune he was currently playing left his mind free to work on detecting nearby magic. He smiled inwardly as he detected a few nearby sources of magic. The one he was most interested in was still approaching.

He had added one particular item to his wardrobe for this evening, one he didn’t know if he’d need or if Malfoy would recognize. Harry stopped playing as a figure approached.

“Potter,” Draco said by way of greeting

“Malfoy.”

Draco sat on the bench as far away from Harry as he could. He rubbed his cheek absently, unsure where to start or even if the meeting was a good idea.

Harry sensed the hesitation in Draco and decided to cut to the chase. “Tell me what’s going on, Malfoy. What’s wrong with your mum?”

Draco looked startled. His note hadn’t said anything about his mother, except that they were both being hunted.

When he didn’t respond, Harry prodded him again. “I can’t help you if I don’t know what is going on...”

Draco sighed and nodded. “It started a long time ago, Potter. My father was never a gentle man,

neither to my mother, or myself. It got worse as I got older. When I came home from Hogwarts for my first holiday, I found he'd taken to drugging and beating my mother. I think she had threatened to leave him and he took steps to prevent it.

“As the years progressed, he seemed to think I would join him as a Death Eater, and his treatment of my mother became more cruel. Sometimes he'd cast the Cruciatus curse on her, and he really enjoyed parading his doxies in front of her, taunting her. Of course, being controlled by potions and the *Imperio* us curse, she never said a word.

“When he went to Azkaban, one of his fellow Death Eaters told us that the Dark Lord would be moving into our manor house, and it was expected that I would take my father's place. When the man left, I took my mother and fled. I've heard that the Dark Lord has ordered Lucius to kill my mother and bring me back to take the Dark Mark. If I don't, I'll be killed.

“We Malfoy's have spent years buying influence, Potter. I've since discovered that, when you're on the run with little money, your friends vanish. My mother needs help. I don't have enough money to pay for the healing she needs. All I can do is keep buying her the addictive potions.

“I went to Dumbledore at the end of last term, looking for help. He said he'd help get my mother out and healed, if I'd agree to take the Dark Mark and become a spy for him. I don't want to be another Snape,” he said vehemently.

Harry sat silently for a moment. “You and I have never been friends, Malfoy,” Harry said quietly. “Why ask for my help?”

Draco looked at him then laughed weakly. “Honestly, I don't know. I don't like you and may never like you. I don't like those half breeds and mudbloods you hang around with either. But I do know one thing. You are the only person I am aware of who's actively working against the Dark Lord. I thought maybe...” he trailed off, not really knowing what else he could say.

“Are you willing to trust me enough to tell me where you've hidden your mother?”

Draco took a deep breath and nodded. He'd thought about this for days, and knew he'd have to give Harry the information and trust that he would help his mother. He placed a slip of parchment on the bench between them and waited.

Harry performed a quick scan of the parchment and, finding no magic surrounding it, he picked it up and placed it in his pocket.

“Malfoy, I'm going to have this checked out. If what you've said is true, I'll see that your mother is taken to a place of safety and the best healers looking after her. I'll give her refuge and offer the same thing to you, but under two conditions. If this checks out, she should be safe in a few days.”

“What conditions?” Draco asked, annoyed and a bit nervous.

“Simple really, Malfoy. You once offered me a handshake once and I refused. Today, I suggest

that we start over with a new handshake. The second condition will be harder for you, but I ask you to try to learn that full bloods aren't the best of the Wizarding world."

When Draco's expression hardened and he opened his mouth to comment, Harry cut him off.

"Your father's a full blood, Malfoy. If full bloods are so worthy, why are you and your mother fleeing from him? Why does your father bow and scrape to Voldemort, a known half blood? Nott, Crabbe and Goyle are all full bloods, yet they look at you as though you're trash. Are they right, then?" Harry asked sharply.

Draco blew out a frustrated breath, unable to counter Harry's claims. His shoulders slumped and he conceded the point.

"It's a big world out there, Malfoy and everyone, full blood, half blood, muggle born and muggle alike have to live in it. Besides, I can't have you romping around my sanctuary, insulting my girlfriend, can I?"

Draco swayed with relief. He thought about Harry's conditions and, though he knew it would be hard, he also knew he'd do his best to abide by them. He'd do anything he had to, if it kept his mother safe. Finally, he extended his hand to Harry.

"Hello, I'm Draco Malfoy."

Harry reached out and grabbed his hand. "Harry Potter, or just Harry to my friends."

Draco smiled weakly as he stood up. Then his eyes narrowed and he looked at Harry again.

"Harry," he said in a snooty tone, "I do not romp."

Harry blinked at him in surprise and started to laugh. Draco looked sheepish for a moment before, he too, started to laugh.

As the laughter ebbed away, Draco looked at Harry curiously. "Can I ask why you're doing this?"

"It's simple really, Draco. You're family."

Draco's jaw dropped open. "B-B-But I'm sure there's no relation between the Potter and Malfoy lines."

Harry held up his right hand, revealing the signet ring bearing the Black Family crest. Draco paled.

"Yes Draco, by a strange quirk of fate, I'm now the Head of the Black family. I don't have much experience with family life, but it has to be different than what Dumbledore made me endure. As such, I intend to protect my family, and that includes you and your mum," Harry said fervently. "Don't worry. Your mum will be well taken care of and you'll see her again over the holiday. Hopefully, she'll be much better then."

Draco nodded absently, his mind whirling with conflicting thoughts and emotions.

“One other thing, Draco. A group of us will be getting together to study Occlumency. I’d like you to join. Once you’ve mastered it, you’ll be better able to deal with what’s going on. You don’t have too, but I’d like it if you were there.”

“I’ll think about it Harry, but you know Slytherins and Gryffindor’s don’t mix.”

“I suspect we’re both outcasts in our own Houses now, Draco. I know I am at any rate. It hasn’t come to open war yet, but I suspect it will, eventually.”

Draco looked down and scuffed a foot in the grass. “It will come, Harry,” he said quietly. “It has to. I don’t know who it is, but I know the Dark Lord has at least one servant in your House.”

Harry looked up sharply at him, then nodded in thanks. Strangely enough, Harry wasn’t as shocked by the idea as he thought he might be. Wormtail’s defection and betrayal of his parents had set the stage for all Gryffindors to be at risk.

“Thank you for the warning. I’ll let you know when your mum’s safe.”

“Thanks, Harry. G’night.”

“‘Night, Draco.”

Harry leaned back on the bench and considered everything Draco had told him as he watched the pale young man walk away.

As the quiet night descended around him, he smiled slightly and said, “Alright Hermione, Romany, you can both come out from under the cloaks now.”

He heard the distinctive swish of two invisibility cloaks being removed and chuckled lightly.

Hermione draped the cloak over her arm and sat down next to Harry, while Romany simply walked over to stare at him.

“I know you didn’t hear me or see my shadow that time, Mr. Potter. You saw my aura, didn’t you?” she asked softly. Romany didn’t know whether to be pleased or annoyed.

Harry wrapped an arm around Hermione’s shoulders. “Professor, you know as well as I that hiding one’s abilities is a good defensive measure,” he said with a cheeky grin. “All amusements aside however, I’ve kept a lot of my abilities hidden from all but a select few, even Amelia. I haven’t hidden them because they are dark, Romany. I hide them to protect myself and my friends.”

“An excellent point, Harry. However, since we’re on the subject, is there anything else I *should* know about?” she asked curiously.

Hermione looked up at Harry and noted his frown as he debated with himself. “Harry, you have to

tell her. As your Professor, she has to know in order to protect you and the other students,” she said.

“I suppose you’re right,” he said reluctantly. Turning towards Romany, he looked down with an embarrassed expression. “Professor... I have a bit of a power problem. Have you read the reports the Aurors made to the Ministry over the summer about the fact that I wouldn’t duel with them, except defensively?”

Romany remembered reading the reports after being briefed on her assignment at Hogwarts. She’d thought it strange at the time and had puzzled over it to no avail. Nodding and motioning for him to continue, she waited for the pieces of the puzzle to fall into place.

He looked at her then and his eyes took a far away, lost look. “Every spell I cast is strong, too strong. In Diagon Alley, when I faced down those Death Eaters, my simple *Reducto* r curse blew through their shields. It didn’t just blow the arm off the shoulder of that one Death Eater, it blew it, and the wand it held, apart. You need to know this because, if you set me against a student in a class duel, I could accidentally kill someone.”

“Have you tried controlling the amount of power you put into a spell?” Romany asked.

Harry blinked at her with a dumbfounded expression on his face. “Is that even possible? How come I’ve never heard of such a thing?”

“It’s pretty rare, Harry. In fact, I don’t know anyone who’s ever needed to learn it. But now I’m curious. Why do you have so much power all of a sudden? I’ve read your record and, while your Defense scores have always blown away the curve, there’s never been anything to suggest this kind of power,” Romany said.

Hermione felt him tense up at the question. This was going to dredge up some issues he didn’t want to really talk about it.

“Do you want me to explain it to her?” she asked gently when he turned to look at her.

Running a hand through his hair he nodded. “Thanks, Hermione. I think I’ll go play for a bit.”

Hermione watched him walk to a bench about fifty feet away and pull out his tin whistle. Slowly, the pure strains of music wafted over the two of them.

“Touchy subject. I didn’t know I was going to upset him,” Romany murmured apologetically.

Hermione looked at the older woman for a long moment. “It brings up some painful issues that he’s only just begun to come to grips with. But to answer your question, Harry, at the beginning of the summer, underwent his Matura. He was very ill for a long time and it nearly killed him.”

“But that’s impossible! He should have undergone the Matura at ten, not at sixteen!” Romany protested.

“His home life before coming to Hogwarts was different from most... it’s probably why his Matura was so delayed... Oh bloody hell, there’s no polite way to say this. The muggles he lived with abused, starved and beat him. You read the interview Dumbledore gave. That much of it was true, at least. Harry’s life before Hogwarts was brutal at best. Anyway, he had a long, very delayed Matura, which explains his power jump.”

“How powerful is he, Hermione?” asked Romany, watching the boy... no, young man, quietly playing the tin whistle.

“Honestly Romany, I don’t think anyone’s ever had the amount of power that Harry now possesses, and I think it terrifies him. How powerful is he? You’ll have to see for yourself. Just go slow with him, let him come to trust you and he’ll be more open with you. The one lesson you need to learn about him is, if you think it’s impossible, he’ll show you it can be done. He’s already done some things I was positive were impossible,” she replied softly.

Romany sat down next to Hermione and watched Harry play his instrument while she thought. There had been a few hints here and there in his file, but nothing that stood out and said anything directly about his abilities. She’d read about his life with the muggles and reviewed the extensive medical records he’d amassed over the years he had spent with them. That level of abuse had to leave some kind of mark on a person. Maybe it wouldn’t be a bad idea to ask Amelia to consult with a mind healer from St. Mungos. Child abuse in the wizarding world wasn’t unheard of, but it was fairly rare due to the possibilities of accidental magic in retaliation.

Several minutes passed before Romany turned to the young witch sitting beside her. “I think it’s time to rejoin your young man, Hermione.”

The two stood and walked over to sit on the bench with Harry. He stopped playing and shrunk the tin whistle before putting it in his pocket.

“Harry,” began Romany, “I think I can help you with the power problem. That is, if you’re willing to trust me enough to let me help you.”

Hermione squeezed arm gently. He looked at her and smiled, then turned to Romany and nodded.

“Romany can you get in touch with Tonks,” Harry asked, pulling out the parchment Draco had given him earlier, “and ask her to check out this address?”

She took the parchment from him and nodded. “That’s simple enough.”

“Tell Tonks that if Narcissa is there and in the shape Malfoy says she is in, to get her to a healer, then to the London house.” Harry paused and frowned. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I have to go tell the weasel that’s trying to get into my trunk that it’s bad for his health,” Harry said, standing and walking off.

Romany scowled as she watched Harry’s retreating back. “A Weasel? In Hogwarts? Hermione, what’s going on?”

Hermione stood suddenly, her eyes wide. “Ron!” she exclaimed loudly and turned to run after Harry.

“Well, that explains everything,” Romany said, throwing her arms up in frustration. “I don’t get kids today,” she muttered as she reached out and grabbed Hermione’s arm.

“Professor!” Hermione protested as she was jerked to a halt.

“Explain, Miss Granger. Weasel?”

“Harry placed wards around his trunk to keep people out. Ron Weasley must be trying to get into it,” she said in a rush, trying to jerk her arm loose.

“There, was that so hard? Well, go on then,” Romany said, releasing the young woman and watched as she bolted for the castle.

“If this Weasel boy ends up in the infirmary because of those wards, Amelia will have my ass, sure as shit,” she muttered to herself. Rubbing her now aching head, she walked towards the castle, promising herself a nice stiff shot of whiskey and a pain-relieving potion.

---

Gryffindor Tower, Sixth Year Boy’s Dorm...

Harry had slipped away earlier and Ron had no idea where he’d went. He sat on his bed pondering what to do when it hit him. The Marauders Map! Sliding out of bed, he walked over to Harry’s trunk. When he reached out to open the trunk, he hit an impenetrable barrier some six inches shy of the top.

Ron growled in frustration and ran his hands over the barrier. Finding no breaks in it, he put all his weight behind one hand and tried to force his way through.

His hand seemed to slide, very slowly, through the barrier and Ron grinned in triumph. His victory was short lived however as his hand became warm, then turn hot. Yelping, he pulled his hand away from the trunk and dashed to the bathroom to run it under cold water.

When he came out of the bathroom, he found Harry leaning against a wall, his arms crossed, staring at him. “That was your first warning, Weasley. Effective anti-theft charm, don’t you agree? Each time a person attempts it, the response gets more violent until they’re eventually knocked into a coma,” Harry said, coldly.

“I want to know what you’re hiding in that trunk, Potter!” snapped Ron. “It’s probably some dark art object you’re using to control ‘Mione!”

“Oh come off it, Weasley. She’s made her choice. She’s her own person and has the right to choose. If you have a problem with that, then I pity the girl stupid enough to go out with you,” Harry replied with disdain.



Watching as Ron's face turned purple with rage, Harry shook his head and left the dorm room.

---

## Authors Notes:

A couple points that should be made about people making suggestions. It's not that we mind the suggestions, but people tend to make them about potential stuff to come in the next chapter. As this chapter (5) is published, chapters 6, 7 and 8, are completed and in the editing process. So you see, there is always a minimum of three chapters written already. We have an outline which we are following as closely as possible.

This story is moving slowly, but that's because this story is so AU there is a lot of back filling and characterization to do. So the time line moves slowly. In the end, that means more chapters for you, our greedy little readers. I don't think you'll complain about that.

The last known brotherhood member died out long before Merlin was born. I seriously doubt anyone will see the real brotherhood show up in this story. End of comments on the brotherhood.

YES WE HATE DRACO. That's exactly why we chose to redeem him. Working with a character that you loathe in cannon and giving him a believable reason for turning good is a decent test for a writer. That's why in this story we'll redeem Draco and pair him with... a girl... read and you'll see.

A quick comment about HBP which my wife has read, but I have not. From her description JKR has built a wonderful storyline, but one I find hard to swallow. If Harry were a real person that had undergone the abuse and hardship Harry had, a real life teen would have spent the summer trying to escape his past and totally alienated from most adults. Sorry JKR I don't buy it.

Return Grimmauld Place to the Order? Now why would Harry want to do that?

How do we turn out chapters so fast? House elves, coffee, and very little sleep.

We did a lot with Blaise in our last two stories (DA and SC). This time around, he's a typical Slytherin and will stay mostly in the background. We have enough characters begging to be heard without adding more!

Kinsfire: No need to apologize. The A/N in the last chapter about ridiculing people's ship choices wasn't aimed at anyone in particular. It was just something that we felt needed to be said.

The comment in the last A/N about Snape being misunderstood was a joke. He's not misunderstood. He's an angry, ugly, greasy git of a man! And if that wasn't clear enough: In Sunset over Britain, Snape is, for the most part, in canon (Listens to the cheers). As my husband continually tells me, Snape is NOT Alan Rickman. \* Sigh \*

Wytil: We laughed when we read your review. This chapter had already been written at that point, so we found it amusing that you wanted us to send Ron's potion to Cho or Millicent. We hope you

enjoy it...Ron certainly won't!

Thanks for the reviews, everyone. We'll have the next chapter up soon!

Bob and Alyx

Pet Peeves:

This chapter's pet peeve is a simple one. Is it too much to ask people to use a spell checker? A few misspelled words out of thousands in a chapter isn't bad. But I've seen some really bad spelling.

## **Sunset Over Britain Gifts, Attacks and Tears**

Standard Disclaimer: JKR owns this universe. Its not our fault, we didn't do it really!

---

Sunset over Britain  
Chapter 6

---

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

Hermione was frantically reinforcing her mental shields. She had received a note in Arithmancy, asking her to come to the Headmaster's office. Harry watched her leave the class, his eyes filled with worry.

Stepping up to the office entrance, she noted the stairway was already extended. After climbing the stairs, she knocked on the door.

"Enter," came a voice.

Hermione opened the door and walked into the room. If she was surprised to see Professor Snape in the room, she didn't show it. She moved to take a chair in front of the Headmaster's desk.

"Ah, Miss Granger. Would you care for a lemon drop?" asked Dumbledore, his eyes twinkling merrily.

"No, thank you, Sir," she replied.

Dumbledore leaned forward in his chair and looked at the young witch over his half moon glasses. "Miss Granger, I asked you here today because I need your assistance," started Dumbledore.

"My assistance, Sir?"

"Yes my dear. I am worried about Harry Potter, you see. I am afraid he is running the risk of turning to the dark. Since you appear to be so close to him, I'd like you to let me know what he's doing, what spells he may be learning on the side, where he goes when not in class..."

Hermione stiffened in her seat. “So what you’re really asking me to do is spy on him, Headmaster?”

“I suppose you could look at it that way, Miss Granger, but I prefer saying we’re merely protecting young Harry from himself. With you being so close to him, you’d be in a perfect position to observe his actions and report back to me,” replied Dumbledore smoothly.

“I’m sorry Headmaster, but respectfully I must decline. I will not spy on my friend. To suggest such despicable thing is repellent to me,” she replied firmly.

Dumbledore leaned back in surprise. Hermione had always been such a pliable student, always respectful of authority. Where had this change from? Peering at the girl carefully, he was shocked to see her wearing earrings in the shape of Celtic crosses! *Lets try a different tact*, he thought.

“Miss Granger,” he said more firmly, “I would suggest cooperating with me in this if you wish to retain your Prefect badge. Do not think I am unaware of the fact that you’ve neglected your Prefect duties since you returned to school. You are almost assuredly going to become Head Girl, Hermione. Surely you do not wish to risk losing that?”

Hermione shrugged and unpinned her badge from her robe, and then she tossed it casually on his desk. “To be honest, Headmaster, I’d been planning to turn my badge in, anyway. It merely slipped my mind,” she replied.

“I must admit I am rather surprised, Miss Granger. I had always thought being a Prefect meant something to you,” said Dumbledore, fingering her old badge.

“Oh it did, but in the grand scheme of things, it’s not really all that important. What shall I do when it’s my turn to face Voldemort? Deduct points from him? No sir, it’s not really important and it certainly isn’t worth risking a friendship over,” she stated firmly.

“Granger,” said Snape, “I cannot believe you would be so defiant of the Headmaster’s wishes. I’d have thought that you would have been immune from Potter’s stupidities, but I see I’m wrong.”

“You are, of course, entitled to believe what you wish, Professor Snape, no matter how wrong you are,” Hermione snapped back. She was starting to get annoyed.

Dumbledore nodded to Snape, who whipped out his wand shouting, “LEGILIMENS!”

Hermione smiled sweetly up at her potions Professor. Snape ground his teeth as he hit shields far too strong for him to breach. Hermione crossed her legs and placed both hands on her knees. Silently, she thanked Harry for helping her learn Occlumency this past summer.

Snape took a step forward, as if to grab her. Before he could make another move, Hermione had her wand out and pointing at him. He halted.

“Severus, that will be enough!” barked Dumbledore. “Miss Granger, you may put your wand away. Professor Snape will not harm you in any way.”

Hermione looked back to Dumbledore. “Of course, Sir. After all, we’re not on the train platform, are we? I doubt the Professor would want to assault a student in front of you,” she said. She released her grip on her wand and it automatically resealed itself in her holster.

Dumbledore sighed heavily. The conversation had not gone the way he had planned. “Very well, Miss Granger, you may return to your class.”

Nodding, she stood and walked towards the door. Snape whipped up his wand again and shouted, “*Obliviate* !”

The beam lanced out to strike Hermione squarely in the back of her head. Slowly she turned around to see both men smiling at her.

“I wonder,” she said sharply as the men began to realize that the memory charm had failed, “would the Board of Governors take lightly to your attempt to erase my memory, Professor? I think it’s time we find out. Even if the Board approves, I do believe that the Department of Magical Law Enforcement would take a dim view of it. I warn you, do not assault me a third time. I had a most able teacher in Harry Potter this summer and I’m sure he’ll take a very dim view of your actions.”

With a last, fierce scowl, she whirled and swept from the room, leaving the two stunned men staring at the door.

Classes were just letting out when Hermione came upon Harry in the hallway. He took one look at her face and pulled her into an unused classroom. Hermione, despite being a Gryffindor, never really thought of herself as brave. Today’s meeting had, in her mind, illustrated that fact quite clearly to her.

Harry held her while she trembled in his arms. She explained what had taken place in the Headmasters office and his expression darkened. When she got to the part about the attempt to erase her memory, she finally broke down in tears.

“Harry, I’m so sorry... I thought I could be brave like you and handle this... but I’m not so sure anymore...” she sobbed as she collapsed into a seat.

Harry did a quick check of their schedules and found that they both had a free period, then lunch, so they had two hours to kill.

“Come with me,” he commanded sharply. Her head shot up in surprise at his tone. It was one she’d heard only once before, in the Department of Mysteries. She stood uncertainly and he grabbed her hand, leading her from the classroom and from the school.

He took her to a place down by the lake, a secluded place that Remus had told him about over the summer. It wasn’t far from the point where the lake went under the castle. Sitting Hermione down on a rock, he turned and faced her for a moment, his arms crossed over his chest, his expression unreadable.

She fidgeted under his intense gaze.

“Brave? Hermione Granger, you are one of the bravest people I know,” he said in an angry tone.

She looked down at her feet, shamed because she knew he was wrong. He was Harry Potter, the Boy-Who-Lived. The man who’d faced Voldemort four times, dueling with him and lived to tell about it! How could she compare herself to him?

“Hermione look at me,” he said.

Reluctantly, she looked up and met his eyes. She didn’t see the scorn or anger she’d expected in his gaze. All she saw was a soft compassion and love in his eyes.

“Hermione,” he said softly, “after the third task, when I got home, I sat alone in my bed thinking I had killed another student and I cried. I shook so hard it’s a wonder my bones held together. When Sirius... died... I went to Sir Nicholas and begged him to tell me that Sirius would come back as a ghost. I wandered the castle, unable to sleep and afraid to face my friends who’d been injured because of my stupidity. Hermione, bravery doesn’t mean having no fear of something. It means being afraid and still facing it, even when you know afterwards that you’ll shake and cry like a newborn babe...”

He sat down next to her, his intense gaze boring into her.

“The bravest thing I’ve ever seen was three people who decided to help a sick boy, even when they knew they were setting themselves up to oppose one of the strongest wizards on record,” he said.

“B-b-but you always seem so brave!” she protested.

“I’m not really... There are a lot of things that frighten me. I’m afraid of my future, I’m afraid I won’t be able to protect my friends, I’m afraid I’ll disappoint so many people who depend on me... I’m afraid of loving you and I’m even more afraid of not loving you...” he whispered.

“Gryffindor’s forward, right?” she asked with a soft smile.

Harry snorted and nodded. “Too right, and afterwards we’ll shake and cry together.”

---

The Leaky Cauldron, early morning (two days later)...

Four people stepped out of the floo in the Leaky Cauldron. All were dressed in what was quickly becoming a uniform item: a concealment cloak with a Celtic cross on the right breast. The four approached the counter where Tom, the owner, was cleaning glasses.

“I understand you are caring for a particular visitor, getting her potions and the like. I would like very much to visit with her,” said one of the figures.

Tom stared at the four of them for a moment. He recognized the particular voice belonging to an

Auror he knew, but not well.

Sighing, he pulled out a room key. “Room twenty-one. I don’t know if she is awake though.”

Tom watched the four as they went up the stairs. He shook his head. Aurors! They weren’t good for business. Turning away, he noticed one of his servers lounging about.

“Ere now! There be customers awaiting!” he shouted at the witch.

The door to room twenty-one cracked open and Tonks tossed the hood of her cloak back for a better look. All four had their wands drawn and ready as she entered.

The room wasn’t one of Tom’s best and it hadn’t been cleaned in a while. There was a small tray of potions on a nightstand next to the bed, and a half eaten bowl of stew. Clothes were strewn haphazardly about the room.

On the bed lay an obviously malnourished woman. The healer in the group pushed her way forward and cast several diagnostic spells on the prone woman, while Tonks went to examine some papers sitting on a table near a chair.

Leafing through the papers, she saw half written notes to people asking for help, and in two cases, replies turning down the appeals. *How the mighty have fallen*, she thought.

Stepping over to the healer, Tonks watched silently while the healer assessed her aunt’s condition. Finally, the healer administered two potions to the woman via an injection, cast a few spells and stepped back.

“Danni,” Tonks asked, “how is she? Can we move her?”

The healer looked up from her patient and considered the questions. “Yes, I think it’s safe to move her. I’d prefer St. Mungos, but I know that’s probably out of the question. She’s going to need a healer for at least a week, Tonks. She’s suffering from years of addiction and dealing with untreated damage from the Cruciatus curse. She’s also malnourished and dehydrated. After that? Possibly a mind healer. We’ll see once we wean her off the potions,” the healer replied.

“Danni, get what you need to support her, figure on two weeks, and I’ll meet you at the MLE. I’ll bring her to a safe house, and then bring you there as well. Let me go downstairs and talk to Tom first. I’ll be right back.”

Danni raised an eyebrow. The mention of a safe house indicated that this was a black operation. In nearly twelve years of working for the Ministry as an attached Healer to the MLE, she’d only been involved in a black operation once before. They held to one hard and fast rule: Ask no questions, ever.

When Tonks returned from talking to Tom, she released the remaining two Aurors and pulled out a portkey. Leaning over Narcissa, she took her aunt’s hand and they vanished from the room.

Arriving in the foyer of Grimmauld Place, Tonks looked around, seeing no one.

“Dobby, Winky, I need your help please,” she called.

With two small pops, Dobby and Winky were standing in front of Tonks. Dobby looked at the figure lying prone on the floor, gasped and his ears drooped.

“Winky, I need you to prepare two rooms. We have a very sick lady here and I’ll be bringing a healer to help her.”

Winky nodded quickly and vanished.

Dobby trembled. “That bad old master’s mistress, miss... Master made her beat Dobby many times, Miss Tonks,” Dobby said with a whine.

She looked at Dobby in surprise. She didn’t know much of Dobby’s history, but she knew she had to try to talk the little elf through this. “Dobby, Narcissa was forced into hurting you. She didn’t want to. Lucius was controlling her. Right now, she needs your help to get better. Harry wants her to get better. I promise you she won’t hurt you.”

“Master Harry wants this, Miss?”

“Yes, Harry wants her to get better, and we’ll need your help to see she does. Tell me, was she always mean to you?”

“Oh no, Miss, not until young Master Draco started school.”

“Well Dobby, if we can get her better, she’ll probably be nice to you again.”

Dobby smiled shyly at the Auror, looking up at her with his big, tennis ball sized eyes.

“Now if you’ll bring her to her room and get her into bed, I’ll go get the healer,” she said with a gentle smile.

“Yes Miss, Dobby will take good care of Mistress Narcissa.”

Tonks watched as the little elf levitate the unconscious woman up the stairs and into one of the unused bedrooms before using her MLE portkey.

---

Breakfast in the Great Hall, the next day...

The last few days had passed uneventfully for Harry and Hermione. Ron had spent most of his time hiding from Millicent. Neville and Ginny had found it particularly funny to allow her into the Gryffindor common room.

Harry had explained, in as few details as possible, his truce with Draco to his two Housemates.



They were upset by the idea at first, but were slowly coming to accept it.

Now, at breakfast, Harry sat with Hermione, Ginny, Neville, and surprisingly, Luna and Susan. The two girls had joined them as soon as they'd sat down. People were shocked to see non-Gryffindors at the table, but few were willing to complain to Harry about it.

As Harry ate, he listed to Hermione outline her plans for the study group. When a black and brown owl swept into the hall and dropped in front of him, he blinked in surprise. The sturdy bird extended one leg to him and he removed the letter it carried. Staring at the parchment curiously, he absently he fed the owl a slice of bacon, which it accepted as payment before flying off.

When Hermione sent him a questioning look, he shrugged and opened the letter.

*Harry,  
Narcissa found and moved to our London safe house. Healer says good chance of recovery, but will take time. She's in good hands and will be cared for. Suggest planning on Christmas in London to prevent risking her recovery traveling to another location. Alert her son that he may pass messages to her through you.*

*Best,  
The Brotherhood.*

Harry looked up from his note, smiling broadly. He chuckled at the signature. Tonks was playing the charade for all she was worth.

Turning slightly, he looked towards one person sitting apart from the others at the Slytherin table. Draco had spent an anxious few days waiting for news and it had worn on his nerves.

Draco's eyes widened when he saw Harry smiling at him. He arched an eyebrow in question and Harry nodded slightly in reply.

When Draco sagged in his seat, Harry turned to look at the rest of the people sitting in the Great Hall. His eyes stopped on Professor Snape, who looked decidedly under the weather.

The good Professor was having trouble sleeping of late. The nightmares he was suffering weren't natural though. They were a direct result of the nightmare loop Harry had embedded into Snape's mind when the Professor had attempted to breach his shields. The loop still had a week to go before it peaked and wore off, unless Snape was silly enough to try Legilimency on Harry again, which would restart the whole cycle. Right now Snape sported huge bags under his eyes, and his hands trembled slightly.

The dream loop was a compromise between Harry, Hermione and Remus. Harry had been in favor of turning his mind to mush, but both Hermione and Remus protested. So Harry told them to find a solution before the start of term or he'd go with the mind mush concept.

Turning back to his friends, he showed the note to Hermione who was happy to hear the news. He then tucked the note into his pocket, planning to pass it to Draco when he got the chance.

Hermione nudged him to gain his attention, and then pointed at Professor McGonagall, who was heading in their direction.

“Mr. Potter, I would like to have a word with you in my office after breakfast,” said Professor McGonagall.

“Of course, Professor. I’m done with breakfast. If you wish, I can go there now.”

McGonagall nodded and he stood to follow her from the Great Hall. Reaching her office, she closed the door behind him and cast a number of security and privacy charms.

“Have a seat, Mr. Potter,” she said sternly.

Harry sat on the plain wooden chair in front of her desk and looked at her expectantly.

“First off, I have managed to locate your broom, Mr. Potter. Professor Flitwick and I have examined and removed a number of curses and tracking charms from it and you may take it with you when we are finished. While the Headmaster has, for whatever reason, decided not to lift your Quidditch ban, I know you love flying more than you love the game. So remember, your ban exists on the game only, not on flying. Please refrain from leaving school airspace when you go flying though,” she said.

Harry smiled gratefully at his Head of House. “Thank you, Professor. I don’t think I’ll use it much for flying anymore. It’s too precious to me to risk. I do appreciate your efforts in returning it.”

McGonagall seemed to hesitate for a moment. “Mr... Harry, I am not unaware of the situation that is growing in my own House. Yesterday, on a routine inspection of the dorm rooms, I noted you had erected a number of wards surrounding your bed and your personal effects. I also noted similar wards on Miss Grangers possessions and bed.”

Harry looked at her but said nothing.

McGonagall sighed and shook her head briefly. “Harry, I do not understand this growing feud between yourself and the Headmaster, but it is my job to occasionally inspect the dorms for contraband materials.”

“Professor, while neither Hermione or myself have any contraband materials, I’ll be more than happy to grant access through the protective spells whenever you wish to inspect my trunk and bed. I am sure that Hermione feels the same way.”

Minerva leaned back in her chair, considering his word carefully. He clearly did not trust her. Whatever was going on had eroded all trust between Harry and the staff, and that pained her. She could see she would have to start at the beginning, trying to rebuild a relationship with him.

“I think that would be acceptable, Harry,” she said, noting Harry relax a little.

“I would also like to personally commend you on how well you are doing in Transfiguration this

year. I do not know, nor care, where you spent your holiday, but it seems it served you well. Your work has improved considerably.”

Harry smiled and sat up a little straighter. Trust or not, he had always liked Professor McGonagall. She was a strict, but very fair teacher and he appreciated her for it.

“Thank you Professor. Coming from you, it means a lot,” he replied.

She suppressed the urge to smile and dismissed him after releasing the privacy spells on the room. Harry took his precious Firebolt and left the room, closing the door behind him.

At her desk, Minerva considered their conversation and thought about the young man who’d gotten onto the Hogwarts Express last June and compared that image to the one of the young man who’d just left her office. Something extraordinary had happened to him over the summer. No amount of growth spurts could account for his phenomenal physical changes. Harry had changed in ways she wouldn’t have dreamed possible, both mentally and physically.

Outside of McGonagall’s office, Hermione, Ginny and Neville accosted Harry. He was about to give them a quick run down of his conversation with the Professor when he noted Draco hovering near the end of the corridor. Since they all had a free period, he motioned for Draco to join them.

Draco walked reluctantly and nervously up the hall towards them. Ginny and Neville weren’t convinced about him, but Harry had asked them to give him the benefit of the doubt for now.

When Draco finally joined them, Harry gave him the note from Tonks. He read it quickly then turned to look at Harry, his eyes doubtful.

“It’s true, Draco. She’s safe and should be well when you see her over the Christmas holiday. Keep the note,” he added, when Draco tried to pass it back.

Looking down and trying to control his emotions, he carefully put the note in his pocket. He turned to walk away when Harry stopped him.

“Draco, the study group starts this Saturday, nine in the morning to eleven. The rest of the weekend’s all yours. Be there, please?” Harry asked.

Mutely Draco nodded and walked away, his shoulders square and proud, but his relief evident in his manner.

---

The Great Hall, Lunch (same day)...

The black eagle owl swept down from the heights and landed at the Gryffindor table.

Trembling hands removed the note and the small package. Both were left un-opened as they were shoved into a book bag. He would need them later. The note had his instructions.

Meanwhile, further up the table, Ron kept a close look out for Millicent while he talked to several of the fifth year Gryffindors. Dumbledore's interview had sowed the seeds of fear and mistrust in their minds and Ron was watering the seedlings.

---

Grimmauld Place...

Hedwig arrived with the morning breakfast and landed in front of Remus, looking at him expectantly. Reaching over, he removed the note and read it, while Emma fed the owl bits of bacon from the platter.

Everyone stopped when Remus frowned, then started chuckling.

"Remus, what's wrong?" asked a perplexed Tonks.

He passed the note to her. A moment later, she was smiling and shaking her head as she passed the note to Emma.

"That boy has it bad," Remus murmured, thinking hard, "Any ideas Tonks? He's looking for something I've never heard of."

Tonks paused, about to drink some tea, and thought. "Yeah, I think I know a couple of blokes that can do it, but it's not going to be cheap, Remy."

Remus rolled his eyes. "Tonks, Harry could misplace a million galleons and never notice it. We're on a short time frame here. Do you think we can get it done?"

"Well, it won't be easy, but I think we can do it in the nick," she replied.

Dan looked up from the note and asked, "Is something like this even possible?"

Remus nodded, grinning at the man.

"My word," Emma said, "he does have it bad."

---

Hogwarts Library...

Harry looked around the table at Hermione, Ginny, Neville, Susan, Luna and Draco. He smiled briefly at them and then cast a privacy charm, as well as a silencing charm, so they could talk freely.

"I'd like to thank everyone for coming. Over the summer I learned several disturbing truths and before I can reveal them to you, Hermione, Susan and I are going to have to teach you Occlumency so that you can protect not only yourself, but the information I'm going to share with you."

“Occlumency isn’t like ordinary magic, where you learn a single spell. It’s a discipline, a way of changing how you think so that you can protect yourselves. In addition to protecting yourselves, you’ll find that if you can learn this discipline, the power of your spells, as well as your ability to retain what you learn, will improve.

“The hardest part of Occlumency is learning to make a habit of it. It’s not something you can do haphazardly. This is something you need to do every night before you go to bed. If you practice in your free time, you’ll pick it up even quicker.

“The first and hardest part of Occlumency is learning to clear your mind and order your thoughts. To do this, we’re going to borrow from a muggle technique called meditation. Meditation is a state you can put yourself in where you are not asleep, but you are unaware of your surroundings.

“Now, Susan, Hermione and myself are going to help everyone focus on learning to meditate first. The three of us received instruction in Occlumency during the summer so we can help the rest of you along. I’ll work with Draco and one other person...”

“Me, me!” said Luna, to Harry’s surprise. While he’d been speaking, she’d been reading a book, upside down of course, and Harry had thought she was ignoring him.

Harry smiled. “All right, Luna, I’ll work with you and Draco, while Hermione and Susan pair up with Ginny and Neville.”

As they paired off, Harry noted that Luna sat rather close to Draco.

Draco, too, noticed and moved away slightly. Luna followed him, smiling dreamily.

“What are you doing?” Draco hissed.

“Learning to meditate, of course,” Luna said.

“Why are you sitting so close to me?”

“Am I? I hadn’t noticed,” she said, frowning slightly.

“No wonder they call you Loony Luna,” Draco sneered.

““The greatest wisdom is seeing through appearances,”” she intoned firmly.

Draco scowled. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means what it says,” she replied, vaguely.

“All right you two, let’s get started,” Harry said, gaining their attention.

Draco continued to stare at Luna for a moment longer, trying to puzzle out her words.

She turned to him and smiled. “I think Harry’s going to start now.”

Whipping his head around, he faced Harry and tried not to frown. There was something about the blonde girl that bothered him, but as he didn’t know her well, he wasn’t sure what it was.

“Now,” Harry said, looking between the two, “the first thing we’re going to do is...”

---

Ministry of Magic, Minister’s office...

“Minister, Director Bones is here as you requested.”

“Excellent! Please send her in. Oh and Angie? Would you be so kind as to call in Weatherbee and bring us some tea?” asked Fudge.

The door opened wide to admit Amelia and, a moment later, Percy Weasley.

“Amelia, please have a seat.”

“Thank you, Minister.”

After tea was served, Fudge leaned back in his seat and looked at his MLE Director. “Amelia, I’d like you to give me an update on the ‘special’ case you’ve been working on.”

Amelia glanced at Fudge, and then looked at Percy for a moment, alarmed. “Minister, I would be more than happy to give you an update, but I ask that we please do this alone.”

“Nonsense! Weatherbee is quite trustworthy, I assure you!”

Amelia sighed and sipped her tea, while both men watched her expectantly.

“Very well, Minister,” she said, not liking the situation, but unable to change it. “As you know, one of the target’s of our investigation is powerfully connected and highly placed, politically. In addition, several other targets are also well placed within the Ministry. As a result, we have implemented an unprecedented level of security on the investigation itself. Codenamed ‘Green’, after the principle protectee in this case, we’ve broken the operation down into two details; investigative and protective.

“The case is leading to some very interesting angles and we’re pulling in information relevant not only to the case itself, but to Voldemort as well.”

Both men shivered at the sound of his name being spoken. When she paused, Fudge motioned for her to continue.

“Since we’re dealing with powerful, politically connected targets, I’ve ordered that all evidence be double, and in a few cases, triple checked. Our case must be airtight in order to stand up by itself in front of the Wizengamot. The investigative process is slow Minister, but that’s because I’m

insisting we take extra precautions so we don't tip our hand early. I realize you'd like faster results, but given the magnitude of what we're dealing with, it's rather like examining an iceberg; the case gets bigger and deeper the more we investigate.

"As far as the protective side of the case, our two principle targets are currently attending Hogwarts, at our request. The list of people needing protection is growing, but for good reasons. Thankfully, they've all been taking to a safe location.

"Your plant in Hogwarts is doing well, and has already given us some valuable information. In addition, through the use of the Ministry controlled Neutralizer potion, we've managed to avert at least one confirmed incident of drugging," Amelia concluded.

Fudge sipped his tea noisily and thought about the information he'd just been given. Things were moving along to be sure, but it wasn't time to go to the press yet. Grudgingly, he agreed that the case needed to be absolute before he made a move.

Finally, he put his teacup down and placed his elbows on the desk. "Good brief, Amelia. I thank you. I'll not bother you too often, but please remember to give me an update at least once a month? Also, I quite agree, we need the case to be airtight before we can bring this to trial. Please feel free to use any facility of my office. Just ask Weatherbee here and he'll help you anyway he can."

Amelia nodded and stood to leave. Fudge smiled and waved her and Percy out of the office.

Percy returned to his desk, where he pulled out the journal he kept. The journal was against Ministry rules, highly irregular, and it was, in fact, Percy's private ego. Like so many times in the past, Percy meticulously detailed the meeting he had just come from, then went on to explain how he had been given a position of supervision and liaison between the MLE and the Office of the Minister of Magic.

Later that evening, unknown to Percy, his journal was read by one of the night cleaning staff.

---

### Defense Against the Dark Arts Office, Evening...

Harry and Hermione were sitting in Romany's office, waiting for the Professor to begin. She'd been trying to help Harry control the amount of power he put behind his spells, and, for their own safety, they'd started with simple exercises, like levitating quills. It quickly became apparent however, from the forty quills embedded in the stone ceiling, that they'd need to use a different spell.

Going back to basics, they settled on the first year light spell, *Lumos* .

"Alright then Harry, I want you to think about making as small a point of light as possible," said Romany.

Both women had learned from experience to turn away from his wand before he cast anything.

“*Lumos* ,” he whispered. His wand tip burst into a blinding ball of light that flooded the darkened room.

“Harry, try lowering the light level. Think about making the light smaller,” Romany said, her back turned to the young man.

Harry closed his eyes against the glare and concentrated. His brow furrowed in concentration and he was soon sweating from the effort. Slowly, the light dimmed, bit by bit.

Finally, he had it down to a tiny pinprick of light, but he was trembling from the effort and on the verge of collapsing from exhaustion. He breathed with great, gulping gasps, sounding rather like a racehorse that had been pushed too far. With the glare gone, he opened his eyes to look at his wand and the tiny light it was giving off.

Romany and Hermione were beaming at him for his success. When Romany told him to extinguish the light, he nodded weakly and whispered, “*Nox* .”

When the light winked out, he swayed dangerously. The two women rushed to his side and pulled him to a seat.

Romany handed him a piece of chocolate. “Eat, Harry. It’ll help you gain back a bit of energy.”

Harry eyed the large chunk of chocolate tiredly and muttered something about the Wizarding world being a bunch of nutter chocoholics, causing Hermione to laugh. When Romany looked puzzled, Hermione grinned at her and tried to explain.

“Romany, as a full blood and growing up in the wizarding world, you were raised to think that chocolate is more medicine than sweet. It’s used to help raise spirits after a Dementor attack, to help recover energy when too much is expended and so on. In the muggle world, chocolate is just a sweet. But even as a sweet, people love the stuff. Some muggles love the stuff so much they’ve invented a name for it. A chocoholic is someone who’s addicted to chocolate in all forms.

“My parents make quite a good living repairing the damage done to the teeth of such muggles. I think Harry was calling the entire wizarding world chocoholics,” she concluded, laughing again.

Romany shook her head, grinning. She’d always thought muggles were interesting and rather enjoyed hearing about their world. Remembering why they were there, she looked at Harry and frowned slightly. “I can clearly see that the effort exhausted you, but I have to admit, I’m surprised by it. This should have been a simple exercise.”

“I can’t explain it, Romany. It’s easier for me to increase the power than it is to lower it,” he said quietly.

Romany scowled. “Increase the power? You’re not casting at full strength?” she asked incredulously.



“No, not really. I’d say I normally cast at about one third of what I can cast if I put all my strength into it,” replied Harry seriously.

Romany eyed him speculatively. “Alright then, let’s continue working with the light spell. You can lower the light level and reduce the power behind it after it’s cast. Once that becomes easier and less tiring for you, we’ll work on teaching you to cast the spell with less force.”

---

Gringotts Wizarding Bank...

Nearly a thousand Goblins sat at their desks in an enormous room, working on the daily tasks of keeping Gringotts the foremost Wizarding Bank in the world. A steady stream of owls arrived, twenty-four hours a day, with transfers, drafts and notices that had to be dealt with.

When a series of transfer orders arrived by owl, the Goblin in charge of sorting the incoming correspondence thought nothing of it, as they were no different than any of the other transfer orders. Sorting the orders into various bins, he sent them off quickly. The bins raced along on a high-speed track and delivered themselves to multiple desks.

Far below the room, vault 678, formerly the trust vault of one Harry James Potter, was emptied of 220,000 galleons. The vault funds were disbursed by nearly a dozen different Goblins, each representing a different account.

---

Ministry of Magic, Department of Magical Law Enforcement...

“Auror Winston is here to see you, Director,” a secretary said from the doorway.

“Please send him in,” replied Amelia.

A moment later, a short, chubby, balding man walked in. He was the complete antithesis of what one would expect an Auror to look like. However, since all of the agents in the MLE were technically Aurors, Winston, as the head of the forensic accounting division, was an Auror.

“Director, we’ve had movement on account 678. As requested, we halted deposits to subject P’s trust account from his family account, and filled his trust vault with the requisite amount of charmed galleons,” the pudgy Auror said, looking up from his notes to see if the Director was paying attention.

Amelia smiled inwardly. Winston was a good bean counter, but the task force had hidden everyone’s name behind letters. He didn’t know who ‘P’ was and, frankly, he didn’t care. Aside from the fact that he was quite good at his job, his lack of curiosity about the people behind the numbers was another reason why Amelia had assigned him to the case.

Noting his slight frown, she motioned for him to continue.

“Yes, well, as I was saying, we saw activity on the account on September Tenth. A total of 220,000 galleons were removed and disbursed into several accounts. We’re tracking their progress, as several deposits seem to be floating through dummy accounts in an attempt launder the money,” he concluded.

“Winston, I want your people to keep track of every galleon. I want to know where it ultimately goes, who gets it and how much they get. But be careful, we don’t want anyone to know what we’re doing,” replied Amelia.

“Very good, Director. I’ll see that the account is refilled and we’ll continue tracking,” Winston replied.

---

Headmaster’s Office, Hogwarts...

The scratching of a quill on parchment was the only sound in the otherwise quiet office. It had been a trying day for Dumbledore, beginning with the bank transfer at Gringotts. Taking the money from Harry’s trust vault and transferring it around to multiple dummy accounts before it reached its final destination was a tricky business. He’d been doing it for years and no one suspected a thing.

He leaned back on his chair, pushed his glasses up and pinched the bridge of his nose tiredly. He started at the sound of a tired hoot coming from Fawkes’ old perch. Turning slightly, he looked at the ragged owl, Errol, and wondered why the Weasley’s hadn’t replaced him yet. It wasn’t as if they didn’t have the money to do so.

When Errol ruffled his feathers in obvious annoyance, Albus turned back to his desk and eyed the remains of Molly’s howler. Her demand for the quarterly funds had been loud and quite shrill. Had he known how insistent Molly would become each quarter when he first offered a share of Harry’s trust fund to the Weasley’s, he might have changed his mind.

Molly and Arthur had been easy enough to manipulate. With little money and seven children to feed on a meager Ministry salary, it hadn’t taken much. While Dumbledore had been emptying Harry’s trust account since James and Lily had died, he’d only brought the Weasley’s in to it the summer before Harry’s first year at Hogwarts.

He’d managed to gain their agreement in maneuvering Ron into becoming Harry’s friend. Then, he’d pulled on their heartstrings.

Telling them about the boy’s life living among his muggle relatives, explaining in graphic detail about the abuse he’d suffered, and following it up with his sure knowledge that Harry would *not* survive the final battle with Voldemort, had hooked them. He reeled them in by telling a distressed Arthur and a weeping Molly that once Harry died, the entire Potter fortune would be inherited by his abusive aunt and uncle, rewarding them for their violence against the boy.

He had stressed the need for secrecy in the matter and explained how distressing it would be for

Harry to find out that he was going to fight Voldemort and save the wizarding world, but die in the doing of it. Over the years, he was sure they understood that it wasn't just Harry who couldn't know about what they were doing. The Ministry, while fraught with corruption, took a dim view on theft from a minor.

Cautioning the Weasley's against flaunting the money in public, he'd arranged for quarterly transfers. The amount was small to start, only twenty thousand galleons, but still a fortune by their standards. However, as the years went by, Molly had started demanding more. She pointed out a variety of reasons for her demands. Ron's friendship with Harry was putting him in danger and shouldn't they be compensated for that? Ginny's unfortunate encounter with Riddle's diary and her near death in the Chamber of Secrets meant more money was needed. When Harry started spending his summers at the Burrow, they had another mouth to feed. Who was going to pay for it? The list went on and on.

This year, the excuse was the worry Harry had caused them. Shouldn't they be compensated for the time spent looking for him? The end result was, rather than twenty thousand galleons a quarter, the Weasley family now received fifty thousand.

Surprisingly, Ronald Weasley wasn't upset that his family was stealing from Harry. He'd found out about the arrangement the summer before his fourth year at Hogwarts. He had eavesdropped on a conversation between Dumbledore and his parents and discovered what they were doing. He was upset, however, when he was told he wouldn't be able to spend the money openly. The image of a poor family had to be maintained. Now, in his sixth year, Ron wasn't having any of it. He'd demanded, and received, a very generous allowance from his parents. Dumbledore had cautioned him on his spending, informing him that if he wanted to continue to receive funds, he must not flaunt his new wealth.

With a sigh, Dumbledore sealed his letter to Molly, stood, and approached the aging Weasley owl. Tying the parchment to Errol's leg, he walked to the window and opened it, signaling the bird to make his delivery. With one last tired hoot, the bird launched himself from the perch and nearly collided with Dumbledore's chair before flying from the room.

Returning to his chair, he sat down heavily and removed his glasses. Thoughts of Harry's trust account brought back memories of the first war with Voldemort and the brave people who'd lost their lives in the fighting. While he knew that some of those casualties were his doing, he also knew that the end justified the means. Voldemort's downfall had been worth any cost.

The Potter's had been the first. When Dumbledore had first heard the prophecy, he'd realized that there were two couples within the Order who fit the requirements. Both women were pregnant and due the next year, at the end of July. With subtle maneuvering, he had managed to arrange for each couple to face and defy Voldemort three times. Once Riddle had chosen his nemesis, killed James and Lily and destroyed his own body, Dumbledore had sent Hagrid to collect the child.

While others mourned the loss of the Potters, Dumbledore celebrated his victory and set his plans for the child in motion. When the Longbottom's were captured and tortured into insanity, he was caught off guard. While it was true that the Ministry had been lax in rounding up the remaining

Death Eaters, many excused their lack of action. With the Dark Lord ‘dead’, why would his followers continue to attack?

The Longbottom’s condition was regrettable, but they had served their purpose. Their son, Neville, while not a particularly outstanding individual, would carry on their family name. What more could any parent want?

Reaching for his glasses once more, the Headmaster of Hogwarts, the most respected wizard of the age, shook off the past and formulated his next move in his bid to surpass Merlin as Britain’s foremost wizard.

---

## Harry’s Life...

The first several weeks of school flew by and Hermione was curious about the flurry of owls Harry was sending. But every time she asked him, he merely smiled and changed the topic.

By dinner, late in the third week of their return to school, Hermione was feeling a bit down as she headed to the Great Hall. Harry had vanished an hour earlier and she’d decided that he had forgotten what day it was.

Harry joined her before she reached the entrance to the Great Hall. She looked up, startled by his sudden appearance at her side and frowned. The hall was dark, but his eyes seemed to glow with magic like they did when he was highly upset about something.

“Come with me,” he hissed at her.

Perplexed, she allowed him to lead her to the Room of Requirement. Inside, she found an empty, darkened room and two stiff backed chairs.

Motioning her to sit, he took the chair facing her. He turned for a moment and cast a privacy and a locking charm on the door, then he turned back to her with a large smile on his face.

“I’m not very good with words, but you know that. And sometimes, words just aren’t enough,” Harry said, fidgeting in his seat.

When she stared at him, a bit puzzled, he smiled awkwardly. “I want you to listen and watch, Hermione,” he explained shyly. “I wrote this for you... I call it, Harry’s life...” He pulled out his tin whistle and, as he started to play, the room began to shimmer.

Her chair changed into a comfortable, plush armchair, while his remained untouched. The room remained dark, but became dingy and uncomfortable looking. The song he played was mournful and heartbreaking, and Hermione bit her lip as the sorrow of the music enveloped her.

As the music rose in volume, it changed tempo, becoming upbeat. She blinked in surprise as other instruments slowly joined the tin whistle, eventually becoming an orchestra, following Harry’s

lead.

An image of Hagrid and Hedwig floated by her and she gasped. As the music soared around her, she watched, entranced, as images of herself, images from Harry's memories of her appeared.

First an image of herself in her first year on the Hogwarts Express, followed by one of her standing up to McGonagall over the body of a troll. Images of Hermione smiling, laughing, practicing spells and lecturing on the merit of homework came next. There was even an image of her nibbling on the end of her quill while she studied.

The music kept pace with the images, or perhaps it was the other way around. Occasionally, she'd see other things Harry found important. Images of Quidditch, flying, playing in the snow and saying farewell at the end of term floated by.

Some parts of the music were haunting, filled with pain and an intense, sad longing, while others were uplifting and joyful. The images in the room matched the feelings he poured into the music; music he'd created only for her.

When he finally finished, nearly five minutes later, the music had slowed to a triumphant crescendo that literally took her breath away and made her entire body tingle with pleasure. The last visual image she saw was Harry carrying her to her room after her ritual of amplification.

As the images faded away, she saw Harry sitting with his eyes closed. He was spent from both controlling the room and putting all of his emotions into his music. When the last image faded and echo of his song died away, the room turned itself into a sunlit meadow, where butterflies danced to their own song.

Hermione sat, spellbound. Harry had never been one to show a lot of emotion or displays of affection, but the music he had written, just for her, contained all of his feelings for her. It was as if he'd put his own life to music and, in doing so, had told her exactly how much of an impact she'd made in his life and how important she was to him. He'd said more with his music than he ever could with words.

She clasped her arms together and her eyes welled up with tears. No one had ever done anything like this for her. It was, in her happy opinion, the most wonderful, most romantic gift he could have given her.

Harry opened his eyes and was alarmed to see her crying. He slid out of his chair and dropped to his knees before her. "Hermione, I'm sorry... I didn't want you to cry..."

She slid out of her chair and joined him on the floor, her eyes still wet with tears. "Shut up, you silly man. I'm not crying because I'm upset," she whispered, hugging him tightly.

Harry wrapped his arms around her and frowned into her hair. He was never going to understand women. He held her for a few moments longer before he leaned back slightly and called, "Dobby, you can begin now."

With a loud pop, Dobby and Winky appeared. In a matter of seconds, the chairs had vanished and a picnic basket and blanket were laid out.

Before the elves left, Dobby handed Harry two packages. Harry helped Hermione to her feet as the small elf vanished and they moved to the checkered blanket to enjoy dinner.

He put the packages to one side, and then pulled food out of the large basket. They relaxed and talked, enjoying the picnic as the meadow around them slowly changed from daylight to twilight to night, revealing a million stars in the sky above them. A single candle appeared on the blanket, softly illuminating their faces.

Harry reached over and picked up the two packages. He handed them both to Hermione, murmuring, "I didn't want you to think I'd forget the birthday of the prettiest and smartest witch I know. I should warn you though. One of those packages is from Dobby, so expect it to be unusual."

Her eyes shone with delight and she opened the lighter of the two packages. Inside, she found seven mismatched, homemade socks.

"Well, that's Dobby for you. Socks are his favorite gift," Harry said, laughing.

Opening the other package, she gasped in surprise and looked at Harry uncertainly. It was a heavy box, inlaid with gold filigree and mother of pearl. The top of the box had a large 'H' inscribed in gold and outlined in hundreds of small sapphires, her birthstone.

"Place your thumb on top of the 'H'," he said softly.

She did as instructed and felt a tingling in her thumb. With a soft click, the lid of the box popped open. Lifting the lid slightly, she smiled when she realized it was a jewelry box. As she opened the lid all the way, a hidden button was released and it began to play Harry's Life.

The inside top of the box faded away, only to be replaced by the same images she'd seen when Harry had played his song. She stared at the box with its wonderful music and images for a long moment. Then, with a trembling hand, she closed the lid and placed the box to the side.

Harry watched her carefully. Her expression was unreadable and it worried him. "I thought you might like it, Hermione. As much as I'd like to put an engagement ring on your finger, I think we're probably too young..."

He stopped as she cannoned into him, knocking him flat on his back. She lay atop him, grabbed his head with both hands and kissed him passionately. He lay there, stunned for a moment, but his body caught on sooner than his brain. His arms wrapped around her of their own volition and held her tight. As his mind caught up, he returned her kiss with more enthusiasm than finesse.

When they finally came up for air, Hermione realized she was lying on top of him. Blushing, she moved to roll away, but he stopped her. She looked in his eyes and saw them dancing with mirth.

“I hope that, someday, we’ll stop being embarrassed by this,” he whispered to her.

When her blush increased, he sighed and released her, letting her roll away and sit up.

Sitting across from Harry again, she looked in wonder at her gift. “Harry, I’ve never seen anything like this before. Where did you get it?” she asked breathlessly, still flustered.

“I owled Remus. Between him and Tonks, they found several people who all had a hand in making it,” he replied shyly.

“It’s a one of a kind?” She asked incredulously.

Harry smiled. “Yes.”

She frowned. “Harry, this must have been terribly expensive! You shouldn’t have.”

“Hermione, I have more money than I can possibly spend in my lifetime. My great grandkids won’t be able to spend it all. If I can toss some of it into something that makes you smile, it’s worth it to me,” he said firmly, refusing to back down.

She recognized his stubborn tone and knew she wouldn’t be able to move him. She had to admit she was greatly pleased with the jewelry/music box, but she shuddered at the thought of the cost of it.

Later that evening, Hermione showed Ginny her birthday gift and they both listened to the melody as they watched the images float across the lid top. Ginny sighed over the romantic gift and went to bed, muttering about seeing what kind of artistic talent she might uncover in Neville.

---

## Ron’s Gift...

The morning after her birthday, Hermione was returning from an early morning trip to the library. She’d made it a practice to select a book or two for Harry every night before meeting up with him in the Great Hall. Despite her impressive intellect and maturity, she was still a girl at heart and as she left the library, her mind was replaying the conversation she’d had with Harry last night in the Room of Requirement. His comments left her feeling bubbly and excited.

Hermione was very smart and confident but, in some ways, Harry’s affections towards her caught her completely by surprise. Hermione did not consider herself to be beautiful, or even pretty. Her love of books had earned her few friends before she learned she was a witch and, in the end, she had resigned herself to never having any real friends. Then she met Harry and Ron.

She knew Harry could have his pick any girl at Hogwarts or choose from hundreds of willing witches outside of school. That he had picked her had helped to change her own opinion of herself.

In retrospect, losing Ron’s friendship had been a process that had begun in their third year, when

he blamed her for Crookshanks chasing Scabbers. Things had only gotten worse with Ron's jealousy over Harry in the Tri-Wizard tournament, as well as Viktor Krum. To offset the gulf between them, Hermione had become fast friends with Ron's little sister, Ginny.

While Ron's feelings towards her had been obvious, his jealousy had been even more so. Harry, for all his moody moments and anger, had always tried to support her and be her friend.

And so it was that, with a light heart, Hermione exited the library to meet Harry in the Great Hall for breakfast. She had only gone a short distance when a hand shot out of a darkened corner and grabbed her hand, spinning her around. Her books went flying and she felt something being slipped on to one of her fingers.

Then Ron stepped out of the shadows, still holding her hand and he bent her wrist cruelly, causing her to cry out in pain and back into the wall. He leaned heavily against her and she could smell the fire whiskey on his breath. Pulling her hand up, he thrust it under her nose.

"See this ring, 'Mione?" he asked with a cruel chuckle. "This is a promise ring. It's charmed so only I can take it off. It will never allow another ring on that finger, unless I put it there. You're mine 'Mione and I'm not going to let that bloody rich bastard have you. EVER!"

He kept her hands pinned and pressed his lips against hers. She turned her face away from him and she struggled against him, her eyes filling with tears.

Realizing her struggles were only making him tighten his hold, she relaxed. When Ron felt her body soften against him, he released one of her hands to grope at her breasts and she nearly shouted in triumph. Instead, she yelped in pain when he squeezed one of her breasts hard and twisted the nipple, causing several buttons on her blouse to pop off.

With a low angry growl, she grabbed his hair and yanked back hard. When his neck snapped back, she brought her knee up between his legs with all the strength in her small body, intent on driving his testicles into this throat.

With a hoarse, retching sound, Ron released her and fell to his knees. Hermione stepped around him, dug her hands into his hair and slammed him head first into the wall.

When he slid down to lay on the floor, barely conscious, she spun and fled down the corridor, sobbing, her books still scattered throughout the hallway.

---

The Great Hall (breakfast)...

Harry kept an eye on the entrance to the Great Hall while he ate breakfast. Hermione was late and he was starting to get concerned. He looked up as Professor McGonagall stopped in the entrance and motioned for him to join her. Grabbing his book bag, he stood and left his half eaten breakfast.



“Mr. Potter, we need you in the infirmary. If you would follow me,” McGonagall said sternly.

Harry followed his Transfiguration Professor as she moved quickly to the infirmary. When the double doors opened, he spotted the sobbing form of Hermione sitting on the bed with Professor Flitwick patting her on the back.

When he rushed to her side, she spotted him and blanched. She turned away, refusing to face him.

He looked at Professor McGonagall, worried, but puzzled.

“Ginny Weasley found her this morning. She was in the girl’s dormitory bathroom, crying and trying to take off a ring. She’d cut her finger in several places trying to remove it. Professor Flitwick has tried to dispel the charm on the ring to no avail. We don’t know how she came to be wearing it and she hasn’t told anyone. Nor will she let anyone touch her. We thought that perhaps you might...” McGonagall trailed off, waiting.

Harry nodded and knelt by the sobbing girl. He placed his hands on her shoulders and gently turned her to face him. His heart ached to see the shame and pain in her eyes. She tried several times to turn away, but he wouldn’t let her.

“Hermione...” he whispered. “That ring, do you want it off?”

She sagged against him and nodded mutely. He brushed her hair out of her eyes and whispered, “Let me hold your hand, Hermione... let me help you.”

Harry ignored the Professors, who both stood, watching mutely, as he took her hand. He reviewed all of the dispelling spells he’d learned and quickly decided that the best approach was the brute force method. It would either work or he’d have to try each of the spells individually.

Clasping her hand in his, he drew on all of his power and whispered, “Finite Incantatum.”

His hands erupted in a white aura and he grasped the ring and gently pulled it from her finger. As soon as the ring was off, his hands returned to normal.

Harry tossed the ring onto the bed next to hers and pulled her into his arms while she sobbed in relief on his shoulder. Neither student saw the look exchanged between the two Professors at the display of wandless magic.

When she had calmed down enough to talk, he pulled away from her enough to look at her. As he did, he couldn’t help but notice the popped buttons, and the bruises forming on what he could see of her breast.

Harry bolted to his feet, his body crackling with energy. He seemed to grow taller and more imposing and his hair seemed to move in response to an unfelt wind. His school robe billowed out behind him and his eyes blazed emerald fire as his magic roared within him.

“Who did this to you?” he ground out between clenched teeth.

Hermione looked up, startled. She'd only seen him like this once, over the summer, and she knew that if she didn't help him calm down, Hogwarts would soon be a rubble heap. Hermione jumped up, her own shame forgotten now and she grabbed him whispering in his ear, trying to calm him.

Both McGonagall and Flitwick were surprised by Harry's display and the amount of energy radiating from him.

Harry fought back his rage with Hermione's help. As he did, the power engulfing him ebbed away.

When the couple turned to face the two Professors, Harry reached down and scooped up the ring in one hand, while Hermione explained what had happened to her. McGonagall was outraged and expressed the desire to see Ron expelled.

Harry shook his head grimly. "I'm sorry, Professor. I truly respect you, but I doubt you'll be allowed to expel, deduct points or otherwise punish him."

"Mr. Potter, I can assure you I will do my best," replied McGonagall stiffly. Then she peered hard at the couple. "Miss Granger, Mr. Potter, I release you from this morning's classes. I expect you, Mr. Potter, to escort Miss Granger safely back to our house where she can change her clothing."

Harry nodded mutely and put an arm protectively around Hermione's shoulders. She leaned into him, taking comfort from his presence. The two teachers filed from the room and Harry took Hermione back to Gryffindor house.

After Hermione had changed, Harry took her outside of the castle for a walk down by the lake. She was uncharacteristically quiet and Harry was reluctant to disturb her, knowing she needed time to collect her thoughts.

He settled her on a rock and sat down next to her. They both stared out across the lake, watching the giant squid perform lazy back flips and listening to the songbirds.

When he could stand her silence no longer, he placed a comforting arm across her shoulder and asked if she was all right.

"No, but I will be," she replied. "I think I'm still in a bit of shock, Harry. This morning I felt like I was on top of the world, only to have it come crashing back down on me. I can't believe that arrogant, bloody bastard would do that!"

Harry's jaw dropped open. Hermione never cursed! The look on his face must have been amusing, because Hermione started to laugh.

As her laughter died away, she pulled away and turned to face him. The day had shaken her confidence on several levels, and she needed reassurance.

"Harry, do you think I'm pretty?" she asked quietly.

He blinked in surprise. "Yes, I think you are very pretty, on both sides."

“Both sides?” she asked, puzzled.

Harry looked skyward trying to figure out how to reply without getting himself into too much trouble. Finally he turned back to look at her. “Hermione, did you know that you and Ron were the first friends I ever had? Sure, I liked and still like Hagrid, but you two were my first real friends. I learned things about you that I liked in a friend. Do you know how much I envied both of you? You had parents, a family and both of you seemed to be willing to share a little of that with me. I know, now, that Ron was lying to me, but you weren’t.

“Over the years, I came to understand just how special you were. When you were hit in the Department of Mysteries, I realized that I’d risked someone very important in my life and it felt like a piece of my heart died. On the Express home, I wanted to tell you that, but I thought you fancied Ron. I was afraid to tell you and more afraid I’d ruin our friendship by telling you.

“When the summer came along, I realized my beautiful friend had turned into a beautiful woman... Merlin, Hermione! Sometimes I think you ask me these questions just to torment and tease me. Don’t you know what you do to me?” he finally asked plaintively, running a hand through his hair in frustration.

Hermione smiled. “You still didn’t answer my question though, Harry. What do you mean by ‘both sides’?”

Harry stared out across the lake, his eyes taking on a far away look. When he started to speak again, she had to strain to hear him. “You’re beautiful. On the inside and the outside, and they both affect me in different ways. You’re Hermione, my best friend, and smart, brave, loyal, stubborn, frightened, happy and sad. And that Hermione is someone I care deeply for, someone I want around for a long time. Someone I want to protect. You’re Hermione, beautiful bookworm, and your looks make me nervous, scared and excited. How you look makes it hard sometimes for me to concentrate, and gives me ideas that shame me. I would be lying if I said I didn’t want you. Unlike Ron though, I want you to want me as well. Does that make any sense?” he said very softly.

Hermione moved closer and wrapped both arms around his neck. “It makes perfect sense, Harry. And I do want you as much as you want me. But those sort of things take time,” she whispered.

“I know,” he replied softly. “But don’t be surprised when I keep making an idiot of myself around you. Sometimes you distract me so much I can’t put two words together.”

Hermione smiled gently and trailed soft kisses from his ear to his cheek, then down his neck, causing him to shiver. Leaning back, she looked at him carefully. His eyes were glazed and his smile was slightly lopsided. With a soft laugh, she took his hand in hers and turned back to gaze out across the lake.

The two sat for a long while before returning to the castle. He never did recover his ability to talk while they sat there.

They returned to the castle for lunch, which Ron missed, much to their relief. Harry wondered if McGonagall had actually managed to carry through with her threat of punishing him.

Wherever Ron was, it appeared as though he'd managed to tell someone that he'd given Hermione a promise ring and, being Hogwarts, the word has spread like wildfire. The result was an endless stream of girls coming to the Gryffindor table, wanting to see it.

By dinner everyone knew about the promise ring, only now the story was that Hermione had accepted it willingly and that an engagement would soon follow. Harry, Ginny and Neville sat with her as people around the Great Hall threw her knowing looks while she fumed.

Just before the meal was served, Ron waltzed into the Great Hall, a pleased look on his face. McGonagall brushed by him, every square inch of her body expressing the fury she felt. Harry caught her eye and he nodded slightly.

McGonagall hated to admit it, but Harry had been absolutely spot on. The Headmaster had refused to allow Ronald Weasley to be punished in any way. He had been so much more interested in the ring that McGonagall, in a fit of anger, hadn't bothered to tell him that Harry had broken the charms on it.

Ron sauntered up the aisle feeling very smug with himself. He had lied to Hermione and she'd believed him. The ring didn't just have a sticking charm on it; it also had a love charm on it. Unlike potions, love charms are slow to work and not nearly as reliable. Love charms also suffered from the fatal flaw of being unable to work if the person was already in love.

Ron moved up the aisle figuring that Hermione would be under the influence of the charm enough that she'd be friendly towards him. Stopping behind her, he was about to tap her on the shoulder when Harry stood up and faced him. Ron glanced at him and, for the first time, noticed the power flowing off the young man in waves that beat at him. Harry's face darkened and he scowled. Hermione looked up, startled, as she felt the heavy stone table tremble and the waves of Harry's magic buffeted her.

Seeing the danger they were all in, she took action. Jumping to her feet, she climbed up and stood on the top of the table. When Harry, Ron and the rest of those in the Great Hall all turned to stare at her, she scowled.

"Listen up, you lot," she said angrily. "Ronald Weasley forced a ring on my finger, physically attacked me, nearly breaking my wrist, and then sexually molested me. When he let go of one of my hands, I was able to move him back enough to drive my knee between his legs and get away."

Ron's face was nearly purple with rage as he stared up at Hermione. At the Head table, Dumbledore's expression was a mixture of fear and anger. Minerva sat back with her arms crossed, scowling at him.

The Headmaster stood. "Miss Granger, I really don't think this is the place..."

“I did not accept the ring, I did not want the ring, but I couldn’t get it off. It had to be removed with powerful magic,” she continued, ignoring Dumbledore. “And yet, here he is, walking free without a care in the world. Why? Because Professor Dumbledore has done nothing to punish him for his actions!”

“Really, Miss Granger,” Dumbledore said, as silence descended on the hall and all eyes turned towards him, “I have only your word on the matter. Mr. Weasley has assured me that he did not hurt you in any way...”

“I have the bruises to prove it. And if that’s not enough for you, *Sir*, a Pensieve and a few drops of Veritaserum would erase any doubt about the truth of my words,” Hermione countered.

“I don’t think that will be necessary...” Dumbledore began.

Hermione spun away from him and faced the students once more. “For the girls here, I tell you to beware. Our Headmaster doesn’t mind if a woman is raped within the halls of Hogwarts!”

Dumbledore placed his hands on the table and leaned forward. Before he could speak however, Ron, who’d just noticed the ring missing from Hermione’s finger, leapt forward.

“You bitch!” he screamed. “What did you do with my ring? You weren’t supposed to be able to remove it!”

Hermione looked down at Ron and her eyes turned hard. “I didn’t remove it Ronald, Harry did after two Professors were unable to. Now sod off you bastard and leave me alone!”

Ron started to leave when a cold voice stopped him in his tracks. Turning, he faced Harry.

“Weasley, if you ever touch her again, I’ll rip you apart,” he said quietly, his voicing so low only Hermione, scrambling down from the top of the table, heard him. Then, reaching into his pocket, he pulled out Ron’s ring and tossed it to the ground between them.

Ron’s fists balled up and he lunged for Harry, swinging hard.

“Nail him, Ron!” shouted Seamus.

Harry ducked out of the way and moved back slightly. He was just seconds from pulling his wand when a voice barked out in the Great Hall, stopping both men in their tracks.

“THAT IS ENOUGH!” said Dumbledore. “Mr. Weasley, find yourself a seat and have dinner. Mr. Potter, that will be twenty five points from Gryffindor for fighting.”

“Headmaster, Potter wasn’t the one fighting!” protested McGonagall, furious over what she had just witnessed.

“Professor, kindly remember I am Headmaster of this school,” admonished Dumbledore.

McGonagall looked down at her plate, furious that Dumbledore would reprimand her in public and that he could be so patently unfair.

Harry held out his hand to Hermione and they turned to leave.

“Mr. Potter, you and Miss Granger have not finished your meal,” the Headmaster called.

“That’s all right, Sir,” Harry said, turning to face him. “The company is enough to turn our stomachs. We couldn’t possibly eat a thing.” His eyes bored into Dumbledore’s, glowing eerily. When the old man looked away, Harry escorted Hermione from the hall.

Dumbledore returned to his seat and frowned. He’d expected to see hurt in Harry’s eyes, not cold, calculating anger. The more Dumbledore thought out it, the more it bothered him. It was obvious that the Granger girl was upset, but her display in the hall was shocking. If her resentment of him became too strong, she’d be able to influence Harry, and that couldn’t be allowed. He had to find a way to reach the boy!

---

Sixth Year Boys Dormitory, Hogwarts...

Harry slid under the blankets, thinking that life truly sucked. The number of friends he had could be counted on two hands. The rest of the school either openly mistrusted him, or hated him.

The last three weeks had seen several meetings of the study group. He’d also had several extra lessons with Romany, working on trying to control the amount of power he put into a spell.

Snape was sleeping normally again, which made him his usual ugly, greasy self. Harry was seriously tempted to give him another dream loop, but refrained from doing so. Snape had cost Harry nearly 100 points in the last three weeks, which only fueled the animosity the Gryffindor’s were feeling against him. Even McGonagall seemed to be a little put out with him over the loss of points.

Earlier tonight, he and Hermione had tried to do their homework in the common room with Neville and Ginny, but had been disturbed by comments coming from Ron, Dean and Seamus. Ginny had broken up with Dean over the summer and looked to be centering her attention on Neville.

Like Harry, the summer had seen some major physical changes in Neville. He’d dropped a lot of the baby fat and shot up a few inches. His actions at the Department of Mysteries had done much to boost his confidence and replacing father’s wand with a new one tuned to him made his spell casting much easier. Neville carried himself with a new air of confidence now and it showed.

Harry considered his friends carefully, as he did every night. He had a vague idea of a plan and it was important to him that every one of them was protected. With that thought, Harry slipped into an uneasy sleep.

For several hours there were few sounds, other than the occasional snore from within the dormitory. That changed around four A.M. when one figure stirred in his bed.

The figure took a glass jar containing a large spider from under his bed. He then pulled out his wand and pointed it at the spider. “*Imperio*,” he whispered.

The hyper-aggressive spider froze in the jar and then relaxed.

Carefully opening the jar, he placed it on the floor and flicked the wand towards Harry’s bed. The light brown, palm-sized spider climbed out of jar and scurried towards the bed as instructed.

In the heat of the dorm room, Harry slept with only a light sheet covering him. The spider easily passed his wards, as they were designed only to keep people out. He shifted and, in doing so, exposed his right leg to the night air.

The spider slowly crawled up Harry’s leg, the glass-like hairs slicing into his skin, anesthetizing the cuts and coating them with a mild neurotoxin. Stopping at his calf, the spider raised its two front legs in a high arc and froze for a moment. Then it plunged its quarter inch fangs into his calf, injecting its deadly venom.

Harry howled and bolted from his bed. The sheets flared and fell on the spider, pinning it in place. He looked at the bed as a wave of pain and nausea washed over him. His leg felt like it was on fire. Staggering, he headed for the door and the lit common room where he could see his leg. Each step was agony and his body broke out in a cold sweat. He leaned heavily against the wall as he stumbled down the stairway, his heart beating like a jackhammer.

When he finally reached the common room, he knew he was in serious trouble. He was only wearing his boxers and he could see what appeared to be fine cracks developing over the skin on his leg, like a bullet hole in a pane of glass. Another wave of nausea passed over him and spots danced in front of his eyes. Stumbling towards a couch, he bumped it slightly and the pain caused him to collapse with a whimper. The spots whirling before his eyes grew larger until unconsciousness took him.

---

Sixth Year Girls Dormitory, Hogwarts...

Hermione awoke to a strange glow she didn’t recognize and a soft pinging sound. It took her a moment to recognize that her charm bracelet was the source, and then she bolted upright, staring at the bracelet in horror.

Romany had shown her a new personalized warning charm and had helped her enchant one of the charms on her bracelet with it. It was designed to warn her whenever Harry’s life was in danger and the golden snitch on her bracelet was now glowing brightly and chiming.

She quickly threw back the curtains to her bed, put on a robe and ran down the stairs to the common room. She stopped when she entered and cocked her head slightly, hearing a tapping

sound. Walking around to the back of one of the couches, she was horrified to see Harry on the floor, his heels pounding the floor while the rest of his body convulsed.

“HARRY!!!” she screamed, her voice echoing in the room. She dashed for the door and McGonagall’s apartment.

---

Grimmauld Place...

Tonks had just come off duty and Remus was up waiting for her in the kitchen. Sitting at the kitchen table, they waited while Dobby prepared tea.

“So,” said Remus, “how was your day?”

Tonks snorted. “Same old stuff, Remy. With Harry in school, I’m playing ‘show the brotherhood’ by walking around in my cloak. How’s Narcissa doing?”

“Danni says she’s doing quite well. She says she’s over the addiction and now it’s just a matter of rebuilding her strength...” he trailed off as Dobby approached.

Dobby made a funny whining sound and his eyes grew even larger. Both Tonks and Remus turned in surprise to look at the little house elf.

“Master Harry is in trouble!!” Dobby cried out loudly, then he vanished with a loud pop, the tea service in his hand crashing to the floor.

---

Minerva McGonagall’s quarters...

Grumbling, Minerva threw on a robe and put on her slippers. *Whoever’s was banging on my door had better be reporting a fire or they’ll regret waking me at this hour of the night*, she thought to herself, annoyed.

Minerva threw open her door and was shocked to see one of her favorite students in a state of complete panic. “Miss Granger, whatever is the matter?” she asked, surprised.

Hermione grabbed her hand and started tugging on her. “Professor you must come now... Harry... something is dreadfully wrong... Please, oh please Professor...” sobbed the girl.

Minerva frowned and let the girl lead her back to the common room, where Harry lay still convulsing. Her jaw dropped in shock as she spotted his leg and the fine web of cracks extending out from a central point. Stepping to the fireplace, she threw a pinch of floo powder into the fire and stuck her head in.

A crowd had formed in the common room. Hermione stood to one side, her hands twisting into tight knots. Neville came to her side and put a hand on her shoulder. His eyes were fixed on the



ugly wound still growing on Harry's leg.

McGonagall pulled back from the fireplace and conjured a blanket to place over Harry.

"Professor," said Neville, "that looks like some kind of insect bite. He's going to need an anti-venom."

Ginny moved to stand next to Hermione, while McGonagall stared up sharply at Neville.

Hermione turned to the red head girl, who wrapped an arm around her. "He's in so much pain," she sobbed into the younger girl's shoulder.

The floo flared again and Madam Pomfrey appeared in the fireplace. A moment later Professors Snape, Dumbledore and Blackthorne joined them. Harry was still convulsing and showing no signs of stopping.

"Severus," snapped Poppy. "I need to look at his leg, help me hold him still."

Snape leaned down hard on Harry's leg, pinning it to the ground, while Poppy peeled away the blanket. She cast a few diagnostic spells, frowning at the results, as Harry's convulsions grew weaker and his strength ebbed.

"It's some kind of venomous bite, but from what? Using the wrong kind of anti-venom could kill him," said Poppy in frustration.

"Do you not know, Poppy?" asked Dumbledore worriedly. To have the boy die now would ruin everything!

"No, I don't!" she snapped. "It could be anything..."

There was a loud pop and Dobby appeared carrying a bundle.

"Miss Hermy!" he cried running up to Hermione. "Dobby caught bad bug that bite Master Harry Potter!"

McGonagall rushed over to the little elf and conjured a large glass tank. "Put the bug in here!" she commanded.

Nodding, Dobby placed the sheet into the tank and Minerva conjured a lid. Carefully grabbing one end of the sheet and threading it under the lid, she started pulling on it. Neville knelt by her side, his hands poised to press down on the lid at a moments notice.

Slowly, the large, light brown spider was revealed. It reared the front of its body up and venom dripped from its fangs in gooey droplets in the tank.

"What is that thing?" someone asked.

“It’s a Jordanian Glass Razorback Spider. Its bite is lethal without the anti-venom,” whispered Hermione, stepping back from the now caged arachnid.

Madam Pomfrey stepped to the fireplace and placed another floo call. A few minutes later, a man dressed in Healer green stepped out carrying a very small vial and a needle. He looked at Harry for a moment, then at the glass tank now sitting on a table.

“My word! A Jordanian Glass Razorback! What an wonderful specimen,” he exclaimed.

“Healer Hopkins, if you please! Your patient needs you,” snapped Poppy.

Hopkins blinked for a moment and reluctantly turned away from examining the spider. “Oh right, Madam Pomfrey. I’ll need someone to hold his leg still. I have to inject the anti-venom close to the bite site.”

Poppy and Snape held down Harry’s leg. Hopkins drew a small amount of liquid from the vial and plunged the needle into Harry’s leg, very near the bite.

“If the anti-venom takes, we should see him stop convulsing and relax in five minutes. If not, we have to repeat the injection, increasing the dosage.”

Hermione sat on a chair nearby with Ginny and Neville perched on both sides. She kept glancing at the clock, then back to Harry, who was still twitching. She was holding Ginny’s hand so tightly that Ginny wondered if she had any broken bones.

Two and a half minutes into the injection, McGonagall started sending students back to their dorms. She allowed Hermione, Ginny and Neville to stay, but the others had to leave.

Three minutes passed with no change and Hermione’s face crumpled as a sob escaped from her throat.

Nearly four and a half minutes into the injection, Harry’s back arched like a tightly drawn bow. Hermione cried out in fright as he arched again, then sank back to the floor and lay still.

Poppy and Healer Hopkins ran several tests before looking at each other and sighed in relief. Hopkins nodded to the medi-witch and she conjured a stretcher. When she moved to levitate Harry, Dobby beat her to it.

Poppy smiled at the little elf, who returned her smile shyly then he levitated the stretcher for her. Hermione followed her and Hopkins as they left the common room, leaving Dumbledore, Blackthorne, Snape and McGonagall behind with Ginny and Neville.

“How do you suppose a middle-eastern venomous spider got to be in the boy’s sixth year dormitories?” asked Blackthorne in a quiet voice, watching the others closely.

“Yes, that is most curious. I would hazard to say this was a deliberate attempt on Mr. Potter’s life. Ah well, at least this will convince him that staying inside the castle is his best course of action if

he wishes to remain safe,” said Dumbledore.

Romany’s eyes narrowed and looked at Dumbledore speculatively before leaving the common room.

---

Hogwarts Infirmary...

Poppy stood over the prone figure of Harry Potter. His leg was covered in a healing salve and wrapped in bandages. Hermione sat next to the bed, watching her carefully.

Healer Hopkins had explained the prognosis for a Glass Razorback bite once the anti-venom had taken effect. Poppy now watched her patient, worried. He was not going to be happy when he woke up.

Dobby had left a short while ago, returning to report to Remus and Tonks. Many people were awoken as word of the attack on Harry spread. Amelia rushed to her office and, after a hurried conference with the duty officer, she sent an Auror to escort Minister Fudge into the office. Ten Aurors were immediately dispatched to Hogsmeade wearing concealment cloaks and had specific orders. A special owl was prepared to send to Hogwarts. Amelia and Tonks coordinated the best way to provide additional protection to Harry, and a cover story to explain the increased law enforcement presence.

Minister Fudge and Amelia then conferred with the Hogwarts Board of Governors, in most cases waking them up to apprise them of the situation. The Board of Governors had been reluctant to apply a permanent solution, but eventually a compromise was reached between the Ministry and the Board.

Back at Hogwarts, Hermione Granger sat next to the bed of a sleeping Harry Potter, his body exhausted by the ordeal, and wept quietly as the first rays of dawn touched the cold stones of the castle.

---

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

Dumbledore rolled out of his bed. It had been an eventful night and he was already trying to come up with ways to turn them to his advantage.

He was just getting around to his first cup of tea when he heard tapping at his bedroom window. With a sigh, he walked to the window and opened it, admitting a jet black, long eared owl into the room. When the owl landed on the table, he removed the letter and the bird immediately took off in a flurry of feathers.

The address on the envelope simply read ‘Headmaster’, with a Celtic cross in the corner. He frowned and pulled out his wand, running several detection spells on it. Detecting no magic, he opened it and extracted the letter.

*Headmaster,  
The Brotherhood will tolerate no further assaults on Harry Potter or his friend. You have been warned. Do not cross us again.  
The Brotherhood.*

As he finished reading the short note, the paper curled and started to smoke. In another moment it flashed into flame, leaving a stunned Dumbledore wondering how he had failed to detect the burning charm on the note. It never occurred to him that he had just experienced chemically treated flash paper, designed to burst into flame. A Muggle spy technique the MLE had borrowed from the MI6.

Dumbledore's fireplace suddenly flared to life and Professor McGonagall's head appeared. "Albus, Minister Fudge and Amelia Bones are approaching the castle with a large crowd of people, mostly Aurors from the look of them. Also, I've received a floo from Aberforth in the Hogs Head. He says that Hogsmeade is crawling with Brotherhood members."

"Minerva, please escort the Minister and Director Bones to my office. I will be there shortly myself," he replied.

*Could this day get any worse?* He wondered as he dressed and prepared himself to meet the Minister and Director of Magical Law Enforcement.

---

### **Author's Notes:**

And now for the dreaded Authors notes. OH NO! NOT THE AUTHORS NOTES!

The threat to press charges is largely a empty threat. If you haven't figured out by now that there is an ongoing investigation into Dumbledore and his cronies then we haven't done our job. Pressing charges would disrupt said investigation.

Harry will not be a phoenix animagus in this story, nor will he get Fawkes either. If Fawkes returns to this story it won't be until the near the end of the planned sequel to this story. As to why Harry won't get Fawkes, well you'll find out in a chapter or two.

Those people reviewing and complaining that they don't believe the abuse angle belong in the same group as those people that believe sticking a 12 yr old in a room with bars in the window and feeding him thru a cat flap in the door is normal. The abuse issue is a primary catalyst for this story and it will slowly filter its way out of the story. What JKR does and what we do are different. That's why we call it AU. If you don't like, don't read.

Athenakitty: "How much longer will Millicent chase Snape?" Not long. I suggest rereading the chapter. "Will Harry kick the Order out of Grimmauld?" I suggest going back rereading earlier chapters. Do you actually read this story or are you pulling Luna's trick and doing it upside? \* grin \*

We don't like the redeemed Draco either. But that isn't the point of him. To us, taking a character we hate and rewriting him into one we like is an exercise in testing our writing skills.

Snape's cover has been blown. He's stuck in the castle for a while. Of course that while may be shorter than he thinks if he keeps annoying our version of Harry.

I disagree with the idea that we have a H/G in canon. At the end of HBP he broke it off and from the lack of quality I suspect that JKR heading for a more unorthodox pairing. My guess is H/Hedwig for book seven. Attention! Sarcasm was included in this comment!!!

Yes the sorting hat song had the meter skewed. I did that because its AU and I hate poetry that rhymes on every other line. My wife who likes poetry that way didn't want to rewrite what I had written. I'd offer a refund but I'm out of checks. Will you take an IOU? My first pass of the sorting hat song was to make it sing limericks.

There was wizard from surrey,

Who's wand was quite furry.

Ginny was into petting

But Harry was not letting.

He'd rather stick it in curry!

Some of my favorite Fan Fictions are listed in my profile, and I strongly recommend No Thanks and Letters and Lunches by Old-Crow. Excellent work in my opinion.

### **Pet Peeves:**

Authors that jump topics/locations/points of view with no logical separation between the text. Don't you just love reading something like this?

“Wormtail! CRUCIO!”

“Harry, get your hand out of my skirt!” said Ginny hotly.

Is it too much to ask for some kind of separation between story sequences?

## Sunset Over Britain Painful Recovering

Standard Disclaimer:

### **Act 1, Scene 1:**

The stage is dark. Cue spotlight to the center of the stage. Cue Ron Weasley to walk to center of the stage.

“Ahem, the authors would like you to note that JKR owns all rights to these characters.”

Cue Piano Drop.

“AHHHHHHH!”

Cue spotlight on Hermione trying to hide the knife.

---

### Sunset over Britain Chapter 7

---

Hogwarts Entrance Hall...

Professor McGonagall met Minister Fudge and Director Bones at the entrance to the castle. With them were twelve Aurors, Remus and the Grangers.

“Good Morning Minister, Director. Headmaster Dumbledore is expecting you in his office,” said McGonagall, smiling at them.

“Yes well, obviously not all will be going to his office, Professor. Mr. and Mrs. Granger, along with Mr. Lupin, are here to check on Harry Potter, if you have no objections?” asked Fudge.

“No, no objections at all, Minister. I understand the Granger’s daughter is upstairs in the infirmary with Mr. Potter,” replied a confused McGonagall. She wondered how the word had leaked out so quickly, but was glad for it.

Amelia nodded to her people, and the Grangers and Remus were escorted from the Hall with four Aurors accompanying them. McGonagall escorted the remainder to Dumbledore’s office.

---

Hogwarts Infirmary...

The four Aurors split up as they reached the infirmary. Two were stationed outside the doors, one was stationed inside the infirmary and to the right of the doors, while the last positioned himself closer to Harry's bed.

Dan and Emma noticed Hermione sleeping on a bed next to Harry, still dressed in her robe and pajamas from the night before. Emma went to see her, while Dan and Remus stood at the foot of Harry's bed looking down at him.

Harry's face was pale, but he was sleeping. Hearing the doors open, Madam Pomfrey stuck her head out of her office to see who had come in. She was surprised to see two uniformed Aurors and the others.

Walking to Remus and Dan, she smiled at the two men. "Well, this is better than the last visitor. I just finished chasing Hagrid out. He wanted to keep the spider for his Care of Magical Creatures class!"

Remus smiled and shook his head, bemused by Hagrid's idea of proper study material. Looking back at Harry, his face fell. "Poppy, how is he?"

Madam Pomfrey's smile slipped from her face as she looked down at her patient. "He'll live, that's not in doubt anymore. But there was extensive damage to the muscle in his right leg. We can fix that, but it's a long process. It will be months before he's fully healed. In the meantime, he'll need a cane and a stiffening spell to help him get around for a while. We'll cast the spell on him to keep the leg straight, and the cane will help offset the strain he'll be putting on the leg. He'll also need to do a lot of exercises to build up the muscles in his leg."

"What about swimming?" asked Dan. "Harry enjoys swimming and it's good exercise, especially for legs. The water would give him buoyancy that he'd need."

Madam Pomfrey smiled at the muggle. "Mr. Granger, while that's an excellent idea, this is a thousand year old castle. As you might have guessed, we have no pool he can swim in."

Dan shrugged and said, "Well from what Hermione's told me, the Room of Requirement should be able to make one."

Poppy looked at him in shock, then she stammered, "Y-y-you know, that just might work! Why didn't I think of it before!"

Remus chuckled. "Now you understand why Hermione's the smartest young witch in this school."

Emma joined the three of them, while Hermione sat up on the bed and rubbed the sleep from her eyes. Everyone turned as Harry groaned and opened his eyes. Hermione bolted from her bed and rushed to his side.

"Hey you," she said softly. "How do you feel?"

“Tired... mmmm.... hurts some too...,” he whispered back, smiling at her.

Poppy ran a few diagnostic checks on him while he watched her silently. His hand slipped into Hermione’s.

“Mr. Potter, I want you to stay awake for a while. I’ll get an elf to bring you some breakfast, then you can take a nap if you like. You’re not going anywhere for a couple of days. I’ll talk to you later about what we need to do to finish healing you later. Right now, I’ll leave you in the company of your friends,” she said gruffly.

Harry nodded and turned back to Hermione, smiling weakly.

“So now I know it’s a myth...,” he murmured to her.

“Myth? What’s a myth Harry?” she asked confused.

“You girls... always say you look terrible in the morning... but you look real good to me...,” he said with a grin.

Hermione blushed, while Dan and Emma chuckled. Remus murmured to the two of them, “Well, he’s getting better.”

There was a popping sound and a house elf appeared, carrying a tray with breakfast for Harry. Remus and Hermione helped Harry sit up and then placed the tray on his lap and left.

“Remus, what’s wrong with my leg? I can barely move it,” Harry asked, grimacing.

Remus shared a look with the Grangers.

Dan turned to Hermione. “Pumpkin, why don’t you take your mum back to your dorm room and change? I’m sure she’d like to see where you’ve been staying,” he said softly.

Harry watched Hermione lead Emma from the infirmary before putting his fork down. Then, folding his arms across his chest, he eyed Remus.

“Remus... what do you have to say that Hermione can’t hear?” he growled. It would have been an impressive growl, were it not for the fact that he was still very weak.

“Nothing Harry, honest,” began Remus. “She’s heard this at least once, so she didn’t need to sit around to hear it again.”

Remus sat down on the bed next to Harry while Dan sat in a chair.

“Your leg has been badly injured. Madam Pomfrey assures me that it will heal, though there may be some small, permanent impairment. It’s going to be a slow recovery however, several months at least. In the meantime, you’ll need to use a cane to help you get about,” Remus said.



“Madam Pomfrey is going to suggest some exercises for your leg that will help Harry,” Dan said. “But the healing process will be slow and it’s going to hurt a lot. I suggested swimming and using the Room of Requirement for the physical therapy. It will probably be easier on you than weight training. I’ll talk to Hermione later, and let her know what you’ll need there and maybe get her a book on the subject so she can help you.”

Harry frowned and absently picked up his fork to begin eating again. Remus and Dan watched him closely for a while, not sure how he was taking the news.

The infirmary doors opened and Tonks walked in, a folder under her arm and Hermione and Emma at her side. Hermione had changed her clothes, and was now answering Emma’s questions about the ceiling in the Great Hall. When she noticed Harry was still awake, she rushed past Tonks and sat in a chair next to his bed.

Tonks smiled impishly. “You know Harry, you really should avoid playing with venomous spiders,” she said, approaching his bed.

“Very funny, Nymphadora,” he said, smiling when she cringed at the use of her first name.

“I see the anti-venom didn’t improve your sense of humor any,” she said with a mock scowl, placing her folder on the bedside table.

Harry eyed the metamorphmagus’ uniform and frowned. “Are you here on official business?” he asked.

“The Ministry and the Board of Governors had decided to station twelve of us here at Hogwarts to improve security after the attacks on you and Hermione.” Tonks confirmed.

“How did you know about that?” Hermione asked, stunned that the news had traveled so quickly.

“One of the Hogwarts house elves told Dobby, and he reported it to Remy and I after he told us of the attack on Harry.” Tonks said.

“What’s this?” Dan demanded. “Hermione was attacked too?”

“Daddy, it wasn’t serious...” Hermione started.

“Hermione, are you insane? Of course it was serious!” Harry exclaimed.

“Harry, you’re not helping,” she said in a pained voice.

“Just what is going on here?” Emma asked in a no-nonsense tone.

Seeing no way out of it, Hermione explained about Ron Weasley’s attack on her the night before. She tried to downplay the situation, but Harry wouldn’t let her. He was the one to explain what happened in the Great Hall afterwards.

Once the story had been told, Dan paced the infirmary, raging about killing the young man who dared to put his hands on his daughter, while Emma moved to Hermione's side and pulled her into an embrace.

Tonks did her best to calm Dan down, but it wasn't easy. Both Remus and Harry agreed with the furious man and weren't helping matters.

In a desperate bid to gain control of the situation, Tonks finally barked out, "Yes, we get the point, Dan. You're going to gut the bloody git and spread his entrails throughout England. Now sit down!"

Dan sat down, surprised. Tonks had always seemed so happy-go-lucky that the furious anger in her eyes was almost shocking.

Once she had everyone's attention, she beat back her own emotions and began to explain.

"The Minister and Director Bones are in Dumbledore's office as we speak, explaining the situation to him. He is being informed that the Aurors will be here for a while, improving security and keeping an eye on things. All wands within the castle are being checked for the Imperius curse, which we believe was used to control the spider that attacked Harry."

"All wands?" Harry asked.

"Yes, including those belonging to the staff," she confirmed.

"And the attack on Hermione? What's going to happen to that Weasley bastard?" Dan asked coldly.

Tonks removed an object from her pocket and enlarged it. She held out a Pensieve and looked at the young witch, still in her mother's embrace. "I'll need a written statement of the event, and a copy of the memory to confirm it, Hermione," she said gently.

When Hermione nodded and eased from her mother's arms, Harry frowned. "Once her account is confirmed, what will happen to Ron? Dumbledore refused to do anything about it."

"That's another reason why the Ministry and the Board of Governor's is involved, Harry. They won't allow this to pass. A hearing has been scheduled, though I don't know the date. Dumbledore and Ron will attend, the evidence will be examined, and a decision will be made."

When Hermione approached the young Auror, preparing to remove the memory, Emma frowned. "This won't hurt her, will it?"

"No, it won't hurt, though it may tickle a bit." Turning to Hermione, Tonks smiled. "Do you know how to do this, or do you need help?"

"I've read about it," Hermione said, frowning, "but I've never done it before."

“It’s not difficult, but I’ll go over the process with you, just to be sure,” Tonks said reassuringly.

The two spoke quietly about the process and, a few minutes later, the others watched as Hermione drew her wand and placed it next to her temple. A few seconds later, she pulled a long, silver string from her head and, with a flick, deposited it into the Pensieve.

Tonks muttered something softly under her breath while waving her wand over the small, rune-covered bowl. The quicksilver substance doubled in size and, with quick movements, the Auror re-deposited the memory into Hermione’s mind, keeping the copy for the official record.

“Good job, Hermione,” Tonks exclaimed. “I’m not surprised you were able to do it the first time. Remy always said you were an excellent student.”

Hermione blushed at the comment. “Thanks, Tonks. You said something about a written statement,” she asked, sitting back down in the chair next to Harry’s bed.

Tonks brushed off the young woman’s gratitude and explained what needed to be included in her statement. Pulling the proper form from her folder, she handed it to Hermione.

While the adults spoke quietly, Harry watched Hermione write her statement. When she paused and nibbled on the end of her quill, he tried not to smile. When she scratched her nose, he grinned outright.

Finishing a few minutes later, Hermione gave the form back to Tonks. Seeing Harry’s grin, she raised an eyebrow questioningly. When he crooked a finger at her, telling her to come closer, she leaned down to him. She frowned when he reached up and rubbed her nose.

“Harry?” she asked, wondering what he was doing.

“Ink,” he replied, showing her his finger, now smeared with ink.

She sat up suddenly, rubbing her nose vigorously and blushed when Harry laughed quietly, his eyes starting to droop tiredly.

Finishing his meal, Harry leaned back against the pillows with a sigh. His leg had started to throb with a dull ache and it felt like a lead weight.

“Harry, the Grangers and I will be staying in Hogsmeade for a few days. I’ll pick up a cane for you to use and bring it by either later today or tomorrow. We’ll probably be around until you’ve been released from the infirmary,” said Remus.

He nodded and looked at them all. “Thank you for coming,” he said to Remus and the Grangers.

He turned to look at Hermione, who was sitting on the edge of his bed, and grinned reassuringly at her before slipping off into sleep.

Carefully, so as to not wake him, everyone moved to the other side of the infirmary. Dan

explained some of what Harry would have to do to Hermione. She nodded and brightened when he said he'd get book that would explain the process better than he could.

With Harry asleep, there was no reason for any of them to stay in the infirmary. Hermione had classes to go to and the adults didn't want to risk running into Dumbledore.

Three of the Aurors who had accompanied them to the infirmary followed the adults. One remained on station in the infirmary, now wrapped in an invisibility cloak.

---

Headmaster's office, Hogwarts...

"Cornelius, Amelia, it's so nice to see you," Dumbledore exclaimed jovially. "Please, sit. Would you care for some tea?"

"No, no, Albus," Fudge replied, waving Amelia towards a chair before taking the one beside her. "We have little time for pleasantries. We are here for several reasons, not least of which was the attack on Mr. Potter last night."

"Terrible business, that," Dumbledore said as he sat down behind his desk. "But Madam Pomfrey tells me the child will make a full recovery, so there is no need for concern." That wasn't exactly what Poppy had told him, but they didn't need to know that.

Amelia raised an eyebrow. "No need for concern? A student was nearly killed last night, Headmaster. I would say there is every need for concern, and the Board of Governors agree with me."

"Now Amelia," Albus said condescendingly, "There is no need to involve the Board in this matter."

"You've caught the perpetrator of the attack, then?" she asked.

"Well, no, but..."

"Then it's obvious that Hogwarts is no longer a safe environment for students. The Board is concerned that, once news of this attack leaks out, parents will start removing their children from this school."

"There is no reason to expect the news will be leaked," Dumbledore said, frowning.

"Oh come now, Albus," Fudge said in disbelief. "How do you think we found out about it? You obviously didn't contact us, though you should have."

"I am the Headmaster of this school, Cornelius. What happens here is my business," Dumbledore said firmly.

"When you take care of business, yes. But it's come to our attention," Fudge said, waving a hand

to encompass Amelia and himself, “that you are not doing your job!”

“Not doing my job? The boy is alive, is he not?”

“Just, yes. But the attack should never have happened. But it is not only the attack on Mr. Potter that I speak of. It has come to our attention that there was an attack on another student that same day, of which you did nothing about.”

“Another attack?” Dumbledore asked in confusion.

“Miss Hermione Granger was attacked and sexually assaulted by one Ronald Weasley,” Amelia said incredulously. “Surely you are aware of it! The reports we have of the incident say you did nothing to punish Mr. Weasley and refused to investigate the matter.”

“You know how teenagers are, Amelia. The whole thing was a simple misunderstanding. Mr. Weasley has feelings for the girl that she does not return. He insulted her and she made up this story to punish him for it, that’s all.”

“We shall see if that is the case, Albus,” Cornelius said, ominously.

“Whatever do you mean, Minister?” Dumbledore asked.

“We will come to that in a moment. First, I am here to inform you that twelve Aurors will be stationed in Hogwarts for a time. They will be here to insure the safety of the students and to help increase the security around the castle.”

Dumbledore frowned. The Order could not meet in a castle full of Aurors! “I really do not think that is necessary...”

“What you think is irrelevant, Albus,” Amelia said testily. “The Board has decided that this is the best course of action and has given their consent for Cornelius’ plan. My Aurors will be stationed here regardless of your thoughts on the matter.”

A knock at the office door startled the Headmaster. “Come!” he ordered sharply.

Nymphadora Tonks entered the office and greeted Dumbledore and the Minister before standing beside Amelia.

“Your orders have been carried out, Director,” she said firmly, handing a small, bowl-like object to Amelia. “The memory’s been placed in the Pensieve and a stasis charm has been cast on it. I’ve also taken statements from the victim and a few witnesses to the incident in the Great Hall.”

“Very good, Miss Tonks,” Amelia said, placing the Pensieve on Dumbledore’s desk. “And the other situation?”

“The others have begun the wand check,” Tonks said. “With so many student and staff wands to check, it will take some time.”

“Understood,” Amelia said.

“Please inform us if you find anything else, Auror Tonks. And thank you for the update,” Cornelius said seriously. “Your timing could not have been better.”

“It was my pleasure, Sir,” Tonks said. Understanding a dismissal when she heard one, she turned and left the office, trying to not smile. The expression on the Headmaster’s face was priceless.

As the door closed behind her, Dumbledore closed his mouth and frowned at the Pensieve on his desk. “What is this all about?” he asked in confusion.

“This,” Amelia said, laying her hand over the Pensieve, “is a copy of the memory of the attack from Miss Granger. The statements from witnesses should be obvious.” Taking the Pensieve from the desktop, she shrunk it and placed it in her pocket.

“This really is not necessary...” Dumbledore began again, watching the small bowl disappear.

“The evidence will tell its own tale, Albus,” Cornelius stated. “If you are right, then there’s been no harm done. However, if Miss Granger’s account of the incident is correct, action must be taken against Mr. Weasley. A rapist must not be allowed to run free, even you must admit that.”

“Rapist? I think you overstate the case!” Dumbledore exclaimed in alarm.

“We shall see,” Fudge said. “A hearing with the Board is scheduled for November 15th to examine both the evidence and the witness statements. Mr. Weasley will attend the hearing, as will you, as Headmaster of this school. He will be able to present his own testimony about the events of that evening. A Pensieve of his memories may be used, and the Ministry has authorized the use of Veritaserum, if necessary.”

“You go to far and are taking the matter much to seriously,” Albus sputtered.

“And you are not taking it seriously enough,” Amelia raged. “A student under your care may have been sexually assaulted in the halls of this school, and you would rather sweep it under the rug and call it teenage hormones? Where is your sense of outrage, Albus?”

Dumbledore stood and leaned towards Amelia threateningly. “How dare you imply...”

“Enough!” Cornelius barked. “Sit down, Albus. The evidence will either prove or disprove the young woman’s claims. Either way, the hearing is set and you will attend with Mr. Weasley.”

The Headmaster collapsed back into his chair and rubbed his aching temples. He had Aurors in the halls of Hogwarts to deal with and now a hearing? Things were getting out of hand.

“What was this about checking wands?” he asked, not sure he wanted to know the answer.

Fudge blinked in surprise. “I would have thought it obvious,” he began.

“Explain it,” Albus said, more sharply than he’d intended.

When Fudge bristled in annoyance, Amelia stepped in to avoid an argument.

“The Aurors are checking wands to see who cast the Imperius curse,” she said calmly.

“Imperius...what are you talking about?” Dumbledore said, puzzled.

“We believe the Razorback was under the Imperius curse when it attacked Mr. Potter. It is the only thing that explains why its handler wasn’t also bitten, as the species is hyper-aggressive. If we find the wand that cast the Imperius, we find Mr. Potter’s attacker. As the attack happened in his dorm, his roommate’s wands will be checked first. If they’re cleared, we’ll examine the wands of the other students in Gryffindor House and move on from there.

“I believe you said the staff’s wands would also be checked?” Albus asked.

“Of course. The staff has access to all common rooms as well as dorm rooms,” Cornelius said, unable to believe Dumbledore could be so thick. “As Amelia is an Auror in her own right, she will check your wand while we are here.”

“My wand...this is an outrage!” Dumbledore thundered. “I would no more harm the boy than you would, Cornelius!”

Fudge shrugged, enjoying the moment. “No one who was in the school at the time of the attack is exempt from this, Albus. As such, your wand must be examined. One would think you would be happy to set an example for your students.”

Drawing his wand in indignation, he placed it on the desktop and watched, stone faced, as Amelia check his wand. When she passed it back a few minutes later, announcing him cleared from suspicion, Fudge smiled.

“Come now, Dumbledore,” he said, his eyes dancing, “that wasn’t so hard, was it?”

Refusing to be baited, Dumbledore tucked his wand up his sleeve and eyed the Minister over his half-moon glasses. “How long will the Aurors be with us?”

“Oh, not long. Two weeks, a month tops. Once the wand check has been completed, they will start working on security measures for the castle. Your full cooperation is expected, of course.”

“Of course,” Albus said, shortly.

“Excellent! Well then, as I have nothing further, I think that concludes our meeting,” Fudge said as he and the Director stood and moved towards the door. “If you have any questions, feel free to floo me, Albus. Have a pleasant day,” he called, escorting Amelia from the room.

Once the office door had closed, Dumbledore ripped his glasses off and threw them down on his desk. Gripping the arms of his chair tightly, he leaned his head back and ground his teeth in

frustration. He wasn't sure he could protect the Weasley boy and that meant dealing with Molly.

“Bloody hell!” he growled to the now empty room.

---

Hogwarts Infirmary, later that day...

Harry opened his eyes and looked around. He stretched, or tried to, but his right leg wasn't very responsive. The flash of pain caused by his movements caused him to inhale sharply.

“I see you've finally decided to wake up,” said a familiar voice.

Harry turned to see Hermione sitting on the edge of his bed. Ginny and Neville were on the bed next to his, watching him. He tried to sit up, but his leg made the movement difficult.

Neville leapt off the bed to help him, while Hermione piled pillows behind him. The movement caused his injured leg to flare with pain and he hissed his breath through clenched teeth, waiting for it to go away.

Hermione took a potion vial off the nightstand and uncorked it before handing it to him. “Drink this, it will help with the pain,” she said softly.

He drank the offered potion gratefully, and then smiled as the pain eased. Ginny and Neville filled him in on the details of what had happened the previous night, while Hermione sat quietly.

Later, when Neville said he and Ginny should head down to dinner, Harry nodded and thanked the pair for coming to see him. As the infirmary doors closed behind them, he turned slightly and watched Hermione. She was staring at her hands, refusing to meet his eyes.

“Are you angry with me?” he asked, unable to stand the silence any longer. “You seem... distant... like you have bad news you need to tell me.”

When she didn't say anything, he sighed. He didn't really know what was on her mind, but he thought he knew. It was then that he made a classic mistake and started talking without having any real clue as to what was bothering her.

“Hermione,” he said, his heart ripping from what he intended to say. “You knew my life would be a dangerous one... I'll understand if you don't want a part of that kind of life. Heck, I don't want a part of that kind of life. I won't make a scene... if you want to move on...” he trailed off, choking up, and turned his face away.

He felt the bed dip slightly and her arms snake around him carefully, avoiding his leg as she curled her body into his. When she started to shake, sobbing, he wrapped his arms around her and pulled her closer.

When the storm had passed, she looked up at him, lips trembling, her face wet and her eyes red-



shot. “I thought I was going to lose you last night... and when Ginny and Neville talked about what happened, all those feelings came rushing back. That’s why I wasn’t talking,” she whispered. Then his words finally sunk in and she sat up and glared at him. “If you weren’t in the hospital, I’d put you in here myself. What makes you think I wanted to leave you?” she hissed angrily.

She was about to poke him when he grabbed her hand and pulled her back into his embrace. She struggled for a moment before relaxing against him.

“Once again Harry Potter makes an idiot of himself in front of his girlfriend by assuming he knows what she’s thinking. I’m sorry,” he murmured. He smiled softly when she chuckled.

They both looked up when someone nearby coughed and saw Madam Pomfrey and Professor McGonagall watching them, amused.

“I’m please to see you’re recovering, Mr. Potter,” said McGonagall. “Madam Pomfrey has informed me of the requirements for your therapy, so we’ll adjust your class schedule accordingly.

Now Miss Granger, if you would kindly let go of Mr. Potter, I do believe Madam Pomfrey needs to check her patient,” she continued, her lips twitching.

Blushing, Hermione sat up when Harry reluctantly released her.

Madam Pomfrey stepped a little closer, while Hermione sat in the chair next to his bed.

“Mr. Potter, I’m afraid that what I’m about to do will be painful, but muscle regeneration spells are not pleasant. We’ll have to do these once a day for at least ten days. It’s important that you remain still I’m done, so I suggest you brace yourself. The spell will run it’s course in five minutes, but it will feel much longer to you, I’m afraid,” she said sympathetically.

Madam Pomfrey looked at him for a moment and, when he nodded, she pulled out her wand and murmured an incantation over him. He gripped the sides of the bed and laid his head back.

Madam Pomfrey wasn’t surprised by his small reaction to what she knew to be a very painful spell. After all, the patient before her had suffered far worse in his lifetime. She only regretted that she had to add to his memories of painful experiences.

Harry turned his head to Hermione and looked at her, trying to smile. She was chewing on her lip as she watched the spell do its work. Once Madam Pomfrey’s spell had run its course, Harry sighed heavily and tried to relax his trembling body. Near the end, it had been difficult to remain silent as the agony ripped through his leg.

Pomfrey ran a few more tests and seemed pleased with the results. “I expect I’ll be able to release you by lunch tomorrow, Mr. Potter, if you can master the stiffening spell for your leg. Mr. Lupin informs me he’ll bring you a cane, which you’ll need for a while still. For now, I’ll have a house

elf bring you and Miss Granger some dinner. I expect she has your assignments for today.”

Madam Pomfrey went back to her office, leaving Harry with Hermione and McGonagall.

“Miss Granger, since you share all the same classes with Mr. Potter, I expect you’ll be the one helping him get to class?” Professor McGonagall asked.

“Yes, Professor.”

“Very well, then. Madam Pomfrey doesn’t want him going back to his classes until the day after tomorrow. As his pace through the halls will be slow, I will give you both passes, excusing any lateness. Mr. Potter, Madam Pomfrey warned me to tell you, any signs of excessive pain and you are to return to her immediately. Am I understood?” asked the stern Professor.

“Yes Ma’am, understood perfectly,” he replied.

“Good. I will have Mr. Longbottom bring you something casual to wear for tomorrow when you are released. Your dinner will be up shortly and Miss Granger has your assignments. I suggest getting to work on them.”

Hermione started pulling out her books eagerly and Harry smiled in resignation.

“I think, Professor, that I have little choice in the matter about my assignments,” he said, his lips twitching in amusement as he watched his girlfriend.

---

## Plans in Motion...

The plant was heavily guarded. Increases in the threat of terrorism had caused the company to vastly increase security. Armed guards, video cameras, all were useless when the time came.

There was a small popping sound as a figure appeared near the tank wall. With a wave of her wand, the witch, currently under the Imperius curse, sliced open a ten-foot long portion of the tank, near the bottom. She watched and waited as hundreds of gallons of refined, high-octane gasoline spilled out, surrounding her.

When the time was right, she pointed her wand at her feet and murmured, “*Incendio* .”

Alarms sounded throughout the complex, which, in turn, triggered automatic alarms in every nearby fire station. But it was already too late.

As men from the plant rushed out to fight the flames, the blaze traveled the short distance to the tank the witch had cut open and reached inside, hungrily. They watched, frozen and horrified, knowing it was too late to stop it, too late to run. Then, with a tremendous, deep-throated roar, the tank exploded.

Millions of red-hot fragments lanced outward, piercing other nearby tanks and causing them to

burst into flame. The survivors never noticed the four-foot long tank support beam as it was blown away from the fiery hell that had descended upon them.

The beam traveled nearly a thousand yards before arrowing downwards and collided with a liquefied natural gas tank. The impact created a hole and, being heavier than air, the gas began to flow across the ground like water. As the gas was odorless, the ketones giving it the distinctive rotten egg odor only being added once it was ready for commercial use, no one realized the dangerous situation forming around them, as they fought conflagration caused by the exploding gasoline tanks.

The escaping gas should have set off more alarms, but the electrical disruptions from the fire caused the system to fail. Flowing into the sewer system, and running down streets, the liquefied natural gas passed unnoticed.

Nearly an hour after the support beam had first pierced the tank, the port area of the city of Bristol exploded.

The shock wave traveled out, shattering windows five miles away. Buildings nearly a mile away from the tank farm burst into flame. Men and women died before they heard the explosion that had ended their lives. Vehicles were incinerated and, before the tugs in the nearby harbor could prevent it, an oil tanker tied up at the port waiting to be offloaded caught fire.

A commercial airline pilot, in route to London, spotted the explosion and radioed Heathrow approach. It was the first notification for those outside of Bristol that the city had suffered a major disaster.

Voldemort's second war against the wizarding world had begun with an attack on those least prepared to deal with it.

---

Hogwarts, The Great Hall, Lunchtime the next day...

Neville was just leaving the infirmary after delivering clothes to Harry when Remus entered. Twirling the cane he'd brought, he watched Harry relax on the bed as Madam Pomfrey completed the muscle regeneration spell.

Hermione helped Harry put on the shirt Neville had brought him and Remus grinned. Emma and Hermione may have hated the t-shirts, but even they had to admit that the young man had flair. This one read: Official Participant of Voldemort's Second World Tour, 1996.

"Remus," Hermione said, spotting him, "have you made any progress on that little research project yet?"

"No, not yet Hermione," he replied as he sat down in a nearby chair. "I've checked the Ministry records and several libraries, but other than a few obscure historical references, I haven't found anything useful."

“Maybe the Shelf of Requirement would help?” asked Harry.

“Of course! The Shelf of Requirement should at least give him a starting point,” replied Hermione with a snap of her fingers.

She then proceeded to explain the Shelf of Requirement they had discovered in Padfoot Manor. Remus’ eyes lit up, echoing the gleam in Hermione’s eyes.

As Harry watched them, an idea began to form, but it was something he’d need to consider later. Right now, he needed to bring Hermione and Remus back to earth.

“The two most important people in my life are book hounds, intent on bending me to their wicked ways,” Harry said with a laugh.

Remus looked startled for a moment, and then engulfed Harry in a hug, while Hermione looked on, smiling softly.

Harry, startled himself by Remus’ reaction to his words, felt his eyes well up as he realized that the older man’s hug was something he’d spent his entire life wishing for. It wasn’t the embrace itself, but the meaning behind it. He’d always wanted a family, and now he had one. It wasn’t a conventional family to say the least, but they were his.

“Now how about helping me get out of here?” asked Harry plaintively as Remus released him.

Between the two of them, they managed to get Harry to his feet. They then watched as he cast the spell to stiffen his leg at the knee, allowing him to put weight on it.

Remus handed Harry the cane he had picked up for him and spent several minutes helping him learn to use it. Once he felt confident enough with it, the three slowly walked out of the infirmary.

Remus wanted to stay with them, but he also wanted to avoid encountering Dumbledore. He cautioned Harry not to rush his recovery, before leaving them at the entrance hall.

Harry walked slowly, his stiff right leg making any significant speed difficult for him. Hermione walked a foot or two away, not helping, but watching him carefully in case he needed it. At the entrance, they paused for a moment and the room fell silent as the student body noticed them.

Frowning at the stares, Harry headed for a large empty portion of the Gryffindor table. He had a little trouble sitting on the stone bench and had to grab his leg and swing it over before turning to the table itself.

As Hermione settled herself beside him, Neville and Ginny sat down across from them, both grinning widely. A few moments later, Susan and Luna joined them.

At the Slytherin table, Draco Malfoy stood up and walked over to the Gryffindor’s. A hush fell over those in the Great Hall as the two enemies faced each other. When Ginny slid over to make room and Draco sat down, the hall broke out in excited chatter.

“Welcome to the Outcasts of Hogwarts, Draco,” Harry said with a smirk, offering him a drink.

Draco sniffed in disdain. “I prefer to think of them as the outcasts. I can’t help it if they are unable to understand that.”

Reactions to Draco sitting at the Gryffindor table were mixed, at best. Most of the Gryffindor’s were glaring at the group. At the Head table, Professor McGonagall was trying not to smile. She loved her House, and felt pride that at least some of them had managed to look beyond House boundaries. Dumbledore watched, his expression blank, and wondered if he might use this new development to his advantage. Snape, a man who always guarded his outward show of emotion, was clearly shocked.

---

Malfoy Manor...

“Well Lucius? What news have you?” Voldemort snapped at the man standing before him.

“My lord, the attack on Potter failed. Although, from what I understand, it was close and Potter was severely injured, he is recovering from that attack. Rudolphus is now planning an attack that will take advantage of his injuries...”

“No! I have other plans I wish to implement in regard to Potter. Tell Rudolphus to send word to our little Gryffindor spy to await new instructions,” Voldemort said, interrupting him. “Now, what else can you tell me?”

“The attack on Bristol went off as I expected. According to the muggle newspapers, over four thousand muggles died and there are many thousands injured. They’re blaming the attack on terrorists. The technique was so effective I suggest we start employing it more often. It costs us little to use wizards and witches under the Imperius curse, and wastes none of our resources, my lord.

“Finally, my contact in the Ministry suggests the MLE is tied up with a major investigation against a high ranking member of the Wizengamot. I can only suspect at this point that they are targeting Dumbledore, but that is not confirmed. I am trying to find out more information, but my contact has limited information available to him,” concluded Lucius.

“Very well Lucius, I am pleased. Continue the attacks on the muggles. As to the Ministry, I think we must find other ways of penetrating it. Perhaps we could even come up with a way of clearing your name. Would you like to walk those halls again as a free man?” asked Voldemort, his face twisted into a sneer.

“I will walk wherever you command me to walk,” replied Lucius bowing low.

---

Moves...

Dumbledore sat in his office pouring over some old volumes. During the last two weeks he had survived by locking himself in his office or by spending time researching in the library of the Wizengamot, while Aurors roamed the halls of the school. He had wiled away the hours by plunging into research.

If he was correct, he'd finally have the means to bring Harry back under his wing, but he'd have to be cautious.

Carefully jotting down all his notes and references, he rolled up the parchment and sent them to his clerk to tidy up into the proper legal terms.

*Yes , he mused, this will put Potter back into a position where I can control him again.*

Giving the parchment to a school owl, he sent it off to his Ministry office. As the owl took wing, he leaned back and smiled.

---

Gryffindor Common Room...

Ron waited until the portrait banged shut behind Harry and his friends before turning to Dean. "Look, I don't like the idea of them having a Slytherin at our table. It isn't right! Those slimy Slytherins are all Death Eaters. Everyone knows that."

"I know, Ron. But you saw the teachers. They allowed it, so there isn't anything we can do about it," replied Dean loudly.

"Did you know that the sorting hat wanted to put Potter into Slytherin when he was sorted? He talked it into putting him into Gryffindor instead," Ron said, glancing at the small crowd of fifth through seventh years trying to eavesdrop.

"And look what he's done! He's turned Neville, Hermione and Ginny against their own house. Bunch of bloody traitors, they are," growled Dean.

"I bet Harry brought that spider into the dorm himself and it bit him accidentally, instead of biting one of us," said Seamus.

"Stupid git refused to play Quidditch this year, too. He's ruined our chances to get the cup!" said Ron angrily. As the new Quidditch captain, it still burned him that Gryffindor would lose the House cup on his watch.

As the three continued to talk, a number of the faces in the crowd darkened and a sense of anger grew towards people they had known for years.

---

Room of Requirement...

Hermione had learned a lot about herself in the past two weeks since Harry's attack and some of what she had learned had not pleased her. The course of spell work to rebuild Harry's muscles in his leg was complete, but his leg was still dreadfully weak. The exercises he needed to do were extremely painful to him and each time he was ready to collapse in exhaustion, nearly weeping from the pain, she'd browbeat him into getting up and pushing himself harder.

Helping Harry did have one perk as far as Hermione was concerned. Every night, before starting his exercises, she'd massage his leg, and then do it again when he was done. The problem was what happened between those massages. Since his release from the infirmary and the start of his therapy, Harry seemed to be either too tired, or just not interested in holding her. And that worried her more than she'd like to admit.

On more than a few occasions she had crawled into bed, nearly exhausted and emotionally spent, wondering how she could be so cruel to someone she loved. Twice she had brought Harry to a towering rage trying to goad him into working harder on his leg. Other times she watched impassively as he broke down in tears from the pain, and then pushed him harder. While the effort was paying off, he could now walk for brief periods without the stiffening charm, she kept asking herself was it hurting their relationship.

Tonight she was with Harry again in the Room of Requirement. When the Outcasts, as they now called themselves, learned that Harry and Hermione were spending time there every night and that he was using a pool, they joined them.

Usually the Outcasts continued working on their Occlumency, while Harry and Hermione worked on his leg. After an hour or so, they'd join the couple in the pool.

The group had been shocked the first time they saw what Hermione did to Harry during his therapy and it had disrupted their practice. Now, when the Outcasts joined them, she was smart enough to split the room into two sections.

Hermione had just finished massaging his leg from his ankle to his thigh, and was about to strap on the weights he used, when he grabbed her. She squeaked in surprise when he pulled her roughly to him.

"Tonight," he whispered to her huskily, "I need a different kind of therapy."

Then he kissed her. He pulled her on top of his prone body on the low massage table and ran his hand up through her hair. Surprised, she wasn't sure how to react, but his passion was contagious. She returned his kiss, surprised that she wasn't embarrassed to be lying on top of him.

When he finally broke the kiss, he looked into her dilated eyes, and gently rubbed her cheek with the back of one hand. Although his hands had not strayed far from her back or face, she was surprised to find her own hands had slipped up under his shirt.

"I know this hasn't been easy for you," he said softly. "It hasn't been easy for either of us. But never think I don't appreciate what you've done for me."

She buried her head in his shoulder. *How could he know what I was thinking?* She thought wildly.

He stroked her hair gently. "I think this has hurt you more than it's hurt me, Hermione, and I'm truly sorry for that. But it will get better, love... I promise."

She lay quietly against him, allowing his words to sink in. Then her head popped up and she stared into his eyes. "What did you say?"

Harry started to repeat what he said, but she interrupted him again. "No, what did you call me?" she asked. How could he be so dense she asked herself.

He suddenly looked like the proverbial toddler caught with his hand in the cookie jar and Hermione had to stifle a laugh.

"Umm... love?" he whispered, blushing.

"And when did you start thinking of me that way, Mr. Potter?" she asked him softly, her eyes intent on his.

"Before the attack... and then after. No matter how angry you made me, I couldn't stay mad at you... it hurt me to see you hurting... I've never felt this way about anyone before, Hermione. I don't know if it's real love, but I don't know what else I can call it..." he said in a low, husky tone.

Her smile lit the room and kissed him deeply. His arms wrapped around her, pulling her close. Neither heard the opening of the door.

"Well, it seems like muggle 'therapy' might make it worth getting injured, after all," said a droll voice.

Hermione and Harry turned to see Draco standing in the doorway with the rest of the Outcasts behind him, grinning.

Luna pushed Draco into the room. "Oh, leave off them, Draco. We all know they're attracted to each other because they've both been bitten by rabid Dweebles," she said airily.

Draco looked at Luna with disdain. "There's no such thing as Dweebles," he stated firmly.

Luna made a clucking sound and looked at him. "And I thought you were smart, Draco. Everyone knows the Potion of Pruning requires ground up Dweeble wings," she said airily and started to hum as she removed her shoes.

Hermione climbed off Harry and rolled her eyes at Luna's comments. Draco caught the motion and turned towards Luna once more. "Look Luna, even Hermione doesn't believe you."

Luna waved a hand as if chasing away a fly. "Hermione is smart Draco, but not all knowledge comes from books. Besides, she doesn't believe in the Crumple Horned Snorkack, either." She



then unbuttoned her blouse.

“Luna!” Hermione shouted. “You can’t undress in front of the guys!”

“Why not, Hermione? How are knickers and a bra different from a bikini?” asked the pretty Ravenclaw.

Hermione stood for a long moment, trying to come up with an argument, while the other girls went into the nearby dressing rooms to change. Fuming, Hermione turned to Harry, expecting to have to glare at him for staring at the half naked Luna.

Instead, she saw Draco watching the blonde undress and dive into the pool, while Harry stared at Hermione.

Stepping closer, she could see a gentle hunger in his unfocused eyes. “Harry?” she asked softly.

He shook his head slightly. “Sorry, Hermione. I was just thinking about you in that bikini over the summer,” he murmured, blushing.

Her face flamed in response.

---

And Counter Moves...

As a matter of routine procedure, all new potential laws were circulated among the Ministry Department Heads so they could point out conflicts and possible flaws in the proposed legislation.

Amelia was reviewing one such proposal when she gasped as she realized the potential problem the newly proposed law would cause. Standing quickly and moving towards her office door, she jerked it open to find an aide sitting at the desk outside.

“Summon Auror Tonks to my office as quickly as possible,” she growled.

It was more than hour before Tonks returned from the field and entered Amelia’s office. “You sent for me Director?”

“Yes, Tonks. Take a seat and look at this,” Amelia said grimly, handing the young woman a piece of parchment.

As Tonks read the proposed law, her hair cycled through a variety of colors. She paled visibly and, with a trembling hand, passed the parchment back to Amelia. “How much of a chance does this have at passing?” she asked quietly.

Amelia sat back and considered the current makeup of the Wizengamot. “I’d say it’s slightly better than fifty-fifty right now, Tonks. Of course the Ministry will oppose it, but I think we need to come up with contingency plan and then warn Mr. Potter about what may be coming. The real problem is coming up with an alternative that’s acceptable to Harry,” she concluded.

The two women sat in silence for a while before Amelia broke out into a grin and looked at younger woman intently. “Tell me, Tonks, you were a cousin to Sirius Black, were you not?” asked Amelia

Alarm bells started to ring in Tonks’ head. “Yes I was, Director. But you know if I do this I’ll have to resign from the Order.”

Amelia pursed her lips for a moment, considering the options. Tonks had not been actively providing information concerning the Order for over a month now. Her current assignment had precluded her from fulfilling that role. Resigning from the Order might provide a minor inconvenience to the investigation, but at this stage, her resignation would not affect things to greatly.

Making her decision, she looked across her desk at the young Auror. “I think that you should go craft your resignation letter to Dumbledore, while I have our department legal people file all the necessary paperwork. Remember to tell Mr. Potter that this is merely a legal fiction, and will not really change his status. In fact, if the new law isn’t approved, his status will remain unchanged,” she said evenly.

Tonks nodded, surprised and a little shocked at the sudden turn of events.

---

Breakfast, Great Hall...

Harry and the Outcasts sat at one end of the Gryffindor table and, as he watched them interact as a group, he smiled inwardly. Most of them had already picked up occlumency and he figured that the rest would have it down before the month was out.

He broke from his reverie when a non-descript owl arrived, dropped a parchment in front of him and took wing quickly, not waiting for a reply. Frowning, he picked it up and opened it.

*Harry,  
Important we meet this weekend. Three Broomsticks, room five, at noon. Be there.  
Tonks*

Harry passed the note to Hermione and watched as she frowned while reading it. When she passed it back with a questioning look, he shrugged, balled it up and banished it.

At the Head table, Dumbledore received an entirely different note from another owl.

*Albus,  
It is with regret that I must tender my resignation, effective immediately, to the Order of the Phoenix. Demands at work and personal life are making it increasingly difficult for me to play any sort of significant role in the organization and I expect those demands to increase in the weeks to come.  
Nymphadora Tonks.*

Dumbledore frowned. He had just lost an important asset into the workings of the Ministry. Sighing, he placed the letter in his pocket. Her resignation didn't affect much in the Order except access to Ministry happenings and he had alternate sources for that sort of information.

---

## Defense Against the Dark Arts Class...

Back at the Gryffindor table, Harry packed his books back into his bag, getting ready for class. He and Hermione, along with Neville, Susan and Draco had Defense Against the Dark Arts next. Turning to Hermione, he picked up her bag and stood holding both bags. She looked up from her seat and smiled at him before standing.

Over the past weeks Harry had managed to work with Professor Blackthorne in reducing his power output. It hadn't been easy, but he'd managed to achieve a near instinctual level of control over the entire range of his power. He still couldn't participate in some of the dueling that took place in class, as his stiff leg prevented it.

Romany stood in front of the classroom, watching as the students filed in. Once they were seated, she called Seamus to the front of the class.

"Last month we talked about concealment methods, how to use them and how to detect them. Now we begin a new phase, where we'll look into different shields and their uses. Seamus, go to the other end of the platform and shield against the stinging hex I'll be sending at you."

Seamus nodded and walked down to the end of the platform. He turned to face her, wand drawn and ready.

"Attero," said Romany calmly

"Protego!" shouted Seamus.

The bright blue beam lanced down the platform, hit Seamus' shield and bounced off, hitting the ceiling.

"Thank you, Seamus, you may return to your seat. Five points to Gryffindor," said Romany.

"Now, there are many types of shielding spells you can rely on. The Protego shield charm is one of the most common, although it will not block some spells. In some cases you'll use transfigured objects as shields to block those spells that cannot be normally blocked by a spell. The key to using any shield spell lies in understanding its flaws and its strengths. For example, a shield that cannot block physical objects, but blocks most spell energies, is only as good as long as you understand that fact.

"Now, let's try something a little different. Weasley, Potter, up on the platform," Romany called out.

As the two men walked up to the platform, taking positions on opposite ends, Romany continued

to speak. Ron had left Harry and Hermione alone the past few weeks, but the knowledge of his upcoming hearing grated on him. He had already received one howler from his parents over the subject.

“Mr. Weasley will send stinging hexes at Mr. Potter, while Mr. Potter will block them using a transfigured object. Got that?” Romany asked. When both young men nodded, she smiled. “Excellent. Begin!”

Harry moved his cane to his other hand and transfigured it into a small, metal shield.

Ron started firing off stinging hexes and Harry deflected them, one after the other. Frustrated, Ron increased the pace. With his stiff leg, all Harry could do is stand and move his shield. Dancing around was nearly impossible.

Several in the class started to snicker as Ron kept up his pace and seemed to be unable to touch Harry. His face turned a bright purple and Seamus yelled, “Get him, Ron!” Romany turned to admonish Seamus. During her moment of distraction, Ron decided to change tactics.

“Solitudo visagigo!” he shouted.

Romany’s head whipped around, but it was too late and the spell burst against Harry’s shield in a blinding flash of light. Because it was aimed low, Harry was hit full in the face with the blinding light.

Groping blindly, Harry quickly cast two spells in rapid succession.

“Refugium multiplicatus” he muttered and his body was surrounded with a soft glow as the full body rebounding charm took hold. “Serpentsortia regina,” Harry murmured next, and a figure formed in the center of the platform.

The twenty five foot anaconda raised its head and looked at Harry. The class gasped and several of the girls moved back. Even Romany took a step back in surprise.

“*Your command, master?*” hissed the snake.

“*Disarm my opponent and bind him,*” Harry replied in Parseltongue. He still couldn’t see but he knew Ron had stopped firing hexes at him.

Ron stood transfixed by the sight of the huge snake slithering towards him. The head reared up fully to look Ron in the eye while the tail swung around and curled around his legs, wrapping him securely. Ron started whimpering as the snake pinned his arms to his sides. The Slytherins in the class started laughing. Several of the Gryffindor’s turned and looked ready to pull their wands.

“THAT IS ENOUGH!” roared Romany. “Potter! Release Mr. Weasley immediately.”

Harry nodded in her general direction, then hissed again at the snake. “*Your task is complete, my friend. Take my thanks and return to your home.*”

*“Until we meet again, master ,”* the snake replied, and then faded from sight.

Harry dispelled his body charm and stood at the ready, still unable to see anything. Romany charged up the platform and looked at the two with disgust. “Mr. Weasley, twenty five points from Gryffindor and a week’s detention with Mr. Filch.”

Turning to Harry, about to admonish him, she realized he wasn’t quite looking at her. Frowning, she walked over to him. “Mr. Potter?” she asked.

His head swung around, trying to see her. His eyes still didn’t meet hers, but looked over her shoulder. She took his head in her hands and peered into his eyes, noting their unfocused quality and realized he was blind.

“Mr. Malfoy, would you run on down to Professor Snape and request a bottle of eyesight restorer please?” she said, carefully leading Harry back to his seat.

Hermione gasped and turned to glare at Ron as Draco left the room.

“What’s the matter, Potter? Can’t see your hands in front of your nose? Bet you still smell like a Slytherin,” drawled Ron. Several Gryffindors laughed with Ron.

Romany glared at him. “Mr. Weasley, you are excused from class with a failing grade for the day. Go directly to your Head of House and explain to her why you’ve just lost Gryffindor an additional fifty points on top of your original twenty-five.”

Ron glared back at her, then started shoving books into his bag. With a sneer on his lips, he stomped from the room, barely missing Draco who had just returned with a small vial and an eyedropper.

Draco handed the potion to Professor Blackthorne and Hermione moved to Harry’s side, helping him to tilt his head back.

“Three drops should do it, Professor,” Hermione said softly as she held Harry’s head.

“I am aware of that, Miss Granger. Hold still, Mr. Potter. This will sting, but you’ll be as good as new in a few minutes,” Romany said.

Harry blinked furiously as his eyes stung. When his vision was restored, the class continued.

---

Hogwarts Library...

Saturday rolled around and Harry and Hermione were walking to the library to meet up with the Outcasts. Just outside the library, he threw on his invisibility cloak.

“I’ll be back as soon as I can, Hermione. Cover for me if anyone asks, alright?” he said in a hushed tone.

Nodding, she leaned up and kissed him briefly. When she stepped back from him, he vanished. She turned resolutely and entered the library. The Outcasts looked at her questioningly when they noticed Harry was missing. She cast a privacy charm over their table and looked around before speaking.

“If anyone asks, Harry was just here and he’ll be back soon...” she whispered.

---

The Three Broomsticks...

Harry entered The Three Broomsticks and quietly made his way up to room number five. Slipping into the room silently, he found that Remus, Tonks and Amelia had already arrived. When he removed his invisibility cloak, wand in hand, he startled the three of them.

“Merlin, Harry! I never even heard the door open,” exclaimed Tonks.

Harry held up a hand for a moment, silencing them, and his eyes became unfocused. Then his wand flared briefly and his eyes focused on them. Remus leaned across the table, staring at him intently.

“Alright Harry, what did you just do?” he asked with a grin.

“I set up a ward around Hermione, Remus. If any of the teachers approach her in the library, I’ll know about it and be able to return before it’s a problem for her,” he replied.

“You set up a ward in Hogwarts from here? Astounding,” exclaimed Amelia.

“Alright then, next weekend is a Hogsmeade weekend. What’s so important that we had to have this meeting now?” asked Harry intently.

“Harry,” Amelia began, “Dumbledore’s introduced a new law and, right now, it looks like he just might have enough votes to get it passed. While it doesn’t specifically say it’s aimed at you, the intent of the law clearly is. We have a counter move prepared that we wanted to warn you about, should this law come to pass. Our counter move will automatically go into effect...”

---

Headmaster’s office, Hogwarts...

Dumbledore looked up when one of his instruments emitted a startled squeak, then fell silent. Intrigued, he stood and approached it. The instrument’s purpose was to monitor the anti-apparation ward on Hogwarts and, should those wards be breached or fail, it would scream in a shrill voice. A squeak was not normal behavior for the device.

He ran a few spells on the wards, but they appeared fine. *Still*, he mused, *it wouldn’t hurt to do a head count and see if any students are missing.*

An hour and a half later, the teachers converged on the library. Four Gryffindors, one Hufflepuff, one Ravenclaw and one Slytherin were still unaccounted for. Dumbledore, Snape and McGonagall skidded to a halt when they came upon all but one of the missing students.

Dumbledore strode forward angrily. He had suspected that Harry was the one who'd left school grounds. As the headcount was completed, his suspicions were confirmed. *Damn that child*, he raged. *I will bend him to my will or break him for this.*

"Miss Granger, where is Mr. Potter?" asked Dumbledore, his eyes flashing with anger.

"He got up a moment ago, Professor. I'm sorry, he didn't say where he was going." replied Hermione coolly.

"I will deduct 100 points from each of your houses if you don't tell me where Harry Potter is right this instant," said Dumbledore.

"I'm right here, Professor," said Harry, stepping out from behind a bookshelf, holding a thick volume in his hand. "I found that book I told you about, Hermione."

Sitting down at the table, Harry looked up at the three adults innocently. "Yes, Professors? Is there something you wanted?" he asked with a smile.

"Where have you been, Harry?" asked Dumbledore.

"I've been digging through the stacks, Sir. Hermione and I are working on an independent research project and I was looking for a book I'd seen in here a few years ago, but was having problems finding it," Harry replied with a smile, holding up the book for Dumbledore to see.

"*Celtic Music and Its Use in Rituals* ? I didn't know you had any musical talent, Harry," the Headmaster said, bewildered.

"Come off it, Potter. You have no talent! Why would you want a book like that," sneered Snape.

Harry looked at Hermione and smiled before pulling out his tin whistle. Raising innocent eyes to the three suspicious Professors, he began to play a Scottish ballad from the seventeenth century called, 'I Once Loved a Lass'.

Dumbledore blinked in surprise, while Snape threw up his hands in anger and stomped off. McGonagall's eyes lit up in delight. She recognized the instrument and the song Harry was playing.

When he finished, he smiled at Dumbledore and put his tin whistle back in his pocket. The Headmaster shot him one last suspicious glance and left the library, all but vibrating with annoyance.

McGonagall smiled faintly at the young man once Dumbledore left. "I must say, Mr. Potter, that I wish more students were willing to partake in the gentler arts. You have a fine gift and an ability

for consistently displaying talents that irritate certain Professors.”

Harry looked surprised by her comments and watched mutely as she left the library. He waited a moment longer before turning to the others and casting a privacy charm.

“Alright, then. Neville, you’re the only one whose occlumency shields aren’t quite there,” Harry began. “I want you to work with Hermione and me this week to get you up to speed. Next weekend is a Hogsmeade Weekend. I’ve reserved a room for us at the Three Broomsticks. With everyone up to speed on his or her shields, I’ll finally be able to fill you in on what’s going on. Until then, keep up with your exercises.”

---

The Great Hall, lunch, a few days later...

Harry and Hermione were sitting together, having finished lunch, and were working on their homework. They both had the next hour off before going to their Arithmancy class. Harry put his quill down and reached for a teapot to pour himself a hot cup of tea. Although lunch was technically over, the house elves usually took it upon themselves to see that there was always something to drink and a bit of food on the tables when students were working.

Harry took a drink, closed his eyes and reached out with his senses. Most of the auras he felt were basically pure ones, or ones with only some minor darkness to them. A few were very dark, like Nott... and several at the Gryffindor table! Zeroing in on one of the auras, he examined it carefully. It was very dark...almost pitch black!

Alarmed, he turned to Hermione. “Are you done? I think we better go see if Professor Blackthorne is free this period,” said Harry in an urgent whisper, shoving his things into his bag.

Hermione looked at him in surprise. Frowning at the look on his face, she started to pack her books and parchment into her bag. When she was done, Harry grabbed both their bags, took her by the hand and led her from the Great Hall.

They found Romany in her office, grading papers. Harry knocked, and then opened the door, sticking his head in. “Professor, can you spare a moment?” he asked.

“Of course, Mr. Potter. You and Miss Granger are always welcome,” replied Romany, smiling. She waved a hand at the stack of parchment, commenting, “Any interruption from grading third year defense homework is a welcome change.”

“Professor,” Harry began as he sat down next to Hermione, “I’m wondering what you can tell me about auras. I was sitting in Great Hall and I was sensing the auras around me. Some of them are very dark. Does the color mean anything?”

Romany blinked, a bit startled. “How can you sense auras and not know what the colors mean, Harry?”



“Well, after I got sick, I found I could just do it. Most of the people I spent the summer with have pretty much the same colors with some variations. But here in school, there’s so much variation, going from nearly white to almost black, plus the outer layer colors...” he trailed off, his confusion evident.

“Well Harry, the colors change as a person grows. For example, a new born infant starts with a white aura and white layers. By the time the infant is two years old, colors are creeping into the mix. The current thought is that core of the aura, the inside portion, represents the fundamental personality of the person, be they good, evil or somewhere in-between, while the outer layer or layers represent unique personality traits.

Reading an aura is not an easy skill. It took me years to learn and I can only sense them with great difficulty. To be able to read auras easily requires great skill and concentration.” She paused for a moment, curious. “What colors do you see for me, Harry?” she asked.

Harry reached out for a moment. “Your core is a dirty white, almost but not quite gray. You have two outer layers, one red and the other light blue.”

“Very good. The light blue represents strength and determination, while the red indicates a willingness to fight. But it also says I have a quick temper, something I’ve been working on for years. Now, how about Hermione?”

Harry reached out again, smiling as he did. “Her core is a very light white. She has three layers going from light yellow to light green to a blue.”

“The light yellow represents bravery and pride, not in herself, but for someone close to her. The light green is for serenity and love. The blue indicates a powerful personality and a very strong mind.”

“Well, no surprise there,” Harry murmured, grinning at Hermione. She smiled back at him.

“But Professor, what about the darker cores?” Harry asked, turning back to Romany. “Nott, for example, is almost pure black, and several of the Gryffindors are pretty dark.”

“You can’t use the core colors to find Death Eaters,” Romany said. “The core colors mark a predisposition for good, neutral or evil, but they do not indicate actions. A black cored person can still be good, it just means that they are weaker to temptation to do something bad. And likewise, a white cored person would find temptation less of a problem.”

“Romany, I’m curious now,” asked Hermione. “What colors are in Harry’s aura?”

Romany looked at Harry for a long moment before saying anything. “Harry do you mind if I make your aura visible? It’s easier to make it visible than for me to try to sense it.”

“Not at all. Professor. It’s the only aura I’ve not seen so far,” Harry replied intrigued.

Romany cast a spell over Harry and he felt a strange sensation, almost as if someone had dumped

a bucket of warm water over him. Looking at his hands he was surprised to see only one color and no outer layers! He gasped and looked up at Hermione, afraid to see her reaction. His aura was a perfect gray. Not white, not black, but gray.

“W-w-what does this mean?” he stammered.

Romany cancelled the spell and sat back, thinking. Hermione was looking at Harry as if he were an interesting new puzzle.

“I’m not sure...” began Romany. “It seems your aura is totally in balance, which isn’t supposed to be possible. I don’t think its anything you need worry about, Harry, but it’s interesting. I’ve never heard of anything quite like it before.”

Romany saw the expression of horror on Harry’s face and nearly rolled her eyes. It was time to put a stop to this before it got any further. “Oh Harry, this doesn’t mean you’re going to become the next Dark Lord. The fact that you have no outer layers suggests that your aura is unlike any on record, and therefore under different rules than ours. As I said, you seem to be in perfect balance and that’s not necessarily a bad thing.”

Hermione smiled encouragingly at him. Reluctantly, he nodded to Romany. “So I can’t assume anyone with a really dark aura is automatically a bad guy,” he said with a sigh. “It was a good idea while it lasted.”

“Don’t get me wrong, Harry. You shouldn’t trust someone with a really dark aura, but by the same token, don’t automatically assume they are a Death Eater either.”

“Is it possible to affect an aura, Professor? I’ve been able to sense and alter some spells just by adjusting the aura around them. Would it be the same for people?” asked Harry curiously.

Romany looked at him strangely, then shook her head. “Harry, I’ve never heard anyone describe what you say you can do. Can you demonstrate it for us?”

Harry nodded and closed his eyes. Reaching out, he touched Romany’s aura and, through his connection, he sent her the emotions of trust and friendship for a brief moment. Then reaching out to Hermione, he touched her aura and sent her some of what he felt about her through the connection.

Opening his eyes, he saw Romany’s startled look and smiled. Glancing at Hermione, he couldn’t help but laugh. She stared at him, wide-eyed and flustered. He reached out to touch her hand and felt the shiver that ran through her.

“Merlin, Harry! That’s the most amazing sensation I’ve ever felt. It was almost like being surrounded by a feeling of trust and security,” Romany exclaimed. Then she turned to Hermione and her eyes narrowed, noting the dazed look on the young woman’s face. “I take it what you did to Hermione was different from what I experienced?” she asked drolly.

“Not really, Professor. When I touched each of your auras, I sent each of you what I felt about you. It’s hard to explain. It’s like reaching out and making a connection. Touching your aura was easy, Professor, as was breaking the connection. Touching Hermione’s was easy too, but breaking the connection was difficult. It was like she didn’t want to let go of the link.”

Hermione remained silent, considering the feelings and emotions that had washed over her. There was great joy and friendship, of course, and a deep love that reached down into her soul, moving her. There was also a restrained hunger, a passion that ignited a fire in her belly. In that brief moment of connection, he had deposited a gestalt of his feelings into her and she understood the fires that burned within him for her. The closest she had ever come to experiencing those feelings before was when he had performed Harry’s Song for her.

Glancing up at the clock, Harry realized they needed to go. “C’mon Hermione, it’s time for us to go to Arithmancy. Thank you, Professor. You’ve given me a lot to think about,” he said.

---

### Hogsmeade and Explanations...

It was the first Hogsmeade weekend of the year, and Harry and Neville waited anxiously for Hermione and Ginny to come down from their dorm. Harry opted for muggle clothing today, black jeans, a windbreaker and a t-shirt. This one read: Everyone Is Entitled To Be Stupid But Voldemort Is Abusing The Privilege.

From the Gryffindor common room, they went to the Entrance Hall. Once there, they met up with Susan, Luna, Draco and, surprisingly, Professor McGonagall.

“Mr. Potter, a word with you please,” said McGonagall.

“Yes, Professor?” he asked, approaching her.

“The Headmaster considers it unsafe for you to leave the castle this weekend and he insists that you remain inside.”

“With all due respect, Professor, the Headmaster has no authority to make such a demand. Now if you’ll excuse me, my friends and I are going to Hogsmeade,” replied Harry curtly.

“But Potter, the Headmaster...”

“The Headmaster may say what he wants, Professor, but he is not getting his way on this matter. He has no valid reason to confine me to the castle and, as an adult, I do not need or require his permission to leave,” said Harry angrily.

Harry turned his back on McGonagall and started to limp through the entrance with his friends close behind.

Minerva stared at their retreating backs for a moment, angry. Never had she felt so used by

Dumbledore before. Harry was right. There was no real reason for keeping him here.

Although Hogsmeade was not much more than a mile and half from the school, it was the longest walk Harry had taken in at single time since the injury to his leg. Half way to the village, he was leaning heavily on his cane and his breath whistling between gritted teeth.

Hermione watched him carefully as he walked and cursed the fact that she had fallen in love with such a stubborn man. Then he did something she didn't expect him to do. He veered off the road and sat on a small boulder surrounded by grass. Dropping his cane, he started to massage his leg.

"Alright there, Harry?" asked Neville.

"Yeah, Nev. I guess the leg isn't used to walking this far. Why don't you all go on ahead and enjoy some time in Hogsmeade? I'll catch up with you in The Three Broomsticks," he offered.

A look passed between the group and, almost as one, they sat down on the grass, talked among themselves and waited. Hermione smiled at them and parked herself next to Harry on the boulder.

"Hurt much, Harry?" she asked softly.

He nodded grimly. "Worse than after an exercise session."

"You know this is your own fault. You could have apparated," she said.

"Hermione, I have to keep pushing. My leg won't get better by itself. You know that. This time last year I could have run to Hogsmeade in five minutes and wouldn't have been breathing hard. Now I can barely make it half way there," he replied.

"Harry," Draco said, "it's true then? You can apparate?"

Harry nodded. "Yeah, Hermione and I got our licenses over the summer due to circumstances that I'll explain once we get to The Three Broomsticks. If you want, Draco, we'll show you how over the holiday. It's a useful skill to have, even without the license."

Ginny looked around and, seeing no one, she turned to Harry. "Why don't you just explain here? There's no one to overhear us," she asked.

"No, Ginny. I've arranged a bit of a surprise for someone and it's at the Three Broomsticks," he said firmly.

"Well in that case then, I think we should get going. She whipped out her wand, pointed it at Harry and muttered the levitation charm.

"OY!!! HEY!" Harry yelled as he rose.

Hermione grabbed Harry's cane and laughed, while Ginny deftly maneuvered Harry back to the road. The others rose, grinning and following the floating young man down the road.

“I’ll get you for this, Weasley! Let’s see how you like waking up atop the school flagpole! I’ll turn your hair blue...no, green!” Harry shouted at the little redhead.

“Violent, isn’t he?” Ginny asked Hermione.

“Not really. This is just one of his good days,” she replied with a laugh.

By the time they reached Hogsmeade a few minutes later, Harry was reduced to glaring at Ginny. He didn’t dare cast at her while he was floating twenty feet above them, but his glare said he would figure out some way of paying her back.

When Ginny gently lowered Harry to the ground, both Neville and Hermione were there to steady him and give him back his cane. With a nod of thanks, he led the group into The Three Broomsticks. Harry waved to Madam Rosemerta when they entered, then led the group up the short flight of stairs to the upper level of the inn.

Entering room number five, they found themselves confronted with three cloaked figures. While the room wasn’t large, it was big enough for everyone to take a seat around the table in the center of the room. A moment later, Madam Rosemerta knocked on the door and came in carrying a large tray loaded with Butterbeers and snacks. Harry thanked her and waited until she’d left before he cast a privacy charm on the room.

“Alright then, we’re secure. We have a lot to talk about but before we get started, there’s someone here who I think you need to see, Draco,” he said, turning to the cloaked figure, who pushed their hoods back at his nod.

Remus and Tonks smiled at Harry, while Narcissa looked at him with a curious expression before she turned to face her son and smiled at him. She was pale, and her hands trembled slightly, but she was free from the influence of the potions and recovering nicely.

Draco gasped in stunned amazement as he gazed at his mother. She had started to put on weight again, although she was still very thin.

“Mum?” he asked in a near whisper. He bolted from his chair and rushed to her side. Falling to his knees in front of her, he wrapped his arms around her too-thin waist and held her tightly. She laughed in delight and returned his embrace.

“Let’s give them a few minutes alone,” Harry suggested softly, standing.

Harry motioned to the others to step over to the bed. He deliberately walked over to Ginny and pushed her so she was sitting on the bed, then he sat next to her.

“Ginny,” he began in a hushed tone, “what you are going to hear today is going to hurt you, and I’m sorry for it. It’s not going to be pleasant so I want you to be strong. You’re the little sister I’ve never had and you’re not alone in this.”

Ginny looked solemn and confused, but nodded in reply. Neville sat down next to her on the other

side and put an arm around her shoulders. She leaned into him, a little afraid now.

“Harry,” Tonks said quietly, “we never did find who released the Razorback in your dorm room, nor did we find the wand that cast the Imperius curse.”

“I didn’t really expect that you would,” he said, frowning. “It would have been too simple, and nothing Voldemort does is ever simple.”

The young Auror nodded. She’d been disappointed in their lack of results during the search, but there was nothing they could do about it.

Harry, noticing that Draco and Narcissa had finally stopped talking, motioned for the others to move back to the table. Draco sat next to his mother, holding her hand. When Harry approached the table Narcissa reached out and took his hand as well. He stopped and looked down at her curiously.

“My niece, Nymphadora, tells me you’re the reason we were rescued. Is that true?” she asked softly. Years of potion abuse had made her voice slightly gravelly.

“I’m one of the reasons, Mrs. Malfoy. Your son had the courage to ask me to help, despite all the differences we’ve had over the years. Tonks and the others removed you from this place when I asked them to, and saw to your medical needs,” he replied quietly.

Draco was watching the interplay carefully. He, too, had wondered why Harry had helped them.

“But why, Harry? After all the terrible things my family has done to you and your friends?”

“You’re family, Mrs. Malfoy. Sirius…” he trailed off for a moment and looked away, too choked up to continue. Sirius’ death still caused him pain. “Sirius made me his heir and the patriarch of the Black family. Besides, there was no one around when my mum needed help. I couldn’t let someone else’s mother go through that.” he finished, brushing a tear from his cheek with the sleeve of his shirt.

“My son and I owe you a wizard’s debt, Harry, and more importantly, a family debt.” She paused for a moment and looked at her son, her eyebrow raised in question. When he nodded, she turned back to Harry. “We will support and stand by you. As the head of the Black family, I ask that you dissolve my marriage to Lucius Malfoy.”

“Dissolve your marriage?” Harry asked, glancing at Remus in confusion.

“It’s just a matter of filling out the paperwork for the Ministry, Harry. I can do that, but you’ll have to sign them as the head of the family,” Remus said reassuringly.

“If this is what you want, I’ll be glad to do it,” Harry said, a little unsure of this latest development.

“I’ve made many mistakes in my life, Harry, but it’s not too late for me to change and I intend to

start today,” Narcissa said with conviction.

Harry chuckled. “Mistakes? Sounds like the story of my life.” He stopped for a moment and peered at her intently. “Mrs. Malfoy, I promise you this. Neither you, nor your son, will want for anything again. All I ask in return is that you work on getting yourself well. I know that Draco wants nothing more than to spend the holiday with a mother who’s healthy, and it’s something I would like to see myself.”

She cocked her head to one side and looked at him carefully. “You look like your father, but you have Lily’s heart,” she said quietly.

Harry looked away from her, unable to speak. Many people had said the same thing to him, people who’d known his mother. While he was glad that she was remembered kindly, it was also painful for him, because he’d never really gotten the chance to know her himself.

Sighing, he sat down between Narcissa and Hermione, who reached out for his hand. Everyone faced him expectantly and he took a deep breath, shook off past regrets and gathered his thoughts.

“Remus, Hermione and Tonks know everything I’m going to tell you and Susan knows some of it. They may jump in from time to time to clarify points, so listen to them. Some of this isn’t going to be easy to say, so I ask you to be patient.

“I guess the best place to start is at the beginning. After the attack on my parents, I was supposed to go stay with Sirius Black, my godfather. If that wasn’t possible, Remus Lupin, also a very close friend of my parents, was to get custody of me. As most of you know, that didn’t happen. Instead, I was sent to live with muggle relatives who…” Harry stopped and shook his head. Looking at Remus, he sent the man a pleading look.

Remus sighed, but smiled gently. “His muggle relatives beat and starved him. He didn’t even know he was a wizard until he got his Hogwarts letter. All those years he he’d been told that his parents were a couple of drunks who were killed in an automobile accident while driving under the influence of alcohol,” Remus said, looking around the table.

“Starting shortly after his placement with the Dursley’s, money started to be drained from his trust fund vault, nearly one million galleons per year,” Remus continued. “Most of the money was going into the hands of the Headmaster of Hogwarts, with occasional payments to his muggle relatives.

“During the summer before his first year, there was a change in where the money went. I’m sorry to say this, Ginny, but your parents started getting payments from Harry’s trust fund also.”

Ginny’s jaw dropped and she paled. Harry, still staring at the table, refused to meet her eyes. The revelation of the abuse he had grown up with was something that shamed him deeply.

“It’s true, Ginny,” said Tonks. “At the start of summer, the Ministry began to quietly investigate the whole affair. They’ve found an obvious pattern of planned abuse and neglect, as well as theft,

all aimed at Harry. I want to be clear on this. Everything points to the Headmaster and the Order of the Phoenix orchestrating a deliberate campaign to rob Harry of his money and set him up as V-Voldemort's main target by fulfilling the first half of the prophesy."

"Your brother Ron, Gin." said Hermione. "Didn't you wonder where he got the money for that promise ring?"

Everyone watched as the young woman cringed back from the table, her expression ashen. She raised a trembling hand to her mouth and watched Harry with large, wounded eyes.

"You see, Ginny? That's why I told you that you had to be strong. Of all the people here, you're the only one related to the people involved and, come the holiday, you'll be going home to them. I wish I could take you home with us, but until you turn 17, they could charge us with kidnapping," added Harry.

Neville put his arm around the trembling girl. "Harry, I'll talk to Gran. Maybe we can have her come visit with us for a few days over the holidays. Miss Tonks, would it be possible for you to speak with my Gran?"

Tonks nodded, smiling. "That's a good idea, Neville."

"If she can stay with Neville and his Gran, maybe she can visit with me as well," offered Susan.

Harry sat back and relaxed a little as the group came together to support Ginny.

"Harry, I don't understand this," said Ginny. "You're saying my parents are involved in stealing from you, but haven't you been checking your vault?"

"The last time Dumbledore let me go to my vault was the summer before second year. Until this past summer, I hadn't been back to Diagon Alley at all. Your mum bought my supplies for me the last couple of years, remember?" he asked.

Ginny sat back and thought about what she'd just heard. As the truth started to sink in, her expression changed. Tears slowly rolled down her cheeks as her carefully constructed and safe family life fell apart. Neville pulled her close as her face crumpled and she wept on his shoulder.

Alarmed, Harry stood to go to her side. In his rush, he rammed his chair as he turned. Pain exploded down his leg and he swayed dangerously, nearly losing his balance. Hermione and Narcissa grabbed his arms and helped him back into his chair.

"Ginny," Harry said through gritted teeth, "I'm sorry this comes as a shock to you and I'm sorry for what it's going to do to your family. But I promise you that you and your other brothers will get through this. I wish to god your parents hadn't done this..."

"No, Harry," said Ginny, her voice steely, "they betrayed you, they betrayed their own honor and they betrayed the wizard's debt they owe to you for saving my life. I cannot believe the hurt they have caused you. I'm the one that should be apologizing to you, not the other way around."



Harry looked away, knowing this would tear the Weasley family apart. He knew it wasn't his fault, but his heart ached for it anyway.

"Please understand, Harry," Ginny said pleadingly, "Fred, George, Bill and I think of and loved you like another brother. Charlie does too. I'm sure, if someone were to tell him what was happen, he'd support you."

"I know, Ginny," he replied softly.

When the room remained quiet, he sighed. They still had a ways to go yet, and he needed to finish it.

"Since it seems that we'll be able to see that Ginny's taken care of, let's continue," Harry said, glancing around the table. "I was in terrible shape at the end of last term. You all know that I watched Sirius go through the veil. What you do know is, an hour after watching him die, the old bastard, Dumbledore, explained the prophecy to me. I was a mess, wanting nothing more than to join Sirius. What I didn't know was that, by the time I got off the Express, I was ill.

"Remus came to visit me a few days later and found me burning up with fever and having hallucinations. He'd just come from a private reading of Sirius' will and wanted to tell me about it. Since he couldn't take me right then, he came back later that night and rescued me from the Dursley's. He took me to a place of safety and tried to care for me. Ultimately, he brought in Hermione and her parents to help because he knew I trusted and cared for her, and her parents had muggle medical experience that might help."

"Illness in a witch or wizard is pretty rare," Narcissa said. "What were you sick from, Harry?"

Harry couldn't answer her. He wasn't embarrassed about undergoing his Matura, but the reasons behind it shamed him still. Hermione, sensing his hesitation, answered for him.

"He was undergoing his Matura, Mrs. Malfoy. We think it was delayed because of the abuse and starvation he lived through with the muggles. When it finally hit him, it was so severe and lasted so long that it nearly killed him," she said.

"I know this is something we don't normally talk about, but I've been dying to know for months now. How long was his Matura, Hermione?" asked Tonks.

Hermione looked at Harry. When he nodded, she faced Tonks again. "He was ill for nearly fifteen days," she replied.

"Cor! That would be..."

"Three hundred and sixty hours, give or take a few."

The room grew deathly quiet as they all stared at Harry. He smiled weakly in return, feeling rather freakish.

“Just how strong are you, Harry?” whispered an awed Tonks.

Harry shrugged. “I don’t know. I took out eight Death Eaters in Diagon Alley with one spell and I wasn’t casting at full strength. A full strength light spell from my wand will blind anyone staring at it and light up a Quidditch pitch. Wandless, it’s even stronger. But how do you measure magical strength? No one seems to know.”

“Merlin!” Tonks breathed, staring at him.

He rolled his eyes. “Well, there you have it. The life of Harry Potter in a nutshell, and now you understand why I’ve insisted that you all learn occlumency before I explained this to you. Our illustrious Potions Master has already mentally assaulted Hermione and myself as he tried to find out where we were over the summer. Now you know why you must keep up with the exercises and be very cautious around the teachers. There’s a criminal investigation going on and we can’t let them know about it. But you all deserve to understand what’s happening and why the Headmaster’s treating me the way he is.”

Remus passed around the butterbeer and the only sound in the room for a few moments was the twisting off of bottle caps.

Luna raised her bottle and looked around the table, smiling. “To the Outcasts...May we never be chased by the Gnarled Footed Twitter Bug!”

When Hermione started to sputter, Harry grinned. “To the Outcasts!” he said, joining Luna and the others in a toast.

---

### **Authors Notes:**

Warning! The Sturgeon General has determined that reading these author’s notes may cause excessive blood pressure, unwanted pregnancies, heart palpations, trembling in the ears and nose, teeth itching and your eyeballs may fall asleep. If you’re reading this while drinking, You must scroll to the bottom of the page and take our online sobriety test. If you can’t find it, you are too drunk to read this.

WE DO NOT HATE RON. We just think he’s fun to throw on the rack and torture for a bit.

Who is the spy in the house Gryffindor? (Diabolical music playing) We’ll not tell.

Why didn’t Harry heal himself from the spider bite. Well let’s be honest here, there are limitations to magic, even for one as strong as Harry. The damage done to Harry’s leg was the result of poisoning and was quite extensive as you will come to see. They can rebuild the muscle tissue, but it will still take time to recover from the bite. Besides, if he’s that strong, why bother with a spider? Let’s nail the little green eyed bugger with Kryptonite and be done with it.

Dumbledore and company are in a world of their own and won’t realize it for quite a long time.

Ahhhhh rose colored glasses.

Lets get one thing straight. Harry may threaten to press charges, but it's an empty threat. He cannot really do anything that might interfere with the investigation underway. But he's not the only one capable of pressing charges or seeing some sort of justice done.

OK, a couple of side comments here. 1) Harry will not be a phoenix animagus or get a phoenix, soon you will find out why. 2) We apologize for the mistake about the Narcissa/Tonks relationship. In fact Tonks is standing behind me right now morphed into the incredible hulk and is making me type this. HELP!!!!

Let us state right now that you should not bet any money on anyone like Dumbledore getting redeemed in this story. It just isn't going to happen and would ruin the plotline.

Harry did not have his earring charmed to alert him that Hermione was in danger at the point of the attack. Harry's oversight is rectified in a later chapter.

The response to the assault on Hermione and Harry is coming, just not in the next chapter or two. So be patient grasshoppers, here, have a cookie.

Folks, please carefully consider the time frames here. Some of these chapters cover a span of several weeks, and several, like the last one, barely covers a few days. The attack on Hermione took place on the morning after her birthday, Harry's spider attack took place that night. Everyone is screaming for retribution, charges, court cases, hanging and quartering while poor Harry still lies exhausted from his ordeal in the infirmary. ITS GONNA HAPPEN FOLKS.

### **Pet Peeves:**

Would it be too much to ask that authors who spend the time and creativity to actually write something substantial try to name chapters? Nothing is more annoying than finding what looks like a decent story, but the author is too lazy to name the chapters.

### **ONLINE SOBRIETY TEST**

Step 1: Turn your mouse upside down.

Step 2: Remove ball from mouse. Place ball in secure location.

Step 3: Pee in ball receptacle.

If you've followed all three steps, you are too drunk to be here. Go home and sleep it off.

You really don't believe this is going to work do you?

## Sunset Over Britain Laws and Legilimency

Standard Disclaimer:

Act 1, Scene 1: Spotlight opens to center stage. Harry Potter is stripped to his speedos and tied tightly to an X shaped metal frame. Hermione Granger steps out wearing hip high leather boots and a leather bustier. In one hand she holds a cat o nine tails.

Ronald (in a whiny voice): “Mistress, I’ll do anything, just don’t show them what you do with Trevor!”

Hermione (cracks her whip): “Say your lines Bug!”

Ronald: “My Mistress, the fearful and wonderful Hermione Granger insists that these characters are the property of JK Rowlings, the authors own nothing and humbly beg her forgiveness for bending us to their will!”

Hermione hands Harry the whip and kisses him sweetly on the cheek. Ron’s eyes start to bug out of his head as Hermione walks off the stage. Harry tosses the whip to one side and conjures a chainsaw. WHIRRRRRRR....

---

Sunset over Britain  
Chapter 8

---

Hogwarts Entrance Hall...

When the meeting in The Three Broomsticks broke up, the group all looked at Harry and his obviously hurting leg.

“Harry, you are not walking back to the castle,” Hermione said with a frown. “You’ve pushed your leg too hard today. It’s going to need some serious heat to get those cramped muscles to relax as it is.”

Harry looked down at his leg. The muscles were knotted so badly that he could barely extend it. Sighing, he said, “I suppose I could apparate to the edge of the wards and wait for you guys. I

should be able to make it from there.”

Despite his ability to apparate in and out of Hogwarts, it was an ability he was reluctant to use unless absolutely necessary.

“I’ll apparate with you, Harry. The others should only be a fifteen minutes behind us,” said Hermione.

“Harry,” said Narcissa softly, “perhaps I can be of some help?”

Harry looked at the older woman curiously.

“I know there’s no real trust between our families...”

“Mrs. Malfoy,” Harry interrupted, “you are and always will be a Black in my opinion. If you can do something for my leg, I’m interested.”

Narcissa waved her wand and whispered an incantation. A soft blue light enveloped his leg and Harry could feel the muscles relaxing. Relieved, he smiled at her.

“It’s only temporary, Harry, and the muscles will knot up again in about thirty minutes, but it will allow you enough time to get it into a hot soak,” she said seriously.

Harry surprised the woman by embracing her and whispering, “Thank you.”

Harry turned towards the door but Hermione stepped in front of him. Her hands were on her hips and her expression stern. “We’re still apparating, Harry.”

Harry laughed, leaned forward and kissed her gently on her forehead. “Of course we are.” Before the words had faded away, he vanished without a sound.

Hermione blinked in surprise, then she stamped her foot. “OOOO! I hate when he does that. Just when I think he’s going to be stubborn, he does what he should do!” Then, with a soft popping sound, she vanished.

Draco turned and hugged his mother tightly before leaving. Luna followed him closely, a small smile on her lips.

At the edge of the anti-apparation wards, Harry and Hermione sat in the grass waiting for their friends to show up. Hermione was leaning back against Harry and occasionally he’d lift up the back of her hair and nuzzle her neck.

“Hermione?”

“Hmmm?”

“Can I ask you something?”

“You know you can ask me anything, Harry. I might not always answer, but you can ask,” she replied, smiling again as he nuzzled her neck.

“You know that the Yule Ball is coming up, right?”

That got her attention. She straightened a little and began to concentrate more on his words than his actions. “Yes, what about it?”

“I’d like to make this Yule ball enjoyable for you, so how about if I make a deal with you?”

She spun around to look at him intently. “Just what sort of deal are we talking about?” Now she was curious.

Harry looked down at his feet. “I was wondering...if I teach you Legilimency, would you teach me to dance?” he said cautiously.

“You want me to teach you to dance in exchange for you teaching me Legilimency?” she asked incredulously.

He looked up at her. “Well, I thought it would be a fair trade... besides I want to be able to dance well enough, that you’ll enjoy going to the ball with me,” he paused, looking at her astounded expression. “Guess it sounds stupid, right?”

“N-N-No, it doesn’t sound stupid. In fact, I think it’s really considerate of you to want to learn so I can enjoy myself at the ball. I would be happy to help you learn, but you don’t have to offer to teach me anything,” she replied softly.

“I know I don’t have to. I just thought you’d like to learn. You have very strong shields, Hermione. It’s only a small step from Occlumency to Legilimency. Besides, I can’t imagine Hermione Jane Granger, the prettiest and smartest witch Hogwarts has seen since Rowena Ravenclaw, turn down the chance to learn something,” he said with a grin.

Hermione flushed.

Hearing voices, Harry looked up and spotted their friends approaching. He struggled to his feet and then offered a hand to Hermione to help her up. When the larger group had caught up, they all entered the castle together.

Walking through the Entrance Hall, they heard a voice call out and saw the stiff form of Professor McGonagall walking briskly towards them.

“Mr. Potter, the Headmaster wishes to see you in his office immediately,” the stern looking McGonagall said once she’d caught up.

Harry sighed and shook his head slightly. “Yes Professor, right away,” he replied. Narcissa’s spell was beginning to wear off and his leg was starting to bother him again.

Hermione shot him a worried look. It was a long walk to the Headmaster's office.

He sent her a reassuring smile, then turned and followed McGonagall.

---

Headmaster's Office Hogwarts...

Harry limped into the Headmaster's office ten minutes later. McGonagall had slowed her pace when she realized how much pain he was in.

"Have a seat, Mr. Potter," said the Headmaster.

Dumbledore watched Harry limp to a chair, noting the pained expression he was trying to hide. *This could work to my advantage*, he thought, and then frowned when McGonagall stood behind Harry's chair.

"Mr. Potter, were you not aware that I had forbidden you from leaving the school grounds?" asked Dumbledore, trying for the grandfatherly approach. "Now look at you, limping and in pain. If you had been attacked in Hogsmeade with your injury, you would not have been able to protect yourself or your friends."

Harry's head shot up to glare at him. "You have no right to keep me confined to the school grounds," Harry said stiffly.

Dumbledore glanced up at Minerva for a moment. "Professor McGonagall, you are dismissed," he said curtly.

"But Headmaster..."

"I said you are dismissed!"

McGonagall looked furious. She glanced at Harry, who grimaced in return. Turning, she left the office, slamming the door behind her.

Dumbledore leaned back in his chair and smiled benignly. "Harry, must every one of our conversations be a fight? Can't you see that I have only your best interests in mind? What will it take for us to trust one another again?"

"Headmaster, I think you are more concerned with the fact that you've lost control of your weapon than you are with my welfare," Harry said coldly.

Dumbledore frowned. "If you continue with this course, I will have no choice but to suspend you."

"That is your option Headmaster, but I realize you have to explain all suspensions to the Board of Governors. I would be more than happy to attend that open session to explain my side of the story."

*He's stalling. What is he waiting for?* Harry wondered. He reached out with his senses, trying to determine what Dumbledore was doing.

“Now Harry, I’m sure it won’t come to that if you would just agree to follow the rules I set for you.”

“If those rules apply to me and me alone, then they are an injustice and I will not agree to follow them. I have told you before, Headmaster, you do not control me, you do not own me,” he replied flatly.

*There it is*, Harry thought. He could sense the aura approaching stealthily, using a different passage than the regular entrance to the office. Harry checked his mental shields, but they seemed to be fine. *Let's just see how this plays out.*

“Very well, Harry. For disobeying my direct order, I deduct fifty points from Gryffindor and assign you a week’s worth of detention with Professor Snape,” said Dumbledore angrily.

Harry was about to respond when he felt the telltale tingle of his wards being breached. Harry frowned for an instant, then grabbed hold of the mental tendril and pulled as hard as he could. The tendril fought against his action, but lacked the strength. Harry held the tendril at the breaking point for a moment before releasing it suddenly. Like a rubber band that had been severed, it snapped back into the sender.

Harry smiled as the sound of a body falling came from behind one of the portraits. Dumbledore sat up, startled by the noise.

“I think, that I had better serve that detention with Professor McGonagall, Sir. It would seem that Professor Snape has come down with a bad case of clumsiness and will be unconscious for awhile,” he said, grinning unabashedly.

Alarmed, Dumbledore stood and started for one of the portraits before realizing that Harry was still in the office. “Very well, Mr. Potter, serve it with Professor McGonagall. Now get out,” Dumbledore said angrily.

Harry levered himself to his feet, walked stiffly to the door and left the office. He’d not show Dumbledore how much pain his leg was causing him.

Leaving the staircase to the Headmaster’s office, Harry got only as far as the first of many staircases he would need to traverse to get to the common room when his leg finally gave out on him. He slid down against a wall, trembling violently as waves of pain radiated up his leg. His brow was beaded with sweat. Closing his eyes, he sat, panting and trying to work up the strength to go on.

It was a full twenty minutes later when he heard a familiar voice. “Harry?”

He cracked one eye open to peer at Hermione. Professor McGonagall looked on, her lips curled



disapprovingly.

“Hi there,” he said weakly.

“Harry, what happened?”

“The usual. He threatened me with suspension, and he had Snape try to use Legilimency on me again. He deducted points, gave me detention with you, Professor, for the next week,” He replied, his eyes darting up to the very displeased looking McGonagall.

“How’s your leg?” asked Hermione.

“It’s... well it’s pretty useless right now, although the nerves seems to be working fine. Hurts a lot.”

“Shall I get Madam Pomfrey and a pain relieving potion, Mr. Potter?” asked McGonagall.

Hermione turned to McGonagall, “He can’t use them in this state, Professor. Right now we need to get him to the Room of Requirement and put hot packs on his leg to relax the muscles. A pain-relieving potion would mask the pain and make things worse. I asked Neville to set up the Room for us. We just have to help him get there.”

McGonagall thought for a moment, and then conjured a stretcher. Both women helped him onto it and Hermione cringed when she felt the hard knots under his pants leg.

Levitating him down the stairs to the Room of Requirement, Hermione helped Harry lay on the massage table. Conjuring a knife, she cut away pant leg and cast a heating spell on several hot packs. Placing them around his leg, she waited a few minutes to let the heat sink in before she started to massage the knotted muscles.

McGonagall watched the young witch and frowned. This wasn’t something that she considered proper behavior for a young lady under her care. “Are you sure this is something Madam Pomfrey approves of, Miss Granger?”

“Yes, Professor. Normally I massage the leg first, and then we put weights on his ankles before he does his exercises. Once he’s done, I then massage away any knots caused by the activity. It’s never been so badly knotted before though,” she said, glancing at the man on the table.

Harry grimaced and hissed in pain. “Believe me, Professor, there is nothing enjoyable about this... Hermione forces me to work my leg... It’s the only way to get it back to normal... Hermione hates this almost as much as I do...”

McGonagall’s features softened and she nodded. It may look improper, but they weren’t fooling around. “Very well, Mr. Potter. I expect you to start serving your detention with me on Monday.”

“I’ll be there, Professor.”

---

Airspace over Britain...

United Airlines, Flight 507 had completed the take off climb and was slowly circling up to altitude for it's overseas flight to Washington DC. The local controller wiped his screen and prepared to hand 507 off to international departure control. He blinked in shock when, after passing 15,000 feet, flight 507 suddenly changed its transponder code on his screen. With a shaking hand he flipped a switch on his console alerting his supervisor. Flight 507 was now squawking 7777, the code for an in-flight emergency.

"United 507 heavy, confirm ident squawk 7777," he said emotionlessly over his microphone.

"United 507 heavy, confirm ident squawk 7777," he repeated when he received no answer.

His supervisor arrived and watched over his shoulder. Meanwhile, other controllers started the difficult job of vectoring other aircraft away from the plane declaring the emergency.

"Heathrow departure, United 507 heavy. We have an in-flight explosion, we have decompressed, descending," crackled the speaker, the voice anxious.

His supervisor reached over his shoulder to grab a phone. As he did, alarms sounded throughout the airport. Men scrambled to fire engines and nearby hospitals were alerted to expect wounded. The controller and his supervisor watched anxiously as the altitude indicator started to decreasing slowly

"United 507 heavy, confirm in-flight explosion, state your intentions," said the controller.

"Descending through 12,500 feet, will level out at 10,000 feet. Request immediate straight in approach, Heathrow," came from the speaker.

"United 507 heavy, turn right to 045 and continue your descent. We are clearing runway 060 for your landing, all traffic is being vectored out of your way."

On the scope, United Airlines Flight 507 began its turn. Then it vanished from the screen.

"United 507 heavy, Heathrow departure," said the controller.

Silence.

"United 507 heavy, Heathrow departure," said the controller.

Other controllers in the dimly lit room fell silent as each man prayed to hear something from United Airlines, flight 507.

A nearby controller called on his flights. "Air France 45, can you confirm the presence of United Airlines 507, it should be at your 2 o'clock and descending."

He gasped as Air France flight 45 squawked 7777.

“Air France 45, confirm squawk ident 7777,” said the trembling controller.

The supervisor whipped his head around in disbelief.

Within the span of an hour and before the Government of Britain could order all planes in its airspace to land, nearly forty aircraft fell from the skies of Britain.

Few could honestly find fault with the Government’s slow response in grounding all air traffic. While the skies had been raining aircraft parts down upon the land, a series of explosions had rocked the city of London.

The Prime Minister returned to London later that day from a conference in Bonn. His flight had a military escort. A special session of Parliament had been called for later in the evening. Meanwhile, the MOD sent a directive to all bases to go to a heightened state of alert.

Because the disasters involved mostly muggles, the wizarding world largely ignored the trouble.

---

Hogwarts Library...

Ginny was working on her potions homework halfheartedly. Madam Pomfrey had substituted for Professor Snape, but she was still working off his notes. Professor Snape’s homework assignments, even when he was sick, were hellacious.

Snape’s mysterious illness had the rumor mill working overtime. The current rumor running around the school was he had been poisoned by an unhappy student. Ginny didn’t know what Snape’s problem was, but if she had to bet money on it, she would have put her money on a certain Gryffindor student.

She should have been working on her homework, but she couldn’t concentrate. With a sigh, she closed her book and sat staring at it, considering her options. She could sum up her problem in one word. Neville.

Neville had grown over the past summer and she couldn’t help but admire his newly acquired form. Now, with his own wand, he was a powerful wizard and he gained confidence in his abilities almost daily.

She thought it amusing that Harry had seen what Neville would become long before anyone else. Even with all his powers, Harry still had problems with his own self-confidence and yet he managed to instinctively instill it in others.

While Neville was quickly becoming one of the best wizards in the school as his confidence grew, it still remained seriously lacking in one area. And that was the problem.

To put it bluntly, Neville was afraid of Ginny and Ginny knew it. He’d occasionally hold her hand

or, once in a great while, hug her. But he wouldn't make a single move beyond that and it was beginning to drive her insane. He simply refused to make the first move on her. And while teasing him into speechlessness might be fun, she wanted more.

Sighing she did what she always did when she had a tough problem she couldn't crack by herself. She went to Hermione for advice. Fortunately, she didn't have to go far. Hermione was only a few tables away, working on her own homework.

Packing up her bag, she went over to Hermione's table and sat down heavily. Hermione looked at the younger girl, her eyebrows raised inquisitively.

"Problems, Ginny?" asked Hermione.

"I guess so, Hermione. I just don't know what to do about Neville. He knows I like him, I know he likes me, but he refuses to do anything about it," Ginny replied, the frustration clear in her voice.

Hermione started to chuckle and Ginny eyed her angrily. "This isn't funny, Hermione!"

Hermione held up a hand and tried to get herself under control. Finally, when her mirth subsided she said, "I wasn't laughing at you, Ginny. I was laughing at the situation. Harry and I spent the whole summer dancing around our feelings for each other and denying them. When they were finally revealed, still nothing happened. I went to my mum for this same conversation."

"Really? What did she tell you to do?" Ginny asked.

"She said to throw away the book and make the first move. Make it a small one, but make it and keep making it until he realizes it's alright with you."

"Did it work for you, Hermione?"

"Oh my, yes. I walked in on Harry, sat on his lap and told him it was all right for me to sit there. Then I told him it was alright for to kiss me," she replied.

"And now, Hermione? I mean, I've seen him watch you and hold your hand and even hug you, but I've rarely seen you two kissing."

Hermione thought for a moment. "Harry... is something of a mystery sometimes, Ginny. He's an intensely private man with powerful feelings that he keeps under a tight control most of the time. It took a number of weeks before he'd trust me enough to open up and tell me what he was feeling. I know how he feels for me. He shows it in every action. There are times, when we're alone, that he tells me," she said with a sigh. Then she grinned wickedly. "Then there are the times when I'm able to make him loose all control."

"You haven't!"

"No, not even close. But you can see it in their eyes, Ginny, and they can see it in ours. With the right guy, it's something more than hormones, more than just a quick release, and you can see it,"

she replied softly.

Ginny left the library a few minutes later, a calculating gleam in her eye. Her mission, which she had accepted, was to seek out and teach Neville Longbottom a lesson he'd never forget.

---

### Detention with McGonagall...

While Hermione was giving advice to Ginny, Harry was up to his eyeballs marking first year Transfiguration homework at a desk in front of Professor McGonagall. Harry didn't mind serving detention with his Head of House. She was strict, but she was fair and, unlike Snape, she didn't enjoy humiliating people.

McGonagall looked up as Harry passed one paper to his 'marked' pile and grabbed another to begin reading. The last seven weeks of school had seen an increase in tension not just between Harry and the faculty, but also between Harry and the other students. Many of them in her House blamed Harry for not playing Quidditch, despite the fact that it was the Headmaster who had refused to lift his ban. And then there was the Headmaster's insidious article, which had turned many in the other Houses against him as well.

While Harry had his problems with the Headmaster and Professor Snape, he had always remained courteous and helpful when dealing with most of his other teachers, including herself and Professor Flitwick. Minerva felt she needed to make an effort to reach out to the young man. She had known his parents and they were among her best students, brave fighters for the side of the light, and good friends up until their deaths. Putting her papers and quill to the side, she studied Harry for a moment.

Waving her wand, she closed the door and cast a privacy charm. Harry looked up from his marking to eye her curiously.

"Mr. Potter...", she began hesitantly, "I realize things are becoming difficult for you here in Hogwarts, but I hope you'll realize that you can trust me enough to talk to me about the problems you've been experiencing."

Harry leaned back and put down his quill. "Professor, of all the people I have come to know in the wizarding world, you've always been fair and honest with me. I know you mean well and I appreciate that. But confiding in you presents me with a dilemma that I don't have a solution for."

McGonagall leaned back in her chair, considering his words carefully.

"Professor, not every thing you see is as it appears," he said before she could finish her thoughts. "Even things you have known for years. I want to trust you. I would greatly value your advice and support. But I think you have to make some decisions for yourself before that can happen."

McGonagall was now curious. She motioned for him to continue.

Harry cocked his head to the side and looked at her carefully. “Professor, of all the magical creatures in the world, which are most attracted to the light side of magic?”

She blinked in surprise. The sudden turn of topic had caught her off guard. “Why, the Unicorn, the Griffon and the Phoenix, I suppose. And your point, Mr. Potter?”

“Don’t you find it interesting that, until recently, this school had a resident Phoenix, that has since abandoned its companion? Or that Hagrid says the Unicorn herds are leaving the Forbidden Forest? I can assure, Professor, none of that is my doing.”

Shock whipped over Minerva as she realized what Harry was saying. She hasn’t made the connection to Fawkes’ disappearance. Now that it had been pointed out, it was painfully obvious. As the meaning behind the Phoenix’s abandonment crystallized in her mind, she felt as if her world had been knocked off its axis.

Harry stood up and walked to a window. He spoke softly as he stared out into the deepening darkness. “War is coming to this land, Professor. I can see it stalking closer with each passing day. The time to choose sides is near. I would like to know you are with me Professor, but that’s something only you can decide.”

She was struck by the strength that radiated off him. At that moment, her view of Harry Potter changed forever. He changed from a student and the son of a couple she once loved as her own, to a determined young man, not to be trifled with.

Shaking her head she said, “I will consider what you have said tonight, Mr. Potter. In the meantime, you are free to go back to your common room.”

He smiled at her. For a moment she could see in that boyish smile, an echo of James and Lily in happier times.

Gathering up the homework, he placed them back on her desk before leaving the office.

---

Gryffindor Common Room...

Entering the common room, Harry noted Hermione sitting off in one corner. Several other Gryffindors, including Ron, were sitting around another table, occasionally shooting her glares.

Frowning slightly, Harry walked over and sat down next to her. He leaned over and kissed her on the forehead before pulling out his own homework.

“I see our fan club is busy practicing their useless stares again,” he murmured to her. She snickered in reply and placed a hand on his leg.

The door to the common room opened again and Ginny walked in leading Neville by the hand.

Harry and Hermione looked up at the two and Hermione began to chuckle.

Neville had a glazed look in his eyes. His tie was crooked and hanging loosely and his collar was only partially hiding a noticeable bruise on his neck.

“Oh my,” said Hermione breathlessly. “She went ahead and did it.”

Harry looked at her curiously for a moment before turning to the two approaching them. Neville pulled out a chair for Ginny, and to Harry’s shock, he leaned down and kissed her neck. Ginny purred for a moment and lifted an arm to caress his cheek.

There was a movement out of the corner of Harry’s eye and as soon as Neville straightened up, Ron tackled him, driving him to the floor. Ginny squeaked and whipped around, her wand out. Harry bolted from his chair and was heading for the two when Ginny cast a spell that hit Ron in the side, throwing him off Neville.

“Keep your hands of my sister! I’m not letting you turn her into a Slytherin loving whore,” Ron shouted when he climbed to his feet.

Ginny turned red and stood up. “You don’t own me brother,” she said, stalking towards him. “In fact, I wish you weren’t my brother...you disgust me. Neville is your friend and you know he wouldn’t hurt me. But no, you have to expose your stupidity in public. I will tell you this once and only once. Hurt Neville in any way and you will never have need of a woman in your life. Ever,” she hissed at him, then she kicked him hard in the shin.

Harry helped Neville to a chair. Ginny turned away from her brother and walked over to the table, looking at Neville with concern. Once she was sure Neville was all right, she sat in his lap, wrapping both arms around him.

Neville’s eyes glazed over once more and Harry began to chuckle. “Ginny, remind me to never get you angry with me,” Harry murmured.

Ginny snorted and grinned. “I won’t do anything to you Harry, I’ll have Hermione do it.”

Harry glanced at Hermione, who smiled sweetly at him, batted her eyelashes and patted him on the back.

“Oh Merlin, I’m doomed if that happens,” Harry muttered.

As the quiet murmur of voices returned to the room, Hermione went back to her homework. She glanced over at Harry a few minutes later and saw him doing something with runes and charms, but she couldn’t quite make it out.

“What is that you’re working on?” she asked.

Harry looked up and his expression became guarded. “Umm... this? It’s nothing, Hermione.”

“Harry, it’s not nothing. You’re playing with spell creation again. Can I see? Please?” she asked with a look he found hard to refuse.

“I can’t, Hermione...,” he said, pained.

Ginny snatched the paper from his hand and looked it over, then looked at him questioningly. It was beyond her, but she recognized small pieces of it.

Harry rushed over to her, his expression pleading for the return of the parchment.

“What is this, Harry? It looks interesting. Shall I show it to Hermione? She could probably tell me what it is,” Ginny teased.

“NO! She can’t see it! Ginny, please?” he pleaded with her.

“Tell you what Harry, whisper it in my ear and I’ll give it back to you.”

Hermione watched the two for a moment and felt a momentary pang of jealousy float through her when Harry leaned down and whispered in Ginny’s ear. Ginny’s eyes widened and she grinned broadly at him, nodding. Then to Hermione’s surprise, she handed the paper back to Harry, who folded it up and put it in his bag before sitting down again.

Hermione was more than a little put out by the whole scene, so she quickly finished off her homework and said good night to everyone. Harry tried to give her a kiss before she left, but she would only accept a light peck on the cheek. Sighing, Harry went up to his dorm, with Neville close behind. Ginny followed Hermione.

Up in the girls dorm Ginny found Hermione sitting on her bed, reading.

“Hermione?” asked the younger girl.

Hermione looked up from her book. Then she marked her place and closed it. “Yes, Ginny?”

“You’re not mad at Harry and me are you?”

“No, I’m not mad at you, Ginny. I’m just annoyed that Harry would tell you what he was doing, but wouldn’t tell me,” replied Hermione in a bit of huff.

“Oh Hermione, don’t be. He couldn’t show it to you without ruining the surprise. Those notes were for something he wants to make for you for Christmas,” said Ginny in exasperation.

“A Christmas present?” asked Hermione incredulously.

“Yes, a present. And you might as well face it, you were a little jealous weren’t you?” Ginny asked, grinning.

Hermione looked down at her book, “Well, maybe a little,” she replied sheepishly.



Ginny started laughing. “Don’t be, Hermione. That man has eyes only for you. I’ve seen girls practically expose themselves to him and he ignores it. He spends most of his day with you and his eyes rarely stray from watching you. I’ll bet you figure into a large part of his dreams and most of them have you barely clothed,” she concluded, smirking.

Hermione smiled remembering Harry’s reaction to the first time she wore a bikini.

---

Ministry of Magic, Wizengamot Legislative Meeting...

“Madam Chairwoman, the next order of business pertains to proposed law 1996-65. Entitled ‘Amendment to the Emancipation Act of 1564’, sponsored by Albus Dumbledore and Stanley Gripse. Speaking on behalf of this legislation will be Representative Gripse,” said the Master-at-Arms.

“The Wizengamot recognizes Representative Gripse.”

Representative Gripse was one of the lesser distinguished members of the Wizengamot. He could only trace his family membership in the organization back six generations. The short, round man moved to the podium and faced his fellow members of the Wizengamot.

“Madam Chairwoman, honorable representatives, this proposed amendment is necessary and very needed. In the last one hundred years, fifteen underage witches and wizards have been emancipated before they were of age. Think of the havoc they could have caused had they acted irresponsibly! My esteemed colleague and dear friend, Albus Dumbledore, crafted this bill to ensure the safety of our society and of our children. With this amendment in place, no child risks loss of their education due to the capricious whim of an irresponsible adult who has decided to forego their legal obligations.

“I ask you all to vote from your heart and think of the children! We must protect our children, else we have no future whatsoever,” concluded Gripse. His short speech had left him short of breath and sweating profusely. Stepping away from the podium after having given his second Wizengamot speech in thirty years, he waddled back to his seat, immensely proud of himself.

The Master-at-Arms pounded a staff on the floor to gain everyone’s attention. “What say the Ministry on this matter?” he boomed.

Cornelius Fudge stepped up to the Podium to speak.

“Madam Chairwoman, honored members of the Wizengamot, esteemed guests and visitors, the Ministry is against this bill. We already have safe guards and laws in place to avoid underage wizards and witches from unwisely exercising their powers. We feel this would be a serious misuse of Ministry personnel and a misappropriation of Ministry funding, upon which this bill leans heavily,” he concluded. Then he stepped back to his seat next to Amelia Bones.

Amelia had a charmed tally sheet in her hands. If the voting looked like the bill would pass, the sheet would signal one of her staff, who would walk an application down to child protective services for immediate processing.

Again the Master-at-Arms pounded the floor. “The Wizengamot will put this bill to a vote!”

A large translucent fist appeared in the center of the chamber. The fist had the thumb extended horizontal to the floor. Under the fist were the words “Yea” and “Nay” with the number zero under each.

“Let the vote commence!” cried the Master-of-Arms.

One by one the members of the Wizengamot shot a voting spell at the large translucent hand and the numbers under the hand started to increase as the votes were tallied. When all the votes were cast the hand trembled and slowly rose so the thumb pointed up. Underneath the tally read forty five “Yeas” and thirty eight “Nays”.

Amelia tapped her wand against the tally sheet and sighed. She had hoped it wouldn’t come to this, but at least now they had an alternate plan in motion.

Representative Gripse handed a note to a clerk and instructed him to send it to Dumbledore immediately. The clerk placed the note into the inter-office owl system, and like so many government documents, the machinery of government swallowed it.

Down on the same level as the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, a Child Protective Services Magistrate was handed a document package. Reading it over carefully, he placed the appropriate approval stamps on it, assigning Nymphadora Tonks, cousin of Sirius Black, as guardian of one Harry James Potter-Black. It was only for a short time. The child in question would only need a guardian nine months.

---

Breakfast, Hogwarts Great Hall...

Harry sat, a little depressed, at breakfast, sure that Hermione was mad at him. Mentally he kicked himself for taking out his notes last night and trying to work on them in front of her.

He sighed and went back to eating his eggs and bacon, wondering if she’d still be angry with him this morning. To other couples, this didn’t even count as a minor fight, but to Harry, with his woefully inadequate experience in relationships, it was devastating. He was so busy inventing ways to apologize that he never notice Hermione approach him until she ran her hand up under his hair and across the back of his neck.

He turned to look at her as she sat down, smiling. “Hermione, I’m really sorry about last night. I didn’t mean to hurt your feelings, honest...”

She stopped him by placing a finger on his lips. “Harry, I’m not mad at you. Ginny explained it all

and I realized I was being silly about something that wasn't there."

Ginny and Neville took their customary seats. Unsurprisingly, they were holding hands.

"Ginny told you about it?" Harry asked, wincing.

"I'm sorry, Harry. I know I shouldn't have, but I told her you wanted it to be just right before you would show it to her," said Ginny with a smile and a fast wink.

"Oh, right. Yeah Hermione, when I've got it down pat I promise you'll be the first one to see my notes," Harry said unconvincingly.

Hermione smiled into the cup and nodded as she sipped her tea. Harry never noticed the glance exchanged between her and Ginny. He went back to eating, although he did pause when Hermione began to discreetly massage his thigh under the table.

---

Ministry of Magic, Interoffice Mail Office...

Representative Gripse's note to Dumbledore had finally reached its send off point. A clerk attached the note to an owl and sent it on its way. In a few short hours, it would arrive at Hogwarts.

---

Hogwarts Great Hall, Lunch time...

Harry and his friends had just finished lunch when several owls winged into the Great Hall. The mid-day post delivery was always lighter than the morning post. One owl landed up at the Head table, another landed in front of Harry and extended its leg. Harry removed the letter and unrolled it. He frowned reading the note from Tonks explaining that the guardianship had gone through. But then, it did provide him with ample teasing opportunities for 'Auntie Tonks'.

Harry looked up to see Dumbledore leaving the Great Hall in a hurry, before he turned back to Hermione and his friends.

"How can you read anything upside down, Luna?" asked Draco in exasperation.

"Honestly, Draco, how can you not? Books are so much more interesting this way. You see the hidden meanings the authors don't want you to see," replied Luna dreamily.

Draco sat back, scowling. Luna always seemed to be nearby when they ate, or met in the Room of Requirement. She drove him nuts because he couldn't figure her out. She seemed very smart, but then she'd say something totally off the wall that would make her sound like an idiot. He glanced over at Ginny, who was reading her Quibbler upside down. He frowned.

"Draco mate, don't try to figure it out. Just accept it. It's what I do," said Harry grinning.

Hermione poked her head out of her book and eyed Harry suspiciously. Fortunately she wasn't reading it upside down. Harry took one look at Hermione and grinned nervously.

"You know Potter," said Draco with a smirk, "you are seriously whipped."

Hermione turned her attention on Draco, giving him her best, 'DIE NOW!' glare, but it immediately softened when she heard Harry murmur, "Maybe I am. But I can think of far worse fates, Draco."

Hermione blinked and she turned back to her book, inordinately pleased. For Harry, the comment was the same as if he'd climbed onto the table and shouted, "I love Hermione!" to the Great Hall.

---

Ministry of Magic, Department of Child Protective Services...

Albus Dumbledore walked into the office of Child Protective Services and approached one of the clerks. The witch at the desk looked up at him.

"Yes? Might I help you?" she asked.

"I am here to invoke law 1996-65 for one of my students," replied Dumbledore.

Nodding, the clerk started compiling an impressive pile of paperwork in front of her. When she was finished she handed the inch thick pile to Dumbledore.

"Fill these out, Headmaster. When you have them completed, you may return them to me. There is an empty office two doors down on the left that you may use," she said with an artificial smile.

Wincing over the amount of paperwork, he went looking for the empty office.

Three hours later he returned with all the paperwork filled out and handed it to the same clerk.

"Thank you, Headmaster. It will take a few days for us to process this. You should know the results by Friday."

Nodding at the clerk he left the room thinking, *I've got you now, Harry.*

---

Hogwarts Room of Requirement...

Harry had asked his friends not to come to the room tonight. He wanted a little private time with Hermione to start her on Legilimency. He set up the room just the way he wanted it, then called for Dobby. When the small elf appeared, Harry gave him instructions to serve dinner for two when he was ready for it.

When Hermione showed up she was surprised to see how Harry had crafted the room. It looked a lot like his bedroom at Padfoot manor, except there was no bed. The room was spacious and there was a fire burning in the fireplace. A large bay window showed a moonlit meadow.

Guiding her over to a couch in front of the fireplace, Harry sat next to her. “Hermione, I know we’re missing dinner, but don’t worry. I’ve made plans for that,” he said, smiling at her. “Now then, take out your wand. We’re going to start with the basics of Legilimency. If you can master the basics tonight, we’ll try something a little more advanced.”

He showed her the complex wand movement, and she practiced it a few times until she had it down.

“Good, but you always get the wand movements really fast,” he said. She blushed prettily.

“I think you compliment me just to see me blush, Harry,” she murmured.

“Umm... well yeah, but mainly because I like looking at you,” he replied, blushing himself.

Continuing he said, “Alright then, you have the movement. As you probably know, the incantation is ‘Legilimens’, but the wand movement and the incantation are the easy parts. The hard part is focusing on the emotions that trigger the memory you’re looking for. Remember, I once told you that Legilimency was like opening a book and flipping through its pages. You focus on an emotion and you trigger all of the memories that invoke that emotion in your subject, hopefully including the memory you want to find.”

“But what about those memories that might be triggered by more than one emotion?” Hermione asked.

“You’re right, some memories will invoke more than one emotion in a person. But either emotion can trigger the memory, so it doesn’t really matter.

“A good Legilimens will ultimately learn to control his or her own emotions. That doesn’t mean they become emotionless. What it means is that they learn to suppress them at certain times. Let me give you an example.

“I sit here in front of a romantic fire place and I kiss you. That leaves you a memory, hopefully a happy one,” he said. Then he leaned over and kissed her deeply, breaking away a few moments later.

“You don’t bother to suppress your emotion for that. In fact, you don’t want to suppress the emotions or the flavor of the moment is lost,” he said, then paused to let her consider what he had said.

Slightly flushed Hermione nodded and motioned for him to continue.

“Right, then. In another example, I tell you I am about to give you a secret that holds the key to winning this war. Forewarned, you can suppress your emotions while hearing that secret. Now

with the emotion suppressed, that memory becomes much harder for a Legilimens to dig out.”

“Is this why you don’t display much affection in public, Harry?” she asked shyly.

Harry looked surprised, then a little hurt. “That’s part of it, I suppose, but more likely it’s mostly cowardice on my part.”

“Cowardice??” she exclaimed.

“I think we’re getting off the subject, Hermione,” Harry said, trying to avoid the topic.

“No Harry, I think we need to talk about this,” she replied softly, watching him. She knew he wanted to pace, but couldn’t due to his leg. Running a hand through his hair he tried to stand up, but Hermione stopped him.

“Harry, talk to me, please?”

“Hermione, you’re the smartest witch in this school, but sometimes I think you must be nearly as clueless as I am,” he said.

“What do you mean by that, Harry James Potter,” she said hotly.

“I love you, Hermione. It’s an emotion I’m not used to and it’s unlike anything I’ve ever felt before. If it’s not love, then I don’t know what to call it. Around you I find myself losing control of my emotions, around you I have trouble thinking straight. Sometimes I don’t think you’re even aware of how you make me feel.

“I go to sleep listening to Seamus bragging about shagging Lavender, or listening to Ron tell about the time he got Parvati alone in the Astronomy tower. Sometimes I find myself wishing we could do some of those things and then I feel ashamed and disgusted with myself for thinking about you in that way. But no matter how hard I try, I just can’t seem to stop thinking about it. I don’t want to drag what we have down to Lavender’s level though. I think it would be demeaning.

“I don’t show much affection in public because I’m afraid that one day I’ll start and won’t be able to stop myself. I want you on so many levels that I can’t even begin to describe it.

“Argh! Can’t we just get back to Legilimency and forget this topic, Hermione?” he asked plaintively.

Hermione watched him as he talked, her initial ire passed quickly as his words sunk home. She moved into his lap and wrapped her arms around his neck. “It’s not cowardice to desire the person you love,” she told him.

Harry wrapped his arms around her waist and held her against him, his eyes closed.

“Harry, are you listening to me?”

She shuddered as he began to nibble her neck and her own self-control was suddenly under assault. Closing her eyes, she tightened her grip on him and shivered in delight as he traced soft kisses along her neck. When her body relaxed against him, her eyes popped open in surprise. Self-control indeed! She broke out of his embrace and stood up.

She stared down at him, and he watched her warily. Both were breathing heavily, and each could feel a powerful urge to lunge for the other. Sitting at the end of the couch away from him, she shivered again. She watched him for a long moment before she managed to regain control. *Merlin! If what I do to him is even half as strong as what he does to me, no wonder he tries so hard to control himself*, she thought giddily.

“Harry?”

“Yes?” came his husky reply, sending another arrow of shivers down her back.

“Soon, but not now. We have Legilimency to do remember?”

“I remember telling you the same thing a few minutes ago,” he said, watching her carefully. “I seem to recall you weren’t too interested in returning to the lesson, but insisted that we...talk, instead.”

She squirmed for a moment, realizing that he was right. She had been the one to push for the discussion, and she’d ended it by crawling into his lap, then pushing him away and reminding him of the Legilimency lesson.

“I’m sorry, Harry. I didn’t mean...that is, I hadn’t realized...Oh blast!” she sputtered.

Harry laughed, ignoring the glare she shot at him. It wasn’t often that he managed to catch Hermione out, and he planned on enjoying it.

“Harry...” she said, pleadingly.

Harry shook himself and grinned. “Right then, Legilimency. If you do the spell correctly, you should feel like your mind is reaching out to grasp something. Now without a target, it will feel like you’re reaching for something, but are unable to catch hold. Try it out.”

Hermione nodded and pointed her wand at the wall. “Legilimens,” she said.

It took several times before she could feel that tenuous sensation of reaching for nothing. Excited, she turned back to Harry. “I can do it! I can do it!”

“I knew you could. You never have problems with spells, Hermione,” he replied proudly.

“Alright, what’s next?” she asked, hungry for more.

“Well, the next thing is to try it on a test subject, and since there is only you and me, that means me, I guess. I’ll drop my shields and you’ll try to get a happy memory,” Harry replied.

The turned to face each other on the couch and he nodded once his shields were down and his wards adjusted to allow her in.

Hermione nodded and pointed her wand at Harry. “Legilimens,” she said softly.

Her vision faded and within her mind she could see a flood of images.

*Hermione sitting on Harry’s lap laughing and talking with friends on the Hogwarts Express.*

*Harry playing his tin whistle for Nutters and feeding the little animal.*

*The look on her face when Harry gave her the music box.*

*Hedwig rubbing his cheek.*

Shaking herself, she broke the connection and leaned back, considering what she had seen. Harry sat quietly, smiling at her.

“I think it takes some time afterwards to consider what you’ve learned,” she murmured.

Harry shrugged. “It does. I don’t use the art much, but once you learn the discipline behind it, you’ll find it makes a lot of things easier. Between Occlumency and Legilimency, learning and recalling facts becomes a lot easier. Now, are you ready to try again?”

She nodded and pointed her wand. She was still thinking about what Harry had said, rather than concentrating on an emotion when she cast the spell.

The inrush of images this time was broader, overwhelming in intensity and volume.

*“BOY! YOU WILL DO YOUR CHORES RIGHT!” roared Harry’s Uncle Vernon. He raised his belt and beat the small child across his back mercilessly.*

*“Hermione move!” Harry yelled. Then he leapt onto the back of the troll, sticking his wand up it’s nose while Ron stood, frightened out of his wits.*

*“Please not Harry!” pleaded Lily Potter.*

*“I don’t want to kill you woman, stand aside and you’ll live,” snarled Voldemort.*

*“Avada Kedavra!” Voldemort shouted pointing his wand at a baby Harry.*

*Lily leapt in front of the spell shouting, “HARRRRYYYYY!”*

*“Wands out, d’you reckon?” asked Cedric nervously.*

*“Yeah,” replied Harry.*

*His scar exploded in pain and from a distance he could hear, “Kill the spare.”*



Sobbing, Hermione broke the connection to Harry by dropping her wand as both hands flew to her mouth in horror. Harry had curled himself into a tight ball and was trembling violently. There were tears flowing freely from his closed eyes and his breath came in ragged gasps.

“HARRY!” she exclaimed. She moved to his side of the couch and leaned down to hug him tightly. She held him for a long time weeping over the pain she had seen and caused him. His tremors slowly subsided and he relaxed into her arms.

Harry opened his eyes and was surprised to see Hermione crying. Ruthlessly, he pushed his pain down and sat up. Turning slightly, he gently guided her into his lap, where he wrapped his arms around her and waited for the storm to pass. She buried her head into his shoulder, staining his shirt with her tears. Having dealt with those feelings for so long he was able to push them aside and concentrate on comforting her.

“Shhh, sweetheart. It’ll be all right. I’m fine, your fine, no one’s hurt,” he whispered to her.

She lifted her head to look into his eyes. “How can you say that, Harry? You’ve lived with so much pain, how can you go on?” she asked him quietly.

He rolled his eyes. “Do I have a choice? Shall I go jump in the lake and drown myself because I have horrid relatives, then? Come on, Hermione. I can’t change the past. All I can do is look to the future and hope that it will be better. No, scratch that, I know it will be better with you in it.”

She shook her head in wonder. “I don’t know how you do it, Harry...”

He interrupted her. “I have Remus and Tonks and I know they love me, even if I’m not their son. I know your mum likes me. Your father likes me too, but I think he’s worried I’m going to steal his daughter away from him. And someday I’m going to have a family of my own with children to raise and love. I might not have a real family right now, but it’s close to the real thing and will do until I make one for myself.”

She smiled at him and snuggled a little closer. “Got yourself a wife already picked out?”

“It’s a short list with few candidates on it. Shall I add your name to it?” he asked casually.

She punched him in the arm. “Prat!” she exclaimed, trying to push herself away from him.

He held her fast, not letting her go. When her struggled ceased, he kissed her temple lightly and whispered, “It’s an empty list, Hermione. Although I do have one candidate in mind.”

She instantly stopped struggling. “Really?” she whispered. He smiled and nodded at her and she grinned back at him.

Then Harry’s mood turned serious again. “Do you know what you did wrong with the spell?”

She sighed and ducked her head. “Yes. I was so busy thinking about what you said that I rushed into it without concentrating on what emotion I wanted to look for. I’m sorry, Harry.”

He placed a finger under her chin and gently lifted her head. “No harm done,” he said softly, staring into her eyes. “We learn by making mistakes and if I know you, you’ll never make that mistake again.”

She smiled weakly at him, the images she had pulled from his mind still fresh, and marveled at how easily he could forgive and forget something like that. Then his stomach rumbled.

“Right, guess it’s time to have something to eat... Dobby?”

There was a soft popping sound and Dobby appeared in front of the two of them.

“Yous call me, Master Harry?”

Harry sighed and shook his head. No matter how many times he had asked Dobby not to call him master, Dobby never seemed to get the message.

“Yes, Dobby. Would you please serve dinner now?” asked Harry, smiling at his little friend.

Dobby snapped his fingers and a table appeared near the bay window. With another snap, the house elf lowered the lighting in the room so the candles on the table provided most of the light except for the fireplace. With a third snap of his fingers, he vanished as food appeared on the table.

Hermione stood up and looked at the romantic setting. Harry led her over to the table and pulled out a chair for her. She smiled gratefully at him as he helped her sit, then took the chair opposite hers.

When Harry sat, soft music started playing. Harry looked startled and Hermione started to chuckle. “If I didn’t know better, Mr. Potter, I’d say you’re trying to seduce me,” she said smiling.

Harry looked aghast. “N-N-No, that’s not it Hermione. I didn’t ask Dobby to add music. Or the candles... I just asked for a nice table setting by the window...”

She laughed, interrupting him. “Oh Harry, only you would have a house elf who was a romantic at heart as a friend. I’m not sure if I should thank you or thank Dobby.”

There was a popping sound and Dobby appeared. His big tennis ball eyes grew wide looking at Hermione. “Oh no, Miss Hermy... Dobby set up table as Master Harry wanted, even if he didn’t say so.”

Harry groaned and buried his face in his hands.

Laughing, she thanked Dobby and the little elf vanished again.

“I always suspected you had a romantic streak in you, Harry Potter, even if you need house elf help to show it,” she said laughing.

Harry blushed furiously. “Hermione, I wasn’t trying to seduce you. I just wanted for us to have a nice dinner...”

“Harry... Don’t be afraid. I’m not going to bite you. Now, how about passing that platter of meat? The roast smells heavenly,” she said, smiling at him.

As Harry reached for the platter of meat, he felt a strange sensation on his arm. Hermione looked at him curiously as he pulled up his sleeve and they both gasped.

The tattoo of Padfoot was bulging up off his arm. In just a few seconds, a small, black cloud hovered for a moment over his arm, then it floated down to the table where it formed into a perfect six inch high Grim. Harry was dumbstruck as he watched the small figure walk along the table.

Hermione reached out with a finger and touched the small Grim. It wagged its tail at her happily while her finger passed right through it.

“Well, its not corporeal,” said Hermione. “I wonder why Sirius gave the tattoo this ability?” she mused.

The small Grim walked over to the meat platter and sniffed. Then it bit down into one slice and tore off a chunk of meat. Both Harry and Hermione gaped.

“Alright, he’s not totally incorporeal,” said Hermione, wide-eyed.

“I think I better write Remus and ask him to look into what Sirius did to the wards around Padfoot Manor,” Harry said carefully, watching the little dog. He pulled a slab of meat onto a small plate and gave it to the Grim. Then he offered the platter to Hermione.

The two spent a pleasant time having dinner and enjoying each other’s company. After dinner, Hermione stood up, walked over to him and took him by the hand. Once Harry stood, the Grim faded from view. He could tell by the tingle in his arm that it had returned to its proper place.

Hermione led Harry out to the open space between the table and the couch. “Harry, you’ve started to teach me Legilimency, so now it’s my turn. I know your leg will give you some problems, but we’ll work around it.”

With the music still playing in the background, Hermione stepped into his arms and started to show him how to dance some of the slower dances. Harry couldn’t think of a nicer way to spend an evening.

---

Order of the Phoenix Meeting, the Three Broomsticks, Hogsmeade...

Dumbledore looked around at his Order. A few faces were missing. This was the first official meeting of the Order since the start of school. With the students wandering the castle, they

couldn't risk meeting there. Fortunately, Madam Rosemerta had a room large enough to fit everyone...barely.

Rapping his knuckles against the table he called the meeting to order. "Thank you all for coming this evening. Before we begin, I'd like to recap some of the events that have occurred. As of the start of school, Harry Potter returned to Hogwarts. Plans are now in motion to see that a repeat of last summer does not occur.

"An attack was made on Harry's life near the end of September, which resulted in an injury that he is still recovering from. Almost immediately following the attack, Hogsmeade was flooded with members of the Brotherhood of Druidic Knights. I personally received a communiqué from the Brotherhood, holding me responsible for the attack and saying they will not tolerate another."

Several Order members gasped at the thought of anyone threatening their beloved leader. Dumbledore smiled reassuringly at them.

"Auror Nymphadora Tonks," the Headmaster continued, "has formally resigned from the Order and, although I regret having to accept her resignation, she cites personal and job related reasons for her resignation.

"I have not heard personally from Remus Lupin. He did visit Harry twice in Hogwarts, but I was unable to talk to him when he visited. I can only assume that he, too, has left our ranks. Unfortunately, Severus is not with us tonight. He is... ah indisposed at the moment.

"Now I would like to turn our attention to this Brotherhood. They have, it appears, managed to exert an undue influence on not only Harry Potter but also, perhaps, Hermione Granger. Harry has been less than forthcoming about his time spent with them. Right now I am unconvinced that Miss Granger has been actively involved with them, although she clearly appears to be under the influence of Harry..."

"Albus, they are a couple," interrupted Minerva McGonagall. "If I were pressed, I'd say they are even more in love with each other than James and Lily before they got married. It's not influence, it's love."

"As I was saying," Dumbledore overrode her with a frown. "Influence. Harry has apparently helped her learn some new forms of magic. Nothing dark that I can tell, but she, too, is refusing to cooperate with me..."

Minerva interrupted him again. "What did you expect? You asked her to spy on the man she loves. I'd tell you no also. Albus can't you see what you've done? You've set most of the school against..."

"Professor McGonagall, that is quite enough!" Dumbledore exclaimed loudly. "I will remind you that I am Headmaster, as well as leader of the Order. Now, if you will kindly allow me to speak without any further interruptions, we can get on with business and get out of here tonight."

Minerva McGonagall leaned back in her chair, fuming. *Damn that man*, she thought. *He turns the whole school against a student and then has the gall to complain that the student is being uncooperative? James, Lily, if you can hear me, forgive me.*

“I am most concerned about this Brotherhood and I think it’s becoming imperative that we resolve this issue once and for all,” Dumbledore continued. “This is the second time they have threatened an Order member. Kingsley, do you think that perhaps you could alert Amelia to the possible threat they pose? We must determine if the Brotherhood is working for the light or for Voldemort. If they are working for Voldemort, then they have control of Harry Potter. By the end of this week, I will have legal control over Harry, so I will sever his contact with them. Nevertheless, we must find out where they stand.”

“I’ll speak with Director Bones in the morning, Albus,” said Kingsley.

“Very well then. I think that will do for now. Let us adjourn and return to our homes,” Dumbledore announced.

“B-B-But Headmaster,” shouted Emmeline Vance. “What about He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named?”

Dumbledore turned around to look at her. “Oh, he’s out there making his plans Emmeline. Right now however, we must make sure that this ‘Brotherhood’ does not join him.”

---

Malfoy Manor...

“Lucius, my friend, how is it that Severus has not visited us?” asked Voldemort quietly.

“My lord, our spies in Hogwarts say that Snape has not left the castle since the start of the school term. I think Dumbledore is keeping him there for his own safety,” replied Malfoy.

Voldemort thought for a moment, then nodded in acceptance. Snape was, after all, only a minor matter in the grand scheme of things.

“Tell me Lucius, is that idiot cousin of yours, McNulty, still alive?”

Malfoy looked surprised at the sudden change of topic. “Yes my lord, he’s still alive. Last I heard he was living in Hogsmeade, barely surviving by doing minor enchantments for a clothing store.”

“Good. I have a plan that involves both your money and your cousin to sway and confuse these sheep. In the meantime, step up the attacks against the muggles. Since our illustrious Minister is so willing to ignore them, we might as well take advantage.”

“Master, I humbly ask for a little time before continuing the muggle attacks,” said Lucius, now groveling at Voldemort’s feet.

“What? Why? Explain yourself, Lucius!” snarled Voldemort.

“Master, I have been examining muggle society. It is more complex than our own, but vulnerable. I wish to retarget the attacks in ways that would be more effective, more disruptive of the muggles. It is not enough to simply kill them, Master. The muggle government must fall before you can rule in Britain.”

Voldemort leaned back in his chair and let one hand drop over the side to absently stroke Nagini’s head. “Yes, I see that, Lucius. Continue your studies and, when you are ready, strike hard.”

Lucius bowed low before backing out of the room.

---

The Great Hall, lunch time...

Harry and the Outcasts sat together, as was becoming habit. With the exception of Ginny and Luna, the others had all come from sixth year Transfiguration class. Harry pulled out his graded homework that Professor McGonagall had handed back in class. He hadn’t had a chance to look it over before class ended.

Pulling the parchment out of his bag, he was surprised to see a second, smaller parchment attached to the back of it. He carefully peeled the second parchment from the first and read it. His surprise must have shown on his face because Hermione nudged him. He handed her the unsigned note.

*D claims he has taken steps legally to put you under his control.*

*He also thinks you are somehow controlling Miss Granger.*

*Both of you are in danger here. Be careful.*

Hermione gave him back the note. Although unsigned, it was written in a hand they both knew very well. Harry banished the note, then two sets of eyes turned to the Head table, catching the eye of Professor McGonagall, Deputy Headmistress. She nodded imperceptibly to them both and went back to eating their meal.

“Harry...”

“I know, but it’ll be alright. I won’t let anyone hurt you,” he said.

“Me? What about you?” she asked acidly.

“The old fool won’t take direct steps to hurt me, Hermione. He still sees me as his weapon and he needs that...”

Harry stopped talking as Ron, Dean, Seamus and a group of Gryffindors approached them. All of the Outcasts tensed, seeing the group. Ron stopped a few feet away from Harry and stared at him for a moment.

“Potter,” Ron spat, “we don’t want these others sitting at our table,” he said, pointing at Luna,

Susan and Draco.

“Sod off, Weasel. We’ll sit where we please,” said Harry.

“Come on Potter, that snake is ruining our appetites,” said Dean.

“There are three other tables you may sit at, Dean. No one forces you to sit here,” replied Ginny acidly.

“Slut,” Dean said, glaring at the redhead. It was a single word, but it echoed through out the Great Hall. Ginny paled and Neville put an arm around her.

Professor Flitwick scowled up at the Head table and started to get out of his chair when Minerva stopped him. “No Filius, leave them for now. We need to talk later,” she said quietly.

There were only three Professors present at the Head table. Minerva, Filius and Romany Blackthorne all watched the scene unfolding before them silently.

Hermione gasped as she felt the air around her turn electric. Waves of magic were rolling off Harry as he stood. He turned and walked the few feet to the group. He stopped in front of Ron and waited.

Ron took one look at Harry’s eyes and flinched back in fear. Harry’s eyes glowed a bright green, his hair seemed to move in an invisible wind and his robe billowed out behind him.

“Give me an excuse, Weasley, just one excuse. Dumbledore’s not in the Hall to protect you or your friends this time, so be a man, Ron...show everyone how tough you are. Take a swing at me or draw your wand and cast a curse, anything,” Harry said quietly, but calmly. “Or better yet, be a *real* man and punch Dean for calling your sister a slut.”

Ron and his friends started backing away.

“Ah, just as I thought,” Harry said, contemptuously. “Without the Headmaster to back you up, you’re nothing more than a coward. How disappointing.”

“You’ll get yours, Potter. The Headmaster will fix you good. You’ve turned evil!” he shouted, then turned and stumbled back to his seat, following his friends.

Harry turned and looked around him. Nearly every eye in the Great Hall was on him and most looked at him fearfully. Shaking his head in disgust, he sat back down. He glanced at his friends, a little afraid of what he might see in their eyes. While their expressions didn’t hold fear, they did seem a bit shocked by the display of power he had shown.

Harry pushed back his magic to a manageable level and grinned sheepishly at his friends.

“Merlin, Harry!” Ginny exclaimed. “And you say not to make me angry at you?”

“Sorry Ginny, but I wasn’t about to let them continue, not after what they called you,” he replied in a soft, serious tone.

“You guys are friends and family to me. And more,” he said, reaching out to touch Hermione’s hand gently. “I’ll not sit by and let any of you get hurt if I can help it.”

---

Transfiguration Office, Later that evening...

Minerva paced in her office waiting for Flitwick to arrive. With October nearly done, she mentally reviewed all she had observed about Harry over the past two months. She’s sent Harry a note earlier and sincerely hoped that it would help her and Harry build some trust in each other.

The door to the office opened and the diminutive Charms Professor entered the room. He took one look at the pacing McGonagall and he cast the strongest silencing charm he knew, and then locked the door against all intrusions.

“Alright Minerva, will you kindly tell me what in the name of Merlin’s beard is happening in this school?” squeaked the little Professor.

“Filius, have you been watching Harry during your classes?”

“After his display of wandless magic in the infirmary? Of course I have! His work is the best it’s ever been. In fact, he’s on par with Miss Granger in practical and only slightly behind her on theory at this point.”

“And what about his attitude, Filius? Towards the other students?”

“I’d say Harry has become very cautious around them. It’s as if he no longer trusts most of them. Although he and several others have become amazingly close, like the Malfoy boy. Who would have believed he’d befriend Harry Potter?”

“I know, Filius. The problem is our Headmaster seems to be convinced that he must control Harry’s every action and Harry’s having none of it. Albus is doing everything he can to make his life as difficult as possible. The other day, I saw him spend over an hour lecturing Harry, ignoring the fact that the young man was in intense pain from his injury.

“I tried talking to Harry about it, but he said I had some choices to make before he could talk to me. Then he went on to point out that Fawkes has abandoned the Headmaster...”

Filius’ eyes widened as he made the connection. “You don’t think Harry is asking us to support him over Dumbledore, do you?” he asked.

Minerva nodded sadly. “Yes, that is exactly what I think, Filius. What’s worse, from what I can see, Harry is right in asking for our support. The Headmaster is convinced that Mr. Potter is



somehow controlling Miss Granger.”

Filius snorted. “I think the Headmaster has it the other way around. The young man is in love with that young witch and she could easily pull his strings if she wanted. She doesn’t, from what I can see, except for spurring him to make a greater effort in his work. But he’d gleefully wrap himself around her finger if she’d allow it.”

“Yes, he does remind me of James in his last year. Lily could get him to do anything just by asking,” Minerva said with a smile.

“What do you think we should do, Minerva?”

“I think we need to reach out to them. I believe that the Headmaster now poses a danger to them both. We must make them see that at least some of the staff support them,” she replied quietly.

“Why don’t you arrange a meeting with them next week, Minerva? I’ll attend if you like.”

“Yes Filius, perhaps that would be a good idea,” she replied. Perhaps between the four of them, they’d be able to talk.

---

### **Author’s Notes:**

For everyone that failed the Online Sobriety test, we have a sober up potion hidden beneath a word in this document. All you need to do is scratch off the appropriate word using a coin and you’ll find it.

We’d also like to commend all those people that have taken the time to get their mice neutered. It’s nice to see people trying to control our excessive pet population. So here’s to you people with the ball less mice!

Just remember things are not always what they seem to be. And for those people that want to see the hearing, well that’s still two chapters away! Can you believe this? We’re at the end of October here and it’s still taken us two chapters to get to the hearing.

We want to state ON THE RECORD that our attacks on Britain are STRICTLY FICTION! Besides, if we were going to attack anyone, we’d attack Canada. Why Canada? Because like idiots we already conquered California!

Obviously the Matura is a plot device we created. The length of such a thing would be determined by genetics and environmental factors. Think of it this way. If a child has the genetic predisposition to grow to be 6 foot tall and you don’t feed that child well, they will never make that height. Feed them well and they may even exceed it. In Harry’s case, he would have had a longer than normal Mature, but conditions beyond his control, malnutrition and abuse, resulted in a much delayed, much more dangerous Matura.

A Wizards Debt, as in the one the Weasley's owe Harry for saving Ginny in book II does not mean that person cannot betray you. If that were the case, Pettigrew would never have been able to harm Harry in book V.

## **Sunset Over Britain**

### **A Mid-Course Correction**

#### **Standard Disclaimer:**

(Spotlight snaps on to center stage and there is Ron Weasley, wearing leather biker pants and no shirt. On his chest is a tattoo saying “Mom”. Hermione is sitting on a trapeze bar wearing a fairy costume.)

Ron: “Hey, what am I doing wearing this getup?”

Hermione: “It’s Bob and Alyx, Ron, they decide what we wear and don’t wear.”

Ron: “I don’t think that’s fair, do you?”

Hermione: “They want you to say the words Ron. Or else.”

Ron: “Or else what?”

Hermione pulls an uzi from her cleavage and fires three rounds in Ron’s general direction.

Ron: “ACK!!! OK Bob and Alyx make no claim to any of this! They don’t own it, they don’t want to own it! NOTHING!!!! THEY DO THIS FOR FUN!!!”

Hermione aims the uzi again and fires off a few more shots...

Hermione: “Oops. Sorry Ron... Harry? Can I polish your wand tonight please?”

Bob: “Hermione, stop ad libbing! You’ll get to play with Harry’s wand when I say so.”

Hermione: “Oh alright...”

---

### **Sunset Over Britain**

### **Chapter 9**

---

Ginny’s Revenge, Part I, The Great Hall, the next morning...

Ron came down from the Common Room yawning and scratching his head. He scowled for a moment spotting Harry and Hermione together with the rest of the rejects and thought about saying something. He decided against the idea after Harry's display yesterday. Frowning, he went over to his friends and sat down.

As he reached for the eggs, he started to feel uncomfortable. He shifted on his seat and tried to listen to Seamus, the new Gryffindor Seeker, describe his first attempt at a Wronski Feint and how he ended up in the hospital with two broken arms. Ron chuckled and shifted again as the sensation grew more intense.

Putting his fork down, he reached under the table and tried adjusting his underwear to relieve the sensation. That was a mistake. The slight touch created an intense itch and he bolted to his feet.

"OY! It itches!" he yelled. He tore open his robe plunged both hands into his pants, scratching vigorously.

Ginny, who sat next to Neville, said loudly, "I've told him before that he should bathe more often."

Lavender, who sat several spots away from Ginny, turned to look at her, wide eyed. "You mean he doesn't bathe?"

Ginny leaned forward so she could see Lavender. "Oh, he bathes at least once a week Lav. He just doesn't wash well. You know how lazy he is."

Harry and Hermione started laughing. Ron was hopping from foot to foot and tearing at his crotch with his hands. No matter how hard he scratched, it gave him no relief. As more and more people within the hall started laughing, Seamus and Dean grabbed Ron and dragged him towards the exit.

---

Ministry of Magic, Department of Magical Law Enforcement...

"Director, Senior Auror Shacklebolt is asking to see you."

"Send him in, please."

Kingsley Shacklebolt entered the Director's office and took a seat in front of her desk. Kingsley and Amelia were old friends, having trained in the Auror Academy only a year apart.

"Good Morning, Kingsley. What can I do for you today?" asked Amelia, smiling.

"Director, I'm here at the request of Headmaster Dumbledore," Shacklebolt said. "He is concerned that there may be another paramilitary group on the scene and wanted me to request Ministry aid in investigating them. Albus is concerned that this new group could be supporting You-Know-Who."

“I see... Does this mysterious group have a name?”

“Albus thinks they call themselves the Brotherhood of Druidic Knights after an ancient Celtic sect that died out long before Merlin was born.”

Nodding Amelia made a few notes on a parchment. “Has this group broken any laws?”

“Not that I am aware of, Director, although Albus believes that Harry Potter spent the summer in their company.”

“Mr. Potter was an emancipated adult during that period of time, Auror. He was entitled to spend his time anyway he wished. This is the second time Headmaster Dumbledore has made accusations to this office in regards to Mr. Potter. I have personally reviewed Mr. Potter’s files, along with his current status, and find no reason for any further MLE involvement in his life.

“No Auror, we are simply stretched too thin to allow for any investigation based on Dumbledore’s suspicions. You of all people should know that. Between training of the new Aurors and ongoing investigations, we have few resources to spare,” said Amelia firmly

Kingsley was shocked at Amelia’s decision. Apparently the MLE didn’t hold Dumbledore in very high esteem after the baseless charges he’d laid against Harry Potter over the summer. “But Director, Headmaster Dumbledore says...”

Amelia slammed a hand down on her desk. “That is quite enough! I run the MLE, not Dumbledore. He seems to have this strange fixation on Harry Potter, a mere student. No, there will not be a MLE investigation of Dumbledore’s ghosts until they have broken a law. That’s the last word I’ll say on the subject.”

Amelia snatched a folder from the side of her desk and opened it, then she looked up. “You are dismissed, Auror Shackbolt.”

Shackbolt could only nod and leave as quietly as possible.

---

Headmaster’s office, Hogwarts...

“Professor Vector? May I see Harry Potter please?” Minerva McGonagall’s stern voice called from the doorway of the Arithmancy classroom.

“Of course,” the startled Professor said. “Will he be rejoining us today?”

“No, most likely not,” Minerva said, frowning slightly.

“All right, Mr. Potter, you may pack your things and join Professor McGonagall. Don’t forget that you have homework this evening!”

“I won’t, Professor,” Harry said, gathering up his belongings and shrugging at Hermione’s worried

look.

When Harry exited the room, Minerva closed the door and eyed the young man thoughtfully for a moment. “The Headmaster has requested that you join him in his office.”

Harry scowled. “Professor, couldn’t this have waited until lunch? I’m going to have a hard time doing my Arithmancy homework when I’ve missed half the lecture.”

“I sympathize, Mr. Potter, and, though I tried, the Headmaster would hear no argument on this issue.”

“Great, what does he want now?” Harry asked.

Minerva’s lips twitched and she suppressed a smile. “I do not know, Mr. Potter. But I can tell you that the Headmaster was in a very good mood when I left him. As you and Professor Dumbledore have been at odds, I can only assume that whatever he wishes to discuss with you will not be pleasant.”

Harry’s expression darkened with anger and his fists were clenched at his side.

“Calmly, Mr. Potter. Nothing can be accomplished through anger.”

“Maybe not, but it might make me feel better,” he muttered.

Minerva did smile then. “Perhaps, but it’s always better to face one’s enemy calmly and with a clear head.”

He stared at her for a moment, a bit shocked. “Enemy?” he asked softly. “Professor, why are you telling me this? You’re a member of staff!”

“That does not mean I support the Headmaster when he makes foolish decisions, Mr. Potter,” she said, waving him forward. “Now, if we don’t get started, we’ll be late.”

“We? You’ll be at the meeting?” Harry asked as he walked down the hall at her side.

“Of course. I am, after all, your Head of House. Besides, someone on staff should represent your interests.”

“My interests? But Professor, won’t that cause problems between the Headmaster and yourself?”

“It may, Mr. Potter, but that is besides the point.”

“Professor, you can’t! I don’t want you to get into trouble. Not on account of me,” Harry said earnestly.

As they approached the gargoyle guarding the Headmaster’s office, Minerva placed her hand on Harry’s shoulder and looked him in the eye. “Mr. Potter, some people are worth fighting for.”

When Harry's eyes widened in understanding, she smiled. Turning away, she gave the password and they proceeded up the now moving staircase.

After being granted entrance, Harry sat in the chair that was placed before the Headmaster's desk and Professor McGonagall stood behind him. He noticed that Dumbledore's eyes were twinkling.

"Ah Harry, I'm glad you could make it," Dumbledore said.

"Did I have a choice, Professor?" Harry asked politely, cocking his head slightly and watching the old man.

"You didn't, actually," the Headmaster said, smiling.

Harry's eyes narrowed. He had a feeling Professor McGonagall was right. He wasn't going to enjoy this meeting.

"Do you know what this is, Harry?" Dumbledore asked, holding up a sealed parchment.

"No, Sir," Harry said, though he was starting to understand. The parchment was obviously from the Ministry.

"Have you been reading the Prophet lately?"

"The Prophet is garbage, Professor. They print lies, as you well know," Harry said politely and tried not to smile as Dumbledore's eyes lost some of their twinkle when the barb struck home.

"Then you've not heard of the new law the Ministry passed last week?"

When Harry shook his head, Dumbledore leaned back in his chair and smiled once more. "Ah, let me explain then. The law, 1996-65, now makes it illegal to emancipate any under age witch or wizard, retroactive to January 1st of this year. With the passage of this law, you are, once again, a minor."

"Perhaps you should tell him who wrote and sponsored the law, Albus," McGonagall said, her voice calm.

"I don't think that's necessary, Minerva," Dumbledore said, frowning at her. "I will remind you that you are attending this meeting as Harry's Head of House, nothing more."

"Actually, I would be interested in knowing who's responsible for the law," Harry said. "After all, it wouldn't be the first time Voldemort's managed to get one of his followers into a position in the Ministry to twist things his way. And this does sound like something he would think up, doesn't it?"

"I can assure you that Voldemort had nothing to do with the passage of this law. I wrote and co-sponsored it," Dumbledore said, annoyed.

“You? Why?”

“You know why, Harry. We have spoken before about this and you know that I disapprove of your actions. You have proven to be incapable of making adult decisions and do not have the training or experience to look out for your own safety. You need supervision and guidance through these difficult times,” he said, smiling once again.

“Guidance and supervision? I managed to elude you and the Order all summer and you think I’m incapable of looking out for myself?” Harry asked, raising an eyebrow in question.

“We will not go into this any further. The law has been passed and it will not be changed,” the Headmaster said sternly.

Harry very much wanted to laugh at the old man. He knew where this conversation was going, but had to play his part. So instead, he frowned and looked puzzled. “So this means I need a guardian again?”

Dumbledore nodded. “Yes, it does.”

“Well, I suppose Remus would do it,” Harry said, shrugging.

“I’m afraid Remus Lupin cannot be your guardian. Dangerous creatures such as he are excluded from guardianship.”

“Dangerous? Remus? You know better than that, Professor,” Harry said, glaring.

“What I think is beside the point. The Ministry’s laws pertaining to werewolves are quite clear in this matter.”

“Well then, the Granger’s will...”

“The Granger’s, while I’m sure they are nice enough people, are muggles, Harry. Muggles are also excluded from obtaining guardianship of magical children.”

“So no muggles, no ‘dangerous creatures’...wait!” Harry turned in his seat and looked up at his Transfiguration teacher and smiled. “You wouldn’t want to be my guardian, would you Professor?” he asked, grinning for her benefit and winking.

Again, Minerva’s lips twitched as she watched Harry’s eyes dance with mischief. “While it’s a little unorthodox, I would certainly be willing, Harry. I always wanted to have children some day,” she said, smiling at him warmly.

Harry turned quickly in his seat and saw the brief scowl on Dumbledore’s face. It disappeared a moment later and he tried not to laugh out loud at the evidence of his Headmaster’s annoyance.

“It seems the problem’s been solved, Sir,” Harry said cheerfully.



“Professor McGonagall’s generous offer will not be needed. This,” Dumbledore said, holding up the Ministry parchment once more, “is notification from the Ministry that your guardian has already been chosen.”

“Why didn’t you just say so, Sir? Why did we have to waste so much time going through this? I could have gone back to Arithmancy,” he said, scowling as though upset about missing class time.

“Aren’t you curious about who the Ministry has assigned as your guardian, Harry?” Dumbledore asked, the twinkle back in his blue eyes.

Harry rolled his eyes. “You, I would imagine,” he said.

When the Headmaster sat back, a look of surprise on his face, Harry shook his head.

“How did you know that, Harry?” Dumbledore asked.

“Perhaps you’re not as subtle as you think you are, Sir,” Harry replied calmly. “Now, can we get on with this please? I’d rather not miss lunch.”

“Very well.” The Headmaster sat up once again and smiled benignly at the young man. “As your guardian, it is my duty to see that you are kept safe and healthy. However, due to your...unusual circumstance, there are a few things required of you.”

“Such as?” Harry asked with genuine interest. He was curious to see how far the old man would try to take this farce.

“They are simple things really, harmless things,” Dumbledore said casually.

“Albus, really. Must you drag this out?” Minerva said, scowling.

“To the point then.” Dumbledore picked up a piece of parchment from his desktop and examined it for a moment. “This is a list of the things I require from you as your guardian. I will go through them for you and answer any questions you may have.”

When Harry simply nodded, he consulted his list and cleared his throat. “First, you and Miss Granger will no longer see each other outside of classes. There will be no studying together, you will not sit together at meals and you will not visit with each other in your common room in the evenings.”

Harry bolted to his feet. “What? Hermione? Have you lost your mind? You can’t do this, Professor.”

“I can and I will,” Dumbledore said, calmly.

“But why?” Harry asked, sinking back into his chair.

“She exerts too much influence over you and the choices you make, Harry,” he said, not unkindly.

“I know you care for her, but this is better for you.”

“I think I understand. You wish to be the only person who ‘exerts’ influence over me. Am I right, Sir?”

“I am older and wiser, Harry. You must trust my judgment in this. It really is for the best.”

“Older, perhaps,” Harry said, scornfully. “Wiser? I think not.”

“There will be no more discussion on this matter. You will do as your told,” Dumbledore said, angrily.

When Harry simply glared in response, the Headmaster returned to his list. “Now, to continue. You will no longer threaten Professor Snape or myself with any form of prosecution for our actions. What we do, we do for your own good. In time, you will come to see that.”

Harry remained silent, though he was seething inside. What he was hearing would be nightmare fodder for days.

“Professor Snape will be using Legilimency on you frequently, to make sure you are hiding nothing from us. You *will* drop your shields and allow him entrance into your mind. If, at any time, you refuse my order, you will be given a sleeping draught and the required information will be obtained while you sleep. You will also apologize to Professor Snape for threatening him, exposing him as a spy and for breaking his wands. Do you understand?”

Harry nodded curtly and tried not to grind his teeth. His entire body was stiff with anger and he wanted nothing more than to storm from the office. He felt Professor McGonagall’s hand brush his back lightly, briefly, and guessed that she was trying to tell him to be calm. And while he understood her logic, he was finding it difficult to do as she suggested.

“You will also apologize to every member of the Order for putting them at risk when they searched for you over the summer...”

“I didn’t ask...” Harry started.

“This is not up for debate! You will sit there, listen to what actions are required of you and then perform those actions, Mr. Potter!” Dumbledore said in a loud, angry tone. “As I told you before, I will no longer put up with your resistance. You will apologize as I have directed. Is that clear?”

“Albus, I think you are being overly harsh,” Minerva said, gripping the back of Harry’s chair. “This is all rather sudden for Harry. It’s only natural that he be upset.”

“I will remind you once again, Professor McGonagall, that you are here only as his Head of House. Your comments are not required, nor welcome!”

“As his Head of House, I have a duty to look out for his well being,” she said, trying to speak calmly. “Yelling at him and demanding his submission to your authority as his guardian are not

conducive to a well adjusted student!”

“You will remain quiet, or you will leave this office, Professor,” Dumbledore said coldly. “I will not allow you to interfere in my guardianship of this child.”

When Minerva glared at him, but remained silent, he turned back to Harry. “Now child, to continue. You are required to submit to me the names of the cloaked figures you were seen with this summer and tell me how I may contact them. You will also tell me where you spent the summer, so that I may examine it for myself.

“Any and all correspondence will be given to me before it is sealed. If I approve, I will send it for you. Any correspondence you receive will be delivered to me before you read it. You will, however, have *no* contact with Remus Lupin or Nymphadora Tonks. Also, you will not be allowed off school grounds for any reason. Your holidays, including summer break, will be spent at Hogwarts, where you will be kept under supervision at all times. If you behave, you may be allowed to visit the Burrow for a few weeks over the summer.”

“The Burrow? So I can spend time with Ron? Thanks, but no,” Harry said scornfully.

“That brings up another point. You will cease this petty fighting with Ronald Weasley. He has your best interests in mind and wants to help you. I will ask him to keep an eye on you and to help you when he thinks you need it.”

“My best interest at heart? Are you mad? He attacks my girlfriend and calls her a slut, and you think he’s looking out for my interests?” Harry said in disbelief.

“As Miss Granger will no longer be your girlfriend, I fail to see how this is relevant and we shall, therefore, not debate the issue. You will simply do as you are told.”

“But...”

“The matter has been dealt with to my satisfaction. That is all you need to know,” Dumbledore said. When Harry opened his mouth to comment, he scowled. “Enough! The matter will no longer be discussed and we will move on.

“The wards around your trunk and your bed will be dropped. Your belongings will be searched whenever and by whomever I deem necessary. This may, at times, include staff, prefects and even your dorm mates. You will also remove your earring, cut your hair and have the tattoo removed by Professor Flitwick.

“Your classes will, for the most part, remain as they are. However, your free periods will now be used for training. I will work up your new schedule and you will learn what I deem most useful to you. You may have a variety of teachers, including Professor Snape. You *will* obey him. As Occlumency training is no longer necessary, he will be teaching you how to duel.”

Harry couldn’t help but grin at the thought. He knew it would never happen, but the image of a

surprised Snape being smeared against the dungeon wall filled his heart with warmth. When he noticed Dumbledore staring at him oddly, he wiped his expression and waited.

“Do you understand everything I have told you, Harry?” Dumbledore asked a bit suspiciously.

When Harry nodded, the Headmaster sat back in his chair, well pleased. The child would come to learn that he had no choice in the matter. Eventually, Harry would come to trust him once more and his plans for the boy could go forward.

“I’m glad. It really is for your own welfare, child. Now, you may keep this,” he said, holding out the list of things he required from Harry. “I’m sure it’s clear enough, but if you don’t understand something, I will be more than happy to explain. Not debate, mind you,” he added, as Harry looked ready to speak, “but clarify. You can’t change this, Harry. Accept it and things will be much easier for you.”

Harry took the offered parchment and glanced at. Looking back at the Headmaster, he asked, “Are you finished, Sir?”

“For now. You are dismissed.”

Harry stood and cocked his head. “Dismissed? Not yet, I think. I have a few things to add.” He held the list up before Dumbledore’s eyes and, with a flick of his wrist, drew his wand. “*Incendio*,” he murmured, and watched as the parchment burned merrily down to ash.

“Harry!” Dumbledore exclaimed. “There was no need to burn it. I know you’re angry now but...”

“Angry?” Harry asked calmly, brushing the ash from his fingertips. “No, not really. And as your list was meaningless, there was no reason *not* to burn it.”

“Meaningless? What are you talking about?” Dumbledore demanded.

Harry shook his head. “Merlin, and you’re supposed to be wise? Tell me, Professor, did you even read the Ministry’s letter? Of course you didn’t. In your arrogance, you assumed you’d been given guardianship over me. You really are a fool, aren’t you?” he asked in amused disdain.

At Dumbledore’s dumbfounded expression, Harry plucked the Ministry’s letter from Dumbledore’s desk and opened it. Glancing at it swiftly, he read it out loud.

To: Albus Dumbledore, Headmaster, Hogwarts

*From: The Office of Child Protective Services*

*Dear Sir,*

*We regret to inform you that your application for guardianship of one Harry James Potter, minor, has been denied, as an existing guardian for the minor in question already exists. As the current guardian is a member of the minor’s family, it was deemed a more suitable placement. The*

*decision is final, and there can be no appeal.*

*Sincerely,  
Jamie McFearson  
Child Advocate*

Dumbledore stood up and grabbed the letter from Harry's unresisting fingers in disbelief. "But this is impossible! No one knew I was going to write this law or apply for guardianship! How did you do this?" he demanded.

"Me? I didn't do this. I was contacted Tuesday morning and informed that I now had a guardian because a law had been passed revoking my emancipation."

"This will not stand," Dumbledore shouted, slamming the letter down on the desk. "I will have this revoked! Who is your guardian?"

"Oh, I'm sure my guardian will contact you in time. Now, I'd like to go to lunch," Harry said, turning towards the door.

"I demand that you tell me who your guardian is! You have no family, Potter, they're either dead or in prison!" the Headmaster exclaimed.

"Demand all you like, Sir," Harry said, looking over his shoulder as he opened the door. "But since this doesn't have anything to do with this school, my guardian has asked me to tell you to... what were the words? Oh yes, I was told to tell you to 'Sod off, old man'."

Harry then turned serious. "You think Voldemort is dangerous, Headmaster? You better start worrying about me instead, you old fool. You've pushed me too far this time. The next time you push, I'm pushing back and I daresay you won't enjoy it," he said in a cold tone.

Dumbledore's expression was a combination of shock at being spoken to in such a way, amazement that a mere child had out-manuevered him so well, and fear that he'd lost all control of the wizarding world's greatest weapon and a tool to use on his own path to fame.

Minerva followed Harry out the door. Seeing the Headmaster's expression, she started laughing so hard she nearly cackled like a witch from legend. "Oh Merlin! Bested by a student, no less. Twenty-five points to Gryffindor, Mr. Potter, for a brilliant performance!" she gasped, wiping the tears from her cheeks.

"Thank you, Professor. Maybe I should scrap the idea of being an Auror and take up acting instead," Harry said cheerfully.

As the door closed on their laughter, Albus Dumbledore sank into his chair, shocked. *What just happened*, he asked himself.

Outside Dumbledore's office, McGonagall stopped Harry with a hand on his shoulder. "You knew about this all along, didn't you, Mr. Potter? How did you manage it?" she asked him intently.

Harry looked at his Transfiguration Professor and smiled warmly. “Like the good Headmaster, I also have friends who believe and support me, Professor. I’m not pleased about losing the emancipation, but at least I’m still out from under his thumb. And in nine months, he’ll never be able to try that again.”

“A masterful performance, Mr. Potter,” the normally stern McGonagall said, her eyes dancing with glee. “I am very proud of you.”

Harry ducked his head shyly, not used to comments. “Thank you, Professor. And I really do appreciate your help.”

---

## Defense Against the Dark Arts Class...

“Mr. Potter, Miss Granger? A word before you leave class, please,” Romany called.

The two watched as the other students filed out of class. Once the room was empty, Romany shut the door and cast a privacy charm before turning on Harry.

“Alright Harry, what’s the problem? Your power levels were all over the place today. Twice you cast a simple shielding spell that was nearly solid in nature. I thought we had put this problem behind us,” she said, sounding annoyed.

Harry looked ashamed for the loss of control. Hermione touched his arm gently. “Harry, what’s wrong? You’ve been distant and cold since you came back from Dumbledore’s office this morning.”

“I’m sorry,” he said quietly. “I just can’t get out of my head what he wanted me to do. Since that meeting I’ve been fighting the urge to destroy something, anything...preferably Dumbledore or Hogwarts.”

“What do you mean? What did he want you to do?” asked Romany, curious and alarmed by his comment.

“He thought he’d been named my guardian and he had a whole list of things he wanted me to do. Things like allowing Snape to use Legilimency on me anytime he wanted, letting Ron search my trunk, apologizing to the Order, that sort of stuff. None of that matters all that much, but he wanted me to break up with Hermione. He thinks she’s too much of an influence on me,” he said, turning to look at Hermione.

Hermione could see the pain in his eyes. She stepped forward and embraced him. He laid his head atop hers and began to talk again.

“Ever since that meeting I’ve been so angry. He doesn’t know how close I came to blasting him into pieces, how close I came to losing control of my anger in that meeting. It frightens me to

know I can get that close. Even when I found out I have to kill Voldemort, I didn't and still don't want to kill him, I don't want to be a murderer. But today I wanted to kill someone and that scares me," he said in a whisper.

Romany looked startled at his revelation about Voldemort. She filed that away for another time. Right now she had to deal with a powerful wizard before he became afraid of what he was.

"Harry," she started off softly, "everyone experiences that sort of desire at least once in his or her life. It's not something we're proud of, but it happens. The important thing for you to know is that you recognized how close you came and still managed to avoid it. You learned a lesson about yourself today and right now it's a painful one, but later on in life you'll be glad for it.

"Right now you need to focus on what's most important. Your meeting with Dumbledore and his subsequent defeat today was the first salvo in a war. We need to take steps to ensure your safety and Hermione's. She's obviously a target..."

Harry frowned and tightened his grip on Hermione as he listened to Romany.

"You both have enchanted objects to let you know if the other is in danger. I'll charm my earrings to do the same, so I'll know if either of you are in danger. I'll also inform Amelia that the situation here is becoming untenable. It's important to the investigation that you two remain in school and seem to be unaware of what he's up to," Romany said.

"Romany, would it be possible to arrange for Hermione to have an emergency portkey? I'd do it myself, but I only know a few locations to enchant into the key. And she can't do my type of apparation," suggested Harry.

"That's a good idea, Harry. I'll talk to Amelia about it. Wait a second... 'your type of apparation'?"

Hermione looked over at Romany from Harry's embrace and started laughing. "I told you he does things others can't, including apparating into and out of Hogwarts," she said proudly.

"He also uses something he calls personal apparation, which I've only seen him use once to sneak into my bed at the start of term to leave me a note. He's never really explained that very well either," said Hermione stepping back from him and looking at him expectantly.

Both women looked at him for an explanation.

"I-I-it's not all that special, Hermione," he stammered. "I just apparate to a person instead of a place or coordinate."

"How can you apparate to a person?" asked Romany, curious now. She certainly couldn't do it.

Harry shrugged. "I'm not sure. It has to be a person I know well. I just concentrate on the person and away I go. It's not something I do often. When I first tried it, I apparated to Remus Lupin, only he wasn't alone at the time." He shuddered. "It's a good thing I don't make any noise when

apparating. I think Tonks would have been upset with me popping in like that and interrupting them.”

Hermione’s eyes grew wide and she started the snicker.

“Hermione, it isn’t funny! I think I’ve been scarred for life!” he said in protest.

---

Hogwarts Great Hall, dinner time...

Harry was surprised to see Hedwig winging into the Great Hall. He had sent Hedwig off to Remus yesterday with a letter asking about the Grim tattoo. Hedwig appearing now meant Remus had replied, since he told Hedwig to wait for a reply. She winged in low over the Gryffindor table and, instead of carrying a note attached to her leg, she had a much bulkier package clutched in her talons. Dropping the package in front of Harry, she landed between him and Hermione.

Hermione caressed the beautiful bird and fed her some meat scraps from one of the platters while Harry unwrapped the package. Inside the package were two envelopes, one marked “READ ME FIRST!”, one un-addressed, and a small notebook.

He opened the marked envelope first.

*Harry,*

*Hold onto your hat cub because this letter is coming with a few surprises. First off, the book contains notes Sirius made concerning the changes to the wards around Padfoot Manor and, in particular, the Grim tattoo. It’s pretty complex and takes up most of the book so you might want to show it to Hermione. Most of the wards seem pretty standard if you ask me. The only real surprise is the addition of the tattoo, which will be given to each Head of the Black family.*

*I had to get this information from Gringotts. Fortunately, your name seems to carry some weight there and they were more than happy to give up the book with the information. According Rotfoot, the chief goblin in charge of the Gringotts Property Management department, the book and the letter were placed in their care back in early May. Rotfoot says the letter was written by Sirius and was to be given to you when you came enquiring about the wards.*

*I haven’t read the letter Harry, and I probably couldn’t. Sirius was quite good with concealment charms, so it’s possible that no one but you can read it. I don’t know what the letter says but I’m sure it’s going to upset you. Don’t read it alone if you can avoid it. No matter what he says in the letter, always remember he loved you and so do Tonks and I.*

*Remus*

Harry picked up the unopened letter as if it were the most precious object in the universe. He handed the other letter and book to Hermione, who watched him curiously. Then he stood up from



the table and quickly limped out of the Great Hall.

He left the school and walked down to the lake. Finding a boulder, he sat down and looked out across the water, watching the giant squid wave its tentacles as it performed lazy back flips. He closed his eyes for a moment and took a deep breath. He tore the envelope open and pulled out the letter inside before opening his eyes and beginning to read.

*Prongs Jr.,*

*If you're reading this, then I've died. What a horrible way to start a letter, hmm? But then again, there's no easy way to say something like that, is there?*

*I am so sorry, Harry. I hope I died well, fighting for what I believed in. I'm sorry I won't be there to help you. And I'm most sorry that I left you behind to chase after a traitor and ended up in Azkaban for twelve long years. If I'd not been so rash, we could have spent those years together.*

*When I first saw you and got to hold you, you were barely an hour old. Your father held you, then passed you to me. Both of us were reluctant to give you back to your mother, who had not yet had the chance to hold you. Your parents loved you and thought the sun rose and set around you, although Lily did think you were a handful. And despite the fact that I was an outsider from a bad family, your parents welcomed me into their home and hearts and honored me by naming me your godfather.*

*This past year has been difficult for me, Harry. It's taken me a while to realize that you are not James, despite how you look. You are your own person, combining the very best of James and Lily into a unique person. Your father was my friend and more. I watched him grow from being an arrogant, stuffy full blood, to a fine upstanding man in love with a muggle born witch. His attitudes shifted radically as he matured, but his fundamental core remained steadfast. He was someone who wouldn't allow people to be picked on because of blood. Someone that hated bullies. James might have started off as a prat Harry, but, like all of us, he grew up. I'm sure Lily had a lot to do with it, but the process had already started by the time they fell in love.*

*You've managed to combine the best of both your parents. You have your father's bravery and steadfast loyalty to friends. You have your mother's compassion and intelligence. You are all your parents could have wanted their child to be and I know how proud of you they would be right now. You are also the closest thing to a son I'll ever have.*

*Life hasn't been easy for you and I can't tell you how angry it makes me knowing the burdens that have been placed on your shoulders. Live my son, find a way to beat Voldemort and live. Find yourself a woman who can give you the love you richly deserve and raise a family of little Potters who'll play Quidditch and like a good prank.*

*I can only hope that James and Lily can forgive me for making such a mess of things and not being there for you. I've left you the Black Family fortune. Combined with the Potter fortune, you are one of the richest wizards in the world. Use the money to live and help your friends. If you can live and love, you'll have made this old fool very happy.*

*Goodbye son,  
Sirius*

With tears streaming down his cheeks, Harry carefully folded the letter and put it back into the envelope. He choked back a sob, then he folded his arms across his knees and lowered his head. He cried quietly, longing for a life he had been denied.

Arms wrapped around him and he heard a very familiar voice comforting him. "It's alright Harry," said Hermione softly. "Cry for him, cry for your loss. You need to do this."

He leaned into her embrace and wept for what he had lost. When his tears finally stopped, she tightened her hold on him for a moment. "Feel better now?" she asked him softly.

He smiled weakly and nodded. "He really loved me, that's what makes it hurt so much," he said in a wondering tone, shaking his head in disbelief.

"Is that so hard for you to believe, Harry?"

"It is. All my life I've wanted what everyone else takes for granted...a parent, a friend, someone who cared if I had a nightmare or a skinned knee. I never had any of that before. Do you know much I envied Ron and his family or you and yours? Ron would get jealous of my money or my fame and I'd trade it all in a flash to be a normal teenager with parents. He never could understand that.

"When you spend the first ten years of your life being told you aren't worthy of being loved, you start to believe it, Hermione. That's probably more damaging than all the beatings and weeklong lockups in the cupboard without being fed.

"What's it like to be three and climb into bed with your parents because the storm scared you? Or to have someone bandage your skinned knee and tell you everything will be alright? Sirius wanted to give me those things, but instead ended up in prison without a trial. I could have had all that, but fate didn't allow it.

"Now things have changed for the better, and it's so confusing. I can honestly say in the past few months I've felt things I've never felt before. Feelings I don't know how to deal with.

"I look at you and see a future that I want very much. I look at Remus and Tonks, even your parents, and see people that care about me. But every so often I wonder when I'm going to wake up and find it was all a pleasant dream and nothing more," he said with a sigh.

Hermione was struck by how many basic human needs he had missed out on. While he had spoken about his past before, he'd rarely spoken about it in terms of his needs and desires. His words caused her heart to ache for him.

She leaned over and kissed him softly. It was a gentle, feather light kiss, like the whisper of butterfly wings on his lips. "Does that feel like a dream, Harry?"

“If it is, may I never wake up,” he murmured, smiling.

“Everyone needs love in their lives, Harry. It’s essential to human happiness. Yes, it’s wonderful and confusing and sometimes even painful, but everyone deserves to be loved.

“That’s what makes you different from Voldemort. He’s denied that aspect of himself. You haven’t. You may think you don’t know how to love Harry, but you do it every day with your friends. You show it to me every day in a dozen little things you do without even knowing you do them.

“If I had to say you had any problem, it would be with receiving love and only time and trust will fix that,” she said, then her expression turned playfully seductive. “As far as the rest Harry, you know very well how to kiss. And one of these days soon I intend to find out what else you can do well. I may not be an expert in love, but think of the fun we’ll have learning together.”

Harry looked at her, shocked for a moment, before he laughed. “Do you want to know a secret?” he asked her shyly.

She smiled encouragingly and nodded.

“Do you remember when I went out in Cho in fifth year and how you and Ron both teased me about kissing her?”

She frowned, wondering where he was going with the subject.

“Well, the truth is, she kissed me. I didn’t really kiss her back. I was so shocked and surprised that I stood there like a dummy. You were the first girl I’ve ever kissed back.”

She looked surprised and he laughed. “Don’t you remember what I replied when Ron asked me how was it? ‘Wet’. Some kiss huh?” he asked, still grinning.

Hermione giggled at the comment, but she was secretly pleased by it. Someday she’d tell Harry that he was the first boy she had really kissed.

Together the two headed back into the castle.

---

Ginny’s Revenge, Part II, The Great Hall, the next morning...

Ginny sat sedately with her friends having breakfast when a commotion broke out near the far end of the Gryffindor table.

Both Seamus and Dean had leapt to their feet and were busily scratching their nether regions and screaming about the itch. Ron was still in the infirmary. Madam Pomfrey could only reduce, not eliminate his itch.

“I tried to warn them about Ron,” Ginny said loud enough to be heard over the screams of the two Gryffindors.

Lavender leaned over the table and looked at Ginny. “What do you mean, Ginny?” she asked curiously.

Hermione turned to look at Lavender. “Oh Lavender, don’t you know there are sexually transmitted diseases that cause a tremendous itch?” she asked in an exasperated tone.

“You don’t mean...?” asked Lavender, clearly shocked.

Hermione shrugged. “Think about it, Lavender. Three boys, all in the same room, all coming down with the same uncontrollable itch?” she replied.

Lavender’s eyes grew wide, and worried. Parvati gasped and the two young women looked at each other in concern. Both women had had intimate encounters with at least two of the boys in question. Lavender gasped in shock when Seamus yelled again and started scratching his mouth as well.

“I think I’ll go take a shower,” Lavender said, her face pale. A moment later, Parvati followed her from the room.

Ginny and Hermione smiled at each other. Harry eyed both of them suspiciously. “What’s going on here?” he asked.

“Nothing, Harry, just a little bit of character assassination,” said Ginny primly.

Hermione laughed at Harry’s confused look. She leaned in towards him. “By this evening’s Halloween feast, Lavender will have spread the rumor that Seamus, Dean and Ron are gay or, at least, bisexual.”

Harry exchanged looks with Neville and Draco before turning back to Hermione and Ginny. “I’m glad you aren’t angry with me. I’d hate to see what you’d do.”

“I told you the answer to that already, Harry. I’d let Hermione take care of you for me,” answered Ginny, looking smug.

Hermione laughed and reached one hand under the table to squeeze his thigh. Harry shifted nervously in his seat and Hermione’s hand slipped higher by accident. She pulled it away as if burned and Harry broke into the coughing fit. Both looked at the other, blushing madly.

“Hermione, I warned you that hands under the table could get you into uncharted territory,” Ginny said, laughing.

---

The Halloween Feast...

Harry was looking forward to the Halloween feast. Although the muggles had perverted it into a commercial holiday for children, Halloween was truly a special day on the Wizarding calendar. Halloween magic was special, stronger and somehow purer. It was said in the wizarding world that Halloween was the one day of the year that a wizard or witch could tap into their ancestor's magic, even if only for a brief moment.

In honor of the occasion, Harry had worked a complex enchantment into a single piece of parchment that he would share with his friends. He had tested a minor version of the enchantment earlier and now he used the more powerful version. Just testing it had filled him with an intense sadness and it wasn't something he wanted to partake in again. But it was a gift he could give them if they wanted it. He rolled up the parchment and carried it with him down the to Great Hall.

As Ginny and Hermione predicted, by the time he reached the Great Hall he'd overheard several conversations about the sexual antics of Ron, Dean and Seamus. He had trouble not laughing at some of the more outlandish stories.

Harry was pleased to see the way that Professor Flitwick had redecorated the Great Hall for the occasion. Jack O Lanterns floated above the tables. The house tables were missing and had been replaced by many round tables, seating ten people. Even the Head table was missing. The ghosts of Hogwarts floated everywhere as people took seats.

Harry sat down at a table next to Hermione and his friends. Today he wore simple muggle clothes; jeans and one of the loud, yellow t-shirts Hermione and Emma hated so much. This one read: I Broke Into The Department of Mysteries And All I Got Was This Lousy T-Shirt!

Hermione took one look at the shirt and rolled her eyes, while Neville and Ginny broke into a fit of laughter.

He was surprised when Susan brought her date, Terry Boot, over to join them. When he arched an eyebrow in her direction, she smiled shyly and he broke out into a big grin. Terry stood uncertainly by an empty chair, looking at the group.

"Am I welcome here?" he asked, looking at them.

Harry turned to Susan, who seemed to be blushing eight shades of red. "I don't know. Susan, should we let him sit?" he teased with a grin.

Hermione slapped Harry on the shoulder. "Prat! Of course you're welcome, Terry. Take a seat. Don't mind Harry, he's just upset because a prank was pulled and he wasn't in on it," she said, smiling at the Ravenclaw.

Hermione turned to Harry, "Susan and I have been teaching Terry things. Susan would like him to join our little group..." she trailed off as Harry looked over at Susan, who nodded at him with a hopeful look on her face.

"Terry's been a friend of mine long before Hogwarts, Harry. I trust..." she stopped when he held

up his hand.

Harry turned to look intently at the Ravenclaw. “Terry, if Susan says you’re alright, then I don’t have a problem with it. The real question is will you have a problem with what this will do to you? Most of school is afraid of us. Do you want to be in that boat as well?” Harry asked carefully.

Terry looked Harry in the eye, his expression grim. “Susan’s made me see that you’ve been treated unfairly. She hasn’t explained it all, but if she’s convinced you haven’t gone dark, that’s good enough for me. Besides, I’d follow Susan into You-Know-Who’s lair, if necessary.”

He glanced over to Susan and his expression immediately softened, his heart in his eyes. She blushed and looked down at her plate when he reached over to hold her hand.

Harry looked around to the others, his eyebrow raised in question. Each, in turn, nodded at him, a few grinned.

“Well then Terry,” Harry said, smiling, “welcome to the Outcasts. Susan, when you think he’s mastered Occlumency, let me know. I’ll check his shields and then you can fill him in on the details, alright?”

Susan nodded gratefully at Harry.

After enjoying the meal and the quiet conversation that followed, Harry finally reached into his pocket and pulled out the parchment he’d prepared earlier. “Guys, I have a surprise. But before I show it to you, you all have to make a decision,” he said, unrolling the parchment and placing it on the center of the table.

“This parchment is enchanted with a special charm I created. If you touch it with your wand it will show you a vision.”

“Vision of what, Harry?” Hermione asked, interested despite her self.

“It’ll take you to see the one person or persons you miss the most who’ve passed over to the other side... The charm will only last for three minutes, but it’ll seem completely real. You don’t have to do it if you don’t want to, but I know some of us never got the chance to say goodbye...”

Hermione sat chewing her lip, while surprisingly Luna looked eager and focused on what Harry was saying.

“I’d like to try,” Luna said excitedly.

“Touch your wand to the parchment, Luna, but only if you’re sure,” Harry said.

Nodding eagerly, she touched her wand to the parchment on the table. Her eyes lost their focus and she grew still.

*The room faded. She found herself sitting in her living room. From the kitchen she heard a*

*familiar voice she had not heard for many years.*

*“Luna...”*

*She whirled and looked as her mother came through the door.*

*“Merlin my little girl is all grown up and what a beautiful woman you’ve become,” said her mother.*

*“Mama? Is it really you? You’re not a disguised Gnuffle?” whispered the trembling girl.*

*“It’s really me, Luna. How I have missed you, my little girl. You’ve made me very proud,” her mother said.*

*Luna hurled herself into her mothers arms. “I’m sorry, Mum! I wanted to help you when the fire broke out, but I didn’t know any spells, I didn’t have a wand...”*

*“Hush, my darling. By the time the fire started, it was too late anyway. You were strong for me and your father, that’s what matters.”*

*They held each other for a while, then the scene slowly started to fade. Luna’s mother called out, as if from a distance, “Stay true to your path, Luna. Great things await you...give my love to your father...”*

*The room faded back into the Great Hall and Luna looked around at her friends, her eyes wet with unshed tears. Standing, she walked over to Harry and embraced him. He patted her back somewhat awkwardly before she returned to her seat.*

*“It’s a wonderful gift, Harry,” Luna said, smiling dreamily. “If it’s the last thing I do, I’ll try to get you a Cross-Footed Snuffle Whimper for Christmas to repay you for the gift you’ve just given me. They are a lot of fun.”*

*Everyone looked at Luna for a moment before looking around to see who would be next. Finally, Ginny pulled out her wand and touched the parchment.*

*Ginny’s view of the Great Hall faded and she found herself on top of a small hill overlooking the Burrow. It was a bright, sunlit day, obviously summertime, and butterflies danced lazily in the field. She couldn’t help smiling at the sight. It was one of her favorites of the Burrow and her childhood.*

*“You’re even prettier than your Mum was at your age,” came a voice.*

*“Oh, I quite agree. Much prettier,” said another.*

*Ginny whirled and confronted two men she didn’t recognize. The red hair marked them as family and they looked vaguely familiar, but she didn’t know them.*

*“I always knew Molly would have wonderful looking children,” said one man, smiling softly at her.*

*“Oh yes, and the red hair! It’s a shame we’re related. I’d like a red head like this one myself,” said the other, laughing.*

*“Now Gideon, don’t frighten her,” said the first man.*

*“I’m not frightening her, Fabian! Am I frightening you, Ginevra?” he asked.*

*Ginny looked between the two, recognition dawning upon her. “Uncle Fabian? Uncle Gideon?”*

*“In the flesh,” said Gideon, smiling.*

*“Well, not really. More like, thanks to your smart, green eyed friend,” countered Fabian.*

*Ginny laughed. “Now I know where Fred and George get their way of talking! We thought it was twin-speak.”*

*“Oh my goodness no, my dear,” said Fabian.*

*“It’s merely a family trait with close siblings,” said Gideon.*

*Ginny hugged the two men tightly, men she’d only heard about, who’d been lost fighting in the first war against Voldemort.*

*“Now listen carefully, Ginevra,” started Fabian*

*“We’re so very proud of you,” continued Gideon.*

*“You’ve chosen a difficult path to follow,” added Fabian.*

*“But it’s the right path, even if it pits you against family,” Gideon said.*

*“Stay true to your heart,” said Fabian.*

*“Your parents may have strayed, but hold your course.” said Gideon.*

*“And always remember that we love you, Ginevra,” said the two men as the scene faded back to the Great Hall.*

*Ginny looked over at Harry, her face contorted by a myriad of emotions. “Harry... I... words... thank you for your gift...,” she said before burying her face into Neville’s shoulder and sobbing softly.*

*Harry and Neville exchanged a glance. “I’ll pass, mate. The people I want to talk to haven’t passed over yet,” Neville said quietly. Ginny tightened her grip on Neville and he held her, caressing her*



hair.

“It’s alright, Nev. I didn’t think you would,” replied Harry.

Susan extended her wand next and touched the parchment.

*The Great Hall faded and she found herself sitting in her bedroom in Aunt Amelia’s house. Before her stood a man and a woman she’d only seen in pictures.*

*“Mum? Dad?” she whispered, trembling.*

*“My little baby is all grown up,” whispered her father. Susan’s mum said nothing. She simply stepped forward and swept Susan into an embrace. In a moment her father joined them. It was one of those moments where words were unnecessary.*

*“We’re so proud of you, Susan, so very proud,” said her Mum.*

*“You’ve grown up into a wonderful woman and a powerful witch who fights for the light. What more can a parent ask of their child?” said her father.*

*“I’ve missed you both so very much,” sobbed Susan.*

*“But dear, we’re always with you, and always in your heart. We’ve never really left you. Never forget that Sus,” said her mother.*

*“You’ll see us Sus, the first time you hold your own child. Or see your first grandchild. We’re a part of you and you pass that along with you as you live,” said her father.*

*The scene started to fade out. “Mum! Dad! Don’t go!” she cried.*

“Our time here is over, Sus, but our love for you never ends,” replied her mother as if from a great distance.

Susan blinked her eyes as the Great Hall came into focus. Ginny and Luna smiled softly at Susan and she shivered for a moment as the rush of emotions started to settle down. Reaching across the table, she grabbed Harry by the hand, gripping it tightly and smiling her thanks to him.

Harry looked to Draco, but the blond shook his head. “None of the Malfoys or Blacks are worth talking to, Harry,” he said softly.

Looking at Terry, the Ravenclaw also shook his head, turning down the offer. Harry nodded and turned to the last person, Hermione. She sat, chewing her lip, undecided.

“Hermione, you don’t have to do this if you don’t want to,” he said softly, caressing her cheek.

She leaned into his hand for a moment then her resolve hardened. Reaching out with her wand, she touched the parchment.

*The Great Hall faded from view and she found herself in her Grandmother's living room.*

*"Child, come sit by me," came a gentle voice.*

*Hermione whirled and spotted her Grandmother. "Nana? Is that truly you?" she whispered.*

*"Yes child, now come sit with me. We don't have much time," said her grandmother.*

*Hermione sat next to her Grandmother and then grabbed the woman, pulling her into an embrace. She wept as she held the old woman who'd meant so much to her.*

*"Hush child, relax. I know how much you miss me and I miss you too. But our time is short. Your young man is a strong wizard, the strongest that the world's ever seen, but it's taken most of his power to give you this gift. Let's not waste it.*

*"There are things I need to tell you, important things. First and foremost, your young man, he needs you to be strong for him. Stand by him and he'll remain true to you and the light forever, for his love for you is true and burns like a beacon in the night. Abandon him and he'll sink into the depths of darkness. You are his magnet to the light. Without you, he will not survive to do what he must..."*

*"But, Harry? He'd..."*

*"Hush child, let me finish. The fates have given you both jobs to do and, if you succeed, your names will be recorded down through the ages like Merlin, Godric Gryffindor and Rowena Ravenclaw. You need each other. His life and yours are tied closely together. He has great power and great skill and you provide him with guidance and love. It's your love that ties and binds him to the light and the path of right.*

*"To help you in this, you are given a gift, child. A gift I had, but kept secret. I meant to pass it to you and now I do so."*

*Her grandmother reached over and kissed her on the forehead. She felt a funny shock run through her and she experienced a moment of vertigo. Looking up at her grandmother, she smiled at the older woman.*

*"Oh child, I envy the extraordinary life you will have with your young man," her grandmother said, touching her cheek softly. "Together you will usher in a new age for the wizarding world. You will set an example that all will follow and your young man will give you a family to be proud of. And with my gift, you will be able to guide him. You always had the talent, Hermione. Now I've awakened it within you."*

*"I love you, Nana," Hermione said as the room started to fade.*

*"Yes child, and I love you. Stay true to the light and your young man..." came the reply as if from a distance.*

Hermione shook herself slightly and she slumped against Harry. He put his arms around her, alarmed at her reaction.

Still in his arms, she shuddered and started to speak in a voice that wasn't hers.

“THE BASTION OF LIGHT WILL FALL IN THE TIME OF THE BULL... AND THE CHOSEN CHILD MUST FLEE THE ISLE OF MYRDDIN’S BIRTH... DARKNESS WILL ENGULF THE LAND AND THE REALM OF UTHER’S SON WILL BURN...”

AS LIGHT IS SWALLOWED BY DARK THE DEFENDER MUST WATCH FROM A FAR...  
THE BASTION OF LIGHT WILL FALL IN THE TIME OF THE BULL...”

Harry gasped and hissed quickly, “Someone write this down!”

Both Luna and Ginny conjured parchment and quills and started copying. When they both nodded to let him know they’d managed to get it all down, he gently shook Hermione, breaking her from her trance. Still holding her, he searched her face carefully, concern for her shining from his eyes.

She turned and wrapped her arms around him. “Thank you, Harry. That was a priceless gift.”

Both Ginny and Luna passed their parchments to Harry. He looked up and nodded gratefully to them.

Hermione looked at one of the parchments in puzzlement. “Harry, this looks like...”

“Prophecy, Hermione. Yes, I know,” he replied.

“But where did you get this? Where did it come from? When...” she sputtered, confused.

“It came from you, Hermione, just now,” he said softly.

Hermione shook her head, disbelieving. When he nodded gently, and touched her cheek, she looked stricken and her eyes welled up with tears. Harry tightened his grip around her and tried to calm her.

Luna stood up and walked around the table to kneel next to the sobbing girl. “Hermione,” she said firmly, “look at me.”

Hermione looked up from Harry’s shoulder, surprised by the tone of command coming from Luna.

“Being a Seeress doesn’t mean turning into another Trelawney,” Luna said calmly. “It means that once or twice a year you’ll give a real prophecy. It’s an uncontrollable talent that gets triggered by events around you. It doesn’t change who or what you are. My family has had three seers in the past one hundred years and every one of them loathed and later failed Divination.”

Hermione looked intently at the younger girl for a moment, her tears stopping.

“Does that help?” asked Luna gently.

Hermione bit her lip and nodded.

“Good. Shed enough tears and you’ll attract a Tatampur. They’ve been known to eat people,” Luna said airily as she stood to return to her seat.

Hermione blinked and started to laugh. Harry grinned, Draco rolled his eyes and the others started to chuckle.

Minutes later, Harry took the two parchments, folded them and put them away. Hermione looked at him curiously, so he leaned over to her. “You can look them over tomorrow. Tonight’s a night for celebration,” he whispered.

---

A Hillside Overlooking Liverpool, England, that evening...

Lucius Malfoy watched impassively as he ran a simple test on the city of Liverpool. With a nod of his head, his Death Eaters released twenty wizards. Each had been placed under the Imperius curse and given detailed instructions and some specialized equipment stolen from a British Military base.

This operation was different from the last. This one had been timed to the minute. Two controlled wizards apparated away. Three minutes later, the city of Liverpool plunged into darkness and the remaining seventeen wizards apparated to their targets.

Strangely enough, the first sign that anything was wrong in Liverpool came from purely commercial sources. British Telecom detected an outage in the circuit and was unable to make contact with their field offices using landline or cellular phone. A repair crew was dispatched from Manchester to check the lines.

A fishing vessel contacted the HM Coastguard and reported massive fires along the docks of Liverpool. A flyover at four A.M. by a HM Coastguard helicopter was sufficient to awaken the British Government.

Within half an hour, help was streaming into the stricken city, but people fleeing the fires hampered it. Special staging areas were set up to route the refugees into temporary areas, where relief personnel could help the injured and distraught. The British Government put the Military on high alert but by that point the attackers had either died in the assaults or had vanished without a trace.

Over the next several days it would be revealed that a systematic attack had taken place, first disrupting power, then communications, and then emergency services. Over seventy percent of Liverpool’s police and fire stations were destroyed within minutes of the power going out, then the hospitals. After that, the city seemed to burst into flame. Reports of black cloaked figures killing people by waving sticks at them were discounted as hysterical ravings of people maddened

by fear.

The British Government convened an emergency session of Parliament and Military security was beefed up at key points in London. A quiet sense of panic descended upon the country as the Government could only offer vague theories about terrorists.

---

Hogwarts Library the next morning...

Hermione and the others poured over the prophecy, checking it against the many books in the library on the subject, while Harry prepared a letter to send to Remus with a complete copy of the prophecy.

Finally Hermione looked from her books and notes frowning. "I've taken this apart, and I hate to say this, but it isn't pleasant.

"If I'm reading this right, it means that Voldemort must conquer England before he can be defeated. And before that happens, Harry must leave England. The part about the stronghold is confusing. Could it be Hogwarts? Or the Ministry? I'm not sure. But if this is to be believed, then things here in England are going to get a lot worse before they get any better," she said, slumping back in her chair.

Harry looked stunned. Leave England? Alone? Where would he go? The very thought of leaving his friends and Hermione behind made him tremble.

"NO! I won't do it. I'm not going to leave the country and leave you to the mercy of that madman," he growled at her.

Hermione looked at him and her features softened. "Harry, it doesn't say you have to go alone. Wherever you go, I go," she said firmly.

Harry looked at her for a long moment, then turned to his friends. "We need to make plans. Anyone that wants to keep themselves and their family safe will be welcome to join me. I'll not leave my friends behind."

Ginny looked afraid. As a minor, and one belonging to a questionable family, she couldn't go anywhere.

Harry took one long and knew what she was thinking. "I mean what I said, Ginny. I won't leave you behind. If this is going to get as bad as it seems, kidnapping will be the least of our worries. Send a note to Bill, Fred and George. I want you to make arrangements for all of us to get together over the Christmas holiday. Draco, you're covered for the holidays. Neville, bring your Gran, Susan will bring her Aunt, Luna her father and Terry his parents. I'll not leave you guys in danger," Harry said intensely.

He turned back to his letter to Remus and wrote down their interpretation of the prophecy, asked him to double check it, and start making plans for a large meeting of people over the holiday. While he wrote, the others began writing their own letters.

Later that evening, Hermione went in search of Harry. His manner had been subdued all day and, when he didn't show up for dinner, she became worried about him. She checked the Marauder's Map, which he had given to her for safekeeping, then headed for the Room of Requirement.

Entering the Room, she was surprised to see him exercising his leg, pushing it harder than she had ever tried. He had tripled the weights on his ankle and she could see him straining with every movement.

Spotting her, he paused in his exercises and unsnapped the weights. He got up from the table and peeled down to a bathing suit, then sat by the edge of the pool.

"I've been an fool, Hermione," he said bitterly. "I've been so worried and concerned about Dumbledore and his antics that I've completely forgotten what I'm supposed to do."

Hermione transfigured her uniform into a single piece bathing suit and joined him by the side of the pool. "What do mean?" she asked him gently.

"Voldemort," he replied, looking at the pool. "I've been trying to pretend he wasn't there, that Dumbledore was my only worry. Your prophecy drove it home in all its harsh reality. I'm the weapon, but I'm not allowed to do anything until a lot of people die. Some weapon. Merlin, why can't I just find him and get this over with one way or another?"

Hermione grasped his chin and gently turned his head until he was looking at her. "Harry, if you face him now, he'll kill you!"

"So? How many people are going to die because I have to run away, Hermione? How many? Dumbledore isn't stopping him, the Ministry isn't... maybe... maybe I'll get lucky," he said softly

She released him and turned away from him. "How can you be so cruel, Harry? Don't you know how hurt everyone would be if you died trying to kill him before the time was right? Remus would be devastated. So would Tonks. I..." she stopped, unable to go any further.

"I'm sorry, I wasn't trying to be selfish. It's just so damn confusing! I wasn't thinking of others. Just myself again," he said, and then sighed, hanging his head in shame.

"When the times comes, I'll stand by your side and you'll do whatever it takes to get rid of that monster," Hermione said softly. Then she gasped as Harry's head whipped up, his eyes flaring with magic and he gripped her by the shoulders.

"You'll not be there, Hermione, so forget that idea right now. I don't... I can't... you can't..." he stopped, at a loss for words. He pulled her to him, holding her gently, trying to convey the depths

of his feelings.

She broke free from his embrace and pushed him to the floor, then straddled him. Staring down at him, she glared. “Harry Potter, you can’t stop me from being there. It’s my choice to make, not yours. You better get that through your head right now,” she told him angrily.

Harry’s expression glazed and his hands ran gently over her back. She suddenly realized where she was and made a move to get up, but he pulled her down into his arms.

Harry didn’t want her embarrassment to break the embrace, so he rolled onto his side taking her with him. Lying side by side, he kissed her softly. His kisses grew more passionate and her ardor quickly matched his.

Harry’s mind whirled as her hands left a trail of erotic heat across his back. The feel of her soft breasts pressed up against his bare chest drove his desire higher. He ran both of his hands up into her hair and kissed her again and again. Gasping, he buried his head in her hair and trembled against her.

The temptation to move his hands to forbidden places was intense. There was a strange sensation coming from an unusual area and it was enough to give him pause, while Hermione slid a little lower to kiss his chest.

“Hermione?” he breathed into her ear, causing her to shudder delightfully against him.

“Mmmmm?”

Harry found it very hard to talk with what she was now doing to him. She was laying soft kisses across his chest, her hair traced an erotic halo around the spot where she was kissing.

“Hermione, you do know what you’re doing, don’t you?” he asked, sucking his breath in and shivering.

She stopped and looked at him curious.

“Hermione, ummm... where is your hand?” he asked, unable to keep the grin off his face.

Hermione paused for a moment, then turned a bright red as she realized she had slid her hand into his swim trunks and was busy caressing his bum.

Embarrassed, she buried her head against his chest and pulled her hand out of his trunks as if it was touching fire.

He gently cupped her chin and lifted her head so she could see him. Aware of her actions, she was also extremely aware of his own arousal pressing up against her.

“No one has ever held me or touched me like that,” he said softly. “I know you aren’t ready to take our relationship further yet, but please don’t be embarrassed or ashamed. You only did what I’ve

been dreaming of doing to you.”

“I can’t believe I did that,” she mumbled, still embarrassed.

“Well, don’t look at me to tell you to stop next time. I’ll behave myself and keep my hands in acceptable areas, but I won’t stop you from exploring,” he said, grinning wickedly.

She propped herself up on one arm, her hand under her chin. “What makes you think there’ll be a next time, Mr. Potter?” she asked trying not to match his smile.

He pulled her up to his level and she squeaked in surprise. He kissed her quickly. “Because I think you want me as much as I want you.” Then he wrapped both arms around her and rolled the both of them into the pool.

Sputtering, she shot to the surface. “Oh Potter, I’m going to get you for that!” she said, and then laughed when he swam away from her.

---

## A Meeting with McGonagall and Flitwick...

It was the first week of November and the entire school was tense. Rumors had been circulating about a rift between Harry Potter and the Headmaster and many of the older students were coming down on the side of Dumbledore. The schedule Board meeting was only fueling the rumor mill. The younger students, those in their third year and below, were generally too preoccupied with their own lives to care one way or the other.

After a week’s absence Snape was back with a vengeance. It was his first day back teaching potions and Harry felt the Professor try to breach his shields twice.

The first time he simply let the attempt bounce off his shields and continued making his potion. The second time he got into a staring contest with the greasy git. It would have lasted for the rest of the class had it not been for Draco nudging him to finish chopping up the mummy fingers.

Harry and Hermione had been summoned to Professor McGonagall’s office after dinner. Harry had an idea what the meeting was about, but for him, the key question was how much he could reveal without giving away too much.

Since their time in the Room of Requirement, Harry and Hermione had grown closer. They were also more aware of the each other’s boundaries and which ones could and could not be crossed safely. Both privately wished that the other would agree to take things to another level up.

Since they shared all the same classes, Harry stayed close to Hermione. She was becoming increasingly nervous being in the school and it was an attitude that Harry couldn’t blame her for. She took comfort from his presence, so he did what he could to help her.

Entering the Transfiguration office, they noted that both Professor Flitwick and Professor



McGonagall were already there. Nodding to the two teachers, Harry closed and sealed the door, then cast several privacy charms on the room. He then took a seat next to Hermione and leaned his cane up against the desk. He had taken to wearing ankle weights all the time now, which tired his leg easily.

“Mr. Potter,” Professor McGonagall said, “I asked you both here because I am becoming increasingly alarmed at what is occurring in this school. I have witnessed the Headmaster treat you both unfairly with behavior that borders on the criminal. I have seen my own House turn against its own members. Quite frankly, I’m sick of it and I’d like to know why this is happening so I can do something to stop it before the school explodes.”

“Professor,” started Harry, “I’d like to tell both you and Professor Flitwick about what’s going on, but I can’t. Not yet, anyway. However, if you’d both be willing to swear a wand oath, I promise I’ll tell you what I can now.”

Both professors looked at each other for a moment, then gave Harry their oaths. Both Harry and Hermione visibly relaxed when it was over.

“Professors, what do you know about the Prophecy that the Order of the Phoenix was guarding all last year?” asked Harry.

“I know it was something involving you and V-V-Voldemort, Harry, but that is about it,” Minerva replied, puzzled by his question.

Harry nodded. “Yes Professor, it did involve both of us, but it also explains why our illustrious Headmaster has seen fit to try to control my life the way he has,” he replied, trying to keep his anger in check.

“I suppose it would be easier to just give it to you so you know what I’m dealing with. This will make things a bit clearer. Mind you, this is not the only thing that explains what is going on, but this is the one that started the ball rolling,” he said softly.

Harry then leaned his head back, and closed his eyes. Hermione reached over and took his hand in her own. “I can see it all like it was yesterday,” he murmured. “Sirius had been dead for barely an hour when the Headmaster locked me in his office and revealed the real reason why he had hired Trelawney as the Divination Professor. She gave a real prophecy, the first of two, you see. He played the image of her in his Pensieve for me.

*“...The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches... born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies... and the Dark Lord will mark him as his equal, but he will have power the Dark Lord knows not... and either must die at the hand of the other for neither can live while the other survives... the one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord will be born as the seventh month dies....*

“Can you imagine being fifteen and grieving the loss of the closest thing to a parent you have ever known and suddenly being told that you have the weight of the entire wizarding world on your

shoulders? I should have been prepared, trained for this fight. But no, instead I was placed with muggles who hated me and treated me lower than the lowest house elf,” Harry said softly. Then he opened his eyes and looked at them.

Minerva looked aghast.

Filius didn’t seem so surprised however. “I always wondered about that, Harry. Especially considering some of the things I’ve seen you do this year. You removed that ring from Miss Granger using a spell that shouldn’t have worked and I tried every dispelling spell I knew on it,” said the diminutive Professor.

Harry smiled at his little Charms Professor. He truly liked and admired the man. “Yes Professor, I’ve been hiding some of my abilities, especially from our Headmaster. There’s a lot more going on here than I can tell you tonight, but you can see now why the Headmaster is so keen to keep me under his thumb. To him, I am his weapon, a tool for him to use. I refuse to be anyone’s pawn anymore,” he replied.

“You saw what he wanted me to do, Professor,” he said turning to McGonagall. “He wanted me to basically grovel before him and abandon the woman I love. I won’t do it. I’ll withdraw from this school, drop out like Fred and George Weasley before I’ll let him control me again.”

Harry was starting to get worked up, but Hermione gently squeezed his hand, calming him.

“Harry,” Minerva said hesitantly, “when you were bitten by that spider, I saw scars...so many scars on your body. Did the muggles do that to you?”

He nodded mutely and looked down. Hermione leaned over and put an arm about his shoulders before looking up at McGonagall.

“They did, Professor. It’s not something he likes to talk about. It took most of the summer for him to begin to come to grips with it,” she replied quietly.

The two professors exchanged a look between them. Then Professor Flitwick spoke for both of them. “How can we help you two?”

“Just knowing that you both believe I haven’t turned dark like so many others is help enough. But I am planning to have a get together over the Christmas holiday. There, I’ll be able to explain in greater detail what is going on, and what we have to do. Right now, we have not only one prophecy, but now a second one to deal with as well. There are things we need to do but I can’t make those plans here.”

“Do you really think the Headmaster will allow you to leave the school over the Christmas holiday, Harry?” asked McGonagall in disbelief.

Harry looked up at her, his eyes alight with power and the very air around him seemed alive with magic. “Professor, he hasn’t the power to stop me from leaving the castle if I want to,” the green

eyed wizard said quietly. “Although it might be interesting if he tried.” And then he smiled, a cold, chilling smile.

---

## Author’s Notes...

Yes, once again we deal with the dreaded Author’s notes. Its in this section that we poke fun at all our little reviewers that think they can trip us up and make us confess our deepest plot bunnies. Won’t work. Nope.

Harry’s annoyance levels are tiered. Fudge is at the bottom of his list right now and buffered by Amelia, so he’s not too upset with Fudge at the moment.

Pranks? Nope, not in this little dark fiction. This is DRAMA with angst. Unlike our other stories there will be little intentional humor in the story except for things like Harry’s t-shirts.

The board of Governor meeting will occur next chapter. It’s written. Something everyone has to realize. If we throw Ron, Snape and Dumbledore into prison then we have no story. Nope, we have to tease them into positions of advantage and disadvantage. We have things that have to happen in particular time frames and set ups to do. This is a twisted little trip we’re on and we have one rule for you. If you guess something is going to happen. Throw the guess out the window cause the odds are against it.

Someone seems to think that FF net will remove our story due to “chatty” A/N’s. In a word...so? Most of our A/N’s are in response to questions asked in reviews. Occasionally, we’ll get off topic a bit. However, if the system admins feel that a 30-40 page chapter with a 1-2 page A/N is a violation, there’s not much we can do about it. Our A/N’s will remain as they always have. If the story is removed from the system because of it, we’ll simple move it to another. There are more than enough sites out there now that it’s not really much of a threat. If you don’t like our A/N’s, simple scroll down, folks! Or, if they’re that annoying, stop reading!

Sunset over Britain is not “slightly AU”...it is COMPLETELY AU. Hope that clears things up a bit.

Jamie46: You can email reviews if you like.

Voldy good, Harry bad, Susan dead? Excuse us a second, would you? (Howls of laughter heard from off-screen) Ahem, sorry about that. Yes, yes you are absolutely right! How truly amazing that you can read our minds so easily! We are impressed! Now, want to by a bridge? (Wicked grins)

As far as the “uncanon” thing goes, we were talking more about specific characters and their behavior. You’ll note that we didn’t change the name of the school from Hogwarts to Ball-Buster University. The Headmaster is still a wizard named Dumbledore, rather than a Crumple Horned Snorkack named Bubbles. Get it? Hope that helps.

## Pet Peeves!

Lack of Consistency. If there is one thing I hate is seeing an author that produces a 10K word chapter followed by a 2K word chapter followed by a 5k word chapter. Pick a rough size to your chapters and stick to it.

Every chapter of our stories averaged a minimum of thirty pages in MS Word. MINIMUM.

Be consistent in your writing. It's annoying to find a wonderful chapter that's huge, then you follow it up by a 3 word chapter. Bleh!

## **Sunset Over Britain**

### **Alligators in the Classroom**

Standard Disclaimer:

A spotlight shines center stage. Harry is shackled to a bed just wearing boxers. Hermione stands over him wearing hip high leather boots and a see through teddy. In one hand she carries a two foot long Phoenix feather which she uses to tickle Harry unmercifully until he says the magic words.

Harry: (gasping and writhing on the bed) “Bob and Alyx want me to tell you that they in no way own the Potter Universe!!”

Pleased, Hermione unshackles Harry from the bed and beckons to Ron sitting in the wings.

Ron climbs nervously onto the bed and lets himself be shackled to the it. Hermione smiles sweetly at him, then walks off the stage with Harry, one hand caressing his bum.

Ron looks around nervously and gets a terrified look in his eyes as Millicent Bultstrode steps out dragging electric arc welding torch.

Stage lights dim and the only thing visible is the blue arc of the electric torch.

---

### **Sunset Over Britain**

#### **Chapter 10**

---

Gryffindor Common Room, a few nights later...

Hermione crept down to the common room in her robe and slippers. It was very late and everyone one asleep. Well nearly everyone, one person was awake. Sitting at one of the study tables was Harry. He was hunched over a large book, flipping pages quickly. The casual observer would think he was just skimming, but Hermione knew better. She also knew why he was here instead of in bed.

Stepping up behind him, she stopped in her tracks, startled, when he spoke.

“You should be sleeping, Hermione. It’s late,” he said tiredly.

“I could say the same for you,” she said softly as she sat down next to him.

He peered over at her, the bags under his eyes noticeable. She reached out and brushed a lock of his hair out of his eyes.

“You’re having nightmares again, aren’t you?” she asked him.

“Different ones, but yeah. And the dream journal doesn’t seem to be helping this time.”

“Would you like to talk about it?”

Harry sighed and rubbed his face with his hands tiredly, everything about him fairly screamed exhaustion. He knew he had to talk to her about it. And if he couldn’t, then there was no one he could talk to.

“Ever since your prophecy, I’ve been seeing places I know, and places I’ve only seen on the telly. Everything’s burning, there are bodies everywhere, in the streets, in parks, in the rivers...”

Hermione could see the tension in him as his muscles quivered underneath his shirt and his fists clenched spasmodically on the table. She closed her eyes, blocking out the sight of him and concentrated on his words.

“...So many people are going to die, Hermione. Children, women, wizards, and muggles...” he whispered.

“Harry, we know this. We know things have to get really bad here before they can get better. People are going to get hurt, they’re going to die. It’s war...”

His head whipped up and he glared at her. “Is that supposed to make me feel better? How many will curse my name because I didn’t save their mother, brother or father? How many will be crippled when this is all done?” he asked angrily.

“Oh Harry, of course it’s not supposed to make you feel better. But don’t you see? You’re mourning for people who haven’t died yet, for people that you cannot help. Tell me, have you ever heard about a man named Oscar Schindler?” she asked gently, placing a hand on his trembling arm.

Harry shook his head and looked at her expectantly. Her question at least had deflected his anger.

“In the second world war, fought by the muggles, the Germans were killing people of the Jewish faith by the millions. Oscar Schindler saw this and knew he couldn’t stop it. He couldn’t even try to stop it. But he could try to save as many people as possible. He didn’t save many compared to how many were killed. But thanks to him, some people are alive today. He tormented himself over those he couldn’t save, but he did what he could.”

Harry's brows furrowed in thought. "So you're saying save what I can? Ignore what's outside of my control?"

"Yes. Save who and what you can. But always remember that even you, Harry Potter, as great as I think you are and will be, can't save the whole world," she replied.

"It hurts when I think of those I can't save, Hermione," he said in a whisper.

She leaned over and wrapped her arms around him. "I know it does, but it also means your heart is in the right place."

The two sat for a while before heading back to their own beds. As Harry lay in his dorm room, listening to the quiet breathing and soft snores of those around him, he considered Hermione's words.

*Save what I can. It sounds so simple, but I need a plan to do that,* he mused.

Harry was still considering possibilities when he dropped into a peaceful sleep.

---

Grimmauld Place...

Tonks rolled over in bed and reached for Remus. When she found his side of the bed empty, she muttered grumpily and sat up, awake now. Getting out of bed, she donned a robe and went in search of him. In Grimmauld, there were only a few places he would normally be found. The kitchen, the library or his monthly stays in his reinforced room and, since it wasn't a full moon that only left two places.

Padding silently on the hardwood floors, she walked to library door and looked in. Remus sat at a table, pouring over some very old volumes. To one side was the most recent letter from Harry.

She frowned and stepped into the light. "Remy, you can't keep burning hours like this. You've been reading ever since Harry's letter arrived," she said, exasperated.

"I know Nymph, but I've read this a hundred times in the past few days and, if Hermione's interpretation is correct, we are in for a bloody awful mess."

"That bad?"

"Worse than you can imagine. I pray Harry doesn't understand the ramifications of this prophecy. If he does, we could lose him," came his quiet reply.

"What?! What do you mean Remy?"

"Nymph, read Hermione's thoughts about the prophecy again," he said, handing her the letter.

Tonks reread the letter. She liked to give the impression that this stuff is over her head, but her association with Remus had an added benefit of showing her that there was value in acknowledging one's intelligence.

Remus watched her carefully as she reread the letter again. She had a fine mind despite the impression she often gave people. He loved the way her nose crinkled when she was really considering a problem.

She finally handed the parchment back to Remus and continued to ponder its contents. Suddenly, her eyes widened in shock and she stared at Remus in consternation as she made the connection. "Bloody hell! Remy, what do we do?"

"I think that, my lovely Nymph, is the five galleon question. And I also think that no matter what we decide, Harry's the one who's going to have the ultimate say in it," he replied softly.

Tonks frowned, but couldn't find any way to refute it. He was right. The choice had to be Harry's.

---

Headmasters Office, Hogwarts...

Dumbledore looked up from his conversation with Severus when Alastor Moody entered his office. He smiled genially at the man and offered him a chair.

Moody scowled when he spotted Snape. He knew of Snape's role in the Order, but never fully trusted him. Of course, Moody never trusted anyone.

Moody, never one to dance around a topic, cut straight to the point. "Albus, I'm here because I've been picking up some disturbing rumors from our Ministry and abroad. I know how important it is to keep tabs on Potter, but I'd really suggest holding off trying to get him back under our control. Rumor has it that the Ministry and, in particular, that idiot Fudge, are out for your blood.

"He's heard about the feud you and the boy are having and he's just waiting and hoping for you to make a mistake that he can use to nail your hide to the door."

Dumbledore leaned back in his chair, thinking for a moment. "Well now, that explains a lot. His placing Aurors in the castle then wasn't for Harry's protection, or the students, it was in the hopes of catching me doing something."

Moody looked thoughtful. "How did he find out about the attack on the Granger girl, anyway?"

"Probably the same way he discovered about the attack on Potter, from our resident Ministry spy, Professor Blackthorne, I imagine," spat Snape. "I tell you Headmaster, we need to do something about her."

"Yes, yes, Severus. I quite agree, but now is not the time to be doing that sort of thing, not while the Ministry has its eye fixed firmly on Hogwarts. No, I think we must leave Professor



Blackthorne alone for the time being. Tell me, Alastor, what else have you heard?"

"Well, there seems to be a wave of disappearances of wizards and witches from the continent, but no one knows what is behind it... Damn it all Albus, this is serious. Between this hearing over that foolish Weasley boy and the Ministry looking to roast you over a slow fire, you have trouble! What are you going to do about that idiot Weasley anyway?"

"Yes, Mr. Weasley's obsession over Miss Granger has become a liability. But, like you have already pointed out, we can do nothing until after the hearing, at the earliest," Dumbledore replied, his mind whirling with possibilities.

"Headmaster, should Weasley survive this hearing, I have an idea which might help," offered Snape.

Moody turned to Snape and eyed the man with distaste before speaking. "Well, Snape? If you have an idea, spill it," he growled.

"I think it's time to replace Mr. Weasley's obsession with Granger. If we replace it with an obsession for something else, something that can help our cause..." Snape trailed off, shrugging.

"Yes, I see what you mean, Severus. It has worked before and I don't see why it can't work again," replied Dumbledore.

Moody looked between the two Professors, puzzled. "Will one of you explain what the bloody hell you're talking about?"

"It's simple really, Alastor. In the past we've found it convenient to redirect the attention of some students. A memory charm, followed by the placement of new memories, allows us to take a poor student and force them into becoming a motivated one. If we were to redirect Mr. Weasley's obsession over Miss Granger into something more useful, say his Defense studies?"

"If you can do that, then why the bloody hell didn't you cast a memory charm on Granger and convince her she's in love with Weasley?" demanded Moody.

"I tried!" snarled Snape. "Whatever technique she's learned from Potter makes her immune to it. And now they both know of the attempt!"

Moody turned back to Dumbledore, alarmed. "Albus, you need to back off on Potter. If he's aware of the attempt to alter her memories, he'll treat you as an enemy from this point on," he stated.

Dumbledore smiled benignly at Moody, "Nonsense, Alastor. Harry will soon come to see the error of his ways and once again come to me, seeking help and advice. But we're not here to talk about Harry Potter. We were discussing Mr. Weasley."

Alastor frowned for a moment before considering the Weasley issue. "Won't you be worried that Weasley might become too powerful if you refocus him to defense?"

“Oh, come on Moody. This is a Weasley we’re talking about,” sneered Snape. “Power is something that has never been a strong trait in the Weasley family. Look, this will turn him into a useful fighter for the Order, if nothing else.”

Dumbledore leaned back in his chair, smiling at the two. “Then it’s decided. Should Mr. Weasley still be a student after his hearing, we’ll redirect his interests into a more positive use.”

---

## **Malfoy Manor...**

Lucius sat in his living room and knocked back another stiff drink. He scowled as a house elf quickly refilled his glass from the nearly empty bottle of Ogdens before scurrying back out of range.

He read the statement from Gringotts again and angrily threw his glass against the wall, shattering it. His Lord had given him specific instructions, which he had dutifully passed to his moronic cousin, McNulty. He was to buy the Daily Prophet so that his Lord could use it to confuse the Wizarding public.

“That bloody idiot!” he snarled to the empty room.

Fergus McNulty, his cousin, had been told to spend as much as he needed to purchase the paper and, when the owner had been reluctant to sell, he simply offered it all! In a single day the Malfoy’s had gone from being the fifth richest Wizarding family in the world, to having a few properties and barely 100,000 galleons in Gringotts!

He could sell a few of the properties to bring his cash flow up a bit, but it would take centuries to rebuild the Malfoy fortune. Lucius ground his teeth in frustration. It was all he *could* do, really. The Dark Lord did not take complaints well and Lucius had no plans of becoming the next target of his lord’s wrath. He could only hope that his Lord’s coattails were big enough to drag the Malfoy’s back to their original wealth.

*Malfoy family*, he thought to himself scornfully. *What family? Damn Draco! Why couldn’t he just take the Mark and do what he was told? And why the hell did he have to take Narcissa with him? With her, I could have gotten my hands on the Black family money to repair my fortune. Damn them both!*

---

## **Defense Against the Dark Arts Class...**

Harry watched with interest as Hermione and Pansy Parkinson dueled on the platform. Romany stood off to one side, watching the two with a critical eye. She had made a few changes to the regular dueling rules that were observed in the class. The biggest change being that people no longer stopped dueling when someone was hit with a spell. The object now was to disable or disarm your opponent. The only real limit was the rule of no spells capable of causing death or major injuries.

At the moment, Pansy was having a problem with Hermione. Hermione had learned Harry's rebounding charm and it was much stronger than a standard shield charm. Harry had to admit that the soft glow around her increased her beauty. In his mind, the halo of light made her appear angelic. Her rebounding charm wasn't nearly as strong as Harry's, nor could it deflect as many spells.

"Inflictum poena," Pansy shouted in frustration.

A light green cloud of smoke issued from Pansy's wand. The cloud then moved to one side and started to roil in the air. Pansy began throwing a rapid series of explosive hexes at Hermione to keep her off guard while her main attack prepared itself.

The blood drained from Romany's face as she recognized Pansy's spell. The cloud suddenly formed into thin narrow line. Like a missile, it left Pansy's side, hurtling at Hermione, who was too busy dealing with Pansy's diversionary attacks to do anything about it.

Romany made a dive towards Hermione as the spell crossed the center point of the dueling platform. She grabbed the girl and they both crashed to the floor. Covering Hermione with her own body, she looked up in surprise when the curse never hit. Unlike so many of the dueling spells, this one didn't need to be aimed. It should have struck Romany as it homed in on Hermione's magical aura.

She slowly got to her feet when she saw the spell had reached the middle of the dueling platform and then stopped. The spell quivered and hummed in an ever-increasing whine.

Suddenly, the spell flashed brightly and vanished. The overload of the spell energy flashed back to the caster. Pansy's eyes rolled up in her head and she collapsed like a sack of potatoes.

When a low rumbling sound began among the students, Romany turned away from the unconscious Pansy and faced the class. Her eyes widened for a moment when she saw Harry Potter. He sat at his desk at the front of the class and his body appeared to be buffeted by a phantom wind. His cloak furled around his legs and his hair whipped about his head. His gaze was firmly fixed on Pansy's crumpled form, and his eyes blazed with energy.

"Class dismissed!" Romany barked. "Zabini, Bulstrode, take Miss Parkinson to the infirmary. When she awakens, tell her she's lost fifty points from Slytherin for using a dark spell."

Harry sat and watched as Blaise levitated Pansy and floated her out of the classroom. He then turned his attention to the two women standing on the platform staring at him.

Romany waved her wand, closing the door and cast a privacy charm on the room. She was about to say something, when Hermione started first.

"How dare you interfere, Harry? You arrogant prat!" Hermione hissed in anger at him.

Harry blinked a few times and suddenly realized his girlfriend was talking to him. The fire behind

his eyes went out as her words sunk in.

“I was holding my own! That was my duel, Harry. You had no right to...” she stopped when Romany put a hand on her arm.

“Hermione, I don’t know what he did, but he may have saved your sanity,” she said quietly.

“W-W-What?” the young witch stammered.

“Pansy cast a very powerful and dangerous spell. *Inflicturn poena* is designed to cause pain to the victim. The catch is, the pain increases as time passes. It’s a dark curse that can last for nearly a week, depending on the power of the caster. For most people, it causes days of intense pain that potions can barely control. While it’s not a lethal curse, it often leaves the victim begging to die in order to escape the pain. Sometimes it drives the victim insane.”

“B-B-But why did you jump in the way of the curse then?” Hermione stammered as she paled.

“It’s my job, Hermione. I told you I’m here to keep you both safe,” Romany replied.

Harry got up from his desk and approached them. Hermione looked between the two, her lower lip trembled slightly. Then her gaze locked with Harry’s, the remorse visible in her eyes.

“Harry,” she whispered despairingly.

He smiled softly at her. “I told you I would always protect you, Hermione.”

“I’m sorry I yelled at you,” she whispered with her eyes downcast.

Harry placed his cane on the raised platform and boosted himself up to a sitting position before grabbing his cane and using it to get to his feet. Romany watched him with interest.

“It’s alright, Hermione. It’s not your fault that you didn’t recognize that spell. I read about it over the summer,” he said softly.

“I’d like to know what you did, Harry. That was no shield you used,” Romany said.

He shrugged and looked apologetic. “I’m not sure I can explain it, Romany. I saw the spell moving and it was like I became blind for a moment and was only seeing the aura of it. Once I saw the aura, I knew what I had to do, so I adjusted the spell. It’s funny, really. It was almost like I could see the individual parts of the spell, rather like looking under the hood of a muggle car to see its engine.”

“You adjusted a spell after it had been cast?” exclaimed Romany.

Hermione looked at him, startled.

Harry ignored their looks. “Yeah, I could see part of the spell energy that was feeding its motion,

so I adjusted that portion of the spell back into the casting power, which tried to make it go faster, but couldn't..." he trailed off as he noticed the two were staring at him as if he'd suddenly grown a second head.

"What? Do I have something on my face?" he asked them exasperation.

"Harry, you altered a cast spell," said Romany breathlessly.

"So? I did the same thing with the Headmaster's Gargoyle at the beginning of the year when he didn't give me the password," Harry replied.

Hermione placed a hand on his arm, and he looked at her. "Harry, no one's ever done what you're describing, I've never heard of it," she said breathlessly.

"Alright, let me consider it. It could be really useful to explore, but right now I have a question that has been bothering me for a while. I've been reluctant to ask about it, Harry," said Romany

Harry looked at her guardedly, "Oh? What question would that be?"

"You mentioned that you have to kill Voldemort? Who or what says it has to you?"

Harry's expression darkened. "Prophecy, damn prophecy," he muttered.

Hermione put an arm on his shoulder. He turned to look at her, and then leaned his head against hers for a moment. Hermione turned slightly so she could see Romany.

"There are two prophecies that currently say Harry and Voldemort are closely linked, and either Harry will kill him, or Voldemort will kill Harry," she said softly as Harry tightened his grip on her.

Romany eyed the pair carefully. "Is it true, Harry? Only you can kill him?" she asked, watching them both.

Harry nodded, "One of the perks of being the bloody Boy-Who-Lived."

"What are you going to do?"

Harry frowned before answering harshly, "What choice do I have? I don't want to be a murderer, but if it comes down to my life or his. I'll pick mine. When the time's right, I'll kill him. I want to live my life and raise a family, but I can't. Voldemort isn't going to allow me to, so I'll remove him from the picture."

He then turned and faced Hermione, signaling an end to the discussion. "It's time for Arithmancy," he said.

Hermione nodded and followed him down the stage steps. They collected their book bags and walked out of the classroom.

Romany watched them leave, her mind turning over the two new puzzles the raven haired young man had just presented her. She finally blew out a breath in frustration and scowled. Harry was a mystery, wrapped in an enigma, surrounded by a headache!

---

Hogwarts corridor outside the library...

It was late; barely an hour remained before curfew. Draco had been working on a potions assignment in the library and had just finished it. His own housemates made it nearly impossible for him to work on his homework in the common room. While there were only a few Slytherins in Voldemort's camp, they ruled the house with an iron fist, except where Draco was concerned. Despite his feelings towards his father, even Draco was thankful for all those years of illegal training. His father had started him at an early age in dueling and defensive arts. To say that the few Voldemort supporters in Slytherin House were afraid of Draco would be an understatement. They were terrified of him.

With his homework packed into his bag, Draco stood and made his way to the exit of the library, but paused when he heard a noise. It sounded almost like someone was whimpering, while another spoke in a low voice. Creeping forward, he stopped again just inside the library door. From that vantage point he could hear the voices clearly.

"Aw... look at her, books all over the floor and now she's crying," said a sneering voice. "What are you going to do now, Loony?"

Draco suddenly found himself incapable of rational thought. He charged out of the library, swinging his book bag like a mace of old. Luna's assailant never had a chance.

The heavy bag connected with his head and he went down. Draco didn't bother to look at Luna's assailant. He scooped her stuff up into her book bag and led her away from the area.

It wasn't until they were three floors below the library that he stopped and faced Luna. Her face was tear streaked, but her eyes were soft as she watched him. She lowered her head and glanced up at him through her lashes, smiling shyly.

He felt his pants tighten uncomfortably. As he reached down to adjust himself enough for comfort, his mind started shrieking at him and he froze. What was he doing? This was Luna, not one of the trollops his father brought him and let him use when he was done with her!

"Luna, are you alright?" he asked. His voice, usually refined and cultured was suddenly gruff.

"I am now, Draco. Thank you for helping me back there," Luna replied.

He scowled at her. "Well, really, it was nothing. I just happened to pass by and he was in my way," he replied haughtily. As the silence descended, his expression changed. The frown slowly gave way to confusion.

Luna watched the blond Slytherin and smiled mysteriously at him. She tilted her head slightly and waited.

Finally Draco couldn't take it anymore. "Why do you let them do that to you?" he asked in frustration.

"People always make fun of me. They see me as an airhead. After a while, you get used to it."

"But why do you put up with it, Luna? You're as strong a witch as Ginny."

She looked at him sadly, as if his lack of understanding was disappointing. "Even the wizarding world has its strange characters, Draco. People look at me and don't understand me, so they call me Looney."

"I'm trying to..." Draco said, sotto voce.

She smiled, overhearing his muttered words. Leaning over, she brushed the back of her fingers over his cheek gently. They were both surprised when he didn't pull away from her caress. "I know you are, Draco. But you still have a way to go before you understand me."

With that, she turned her back on him and, smiling triumphantly, walked away.

---

## **Headmaster's Office, Hogwarts...**

Dumbledore sat pensively in his office. Tomorrow was the hearing in front of the Hogwarts Board of Governors and it seemed to him that now, more than two months into the term, events were spiraling out of his control. According to dispatches from Order members, the Brotherhood was now being seen more frequently. There had been sightings in Hogsmeade, Diagon Alley, and at the Ministry. And if that wasn't bad enough, the Daily Prophet was at it again.

Dumbledore sighed and picked up a copy of today's Daily Prophet.

*Hogwarts, a Breeding Ground for Dark Lords?*

*The Daily Prophet has learned that the Headmaster of Hogwarts, Albus Dumbledore, is feuding with Harry Potter, the Boy-Who-Lived. Over the summer, the Headmaster raised some ugly allegations against Mr. Potter, which the Ministry subsequently cleared him of. Now the enmity that first caused those charges has spilled over into halls of Hogwarts as the Headmaster and Harry Potter all but wage open war against each other.*

*Adding to Mr. Potter's rebellion against the Headmaster and the wizarding world is his apparent attachment to a muggle born witch named Hermione Granger. Why Mr. Potter, himself only a half blood, would turn from the many full bloods around him to embrace and sully his line for another generation can only be viewed as rebellion. Yes, rebellion against the tradition that the Headmaster of Hogwarts has neglected to instill in his students.*

*This paper has learned that Mr. Potter and a small number of friends, most of them social misfits in their own right, have become increasingly isolated from the student body. Mr. Potter is a very powerful wizard, and the actions of the Headmaster are driving him away from all that is good about our world...*

Dumbledore threw the paper down in disgust. *The nerve of them! Here they are, all but claiming Harry is turning into the next Dark Lord, and blaming me for it, he thought. Maybe I can arrange another interview with Rita, set the record straight... Yes! If I can put the fear of Harry into the public, then the Ministry and I will both control him using a threat of Azkaban!*

Dumbledore stood and began to pace his office nervously. He had to plan this correctly. But first, he had to get past the blasted hearing...

---

## **Hogwarts Great Hall...**

Just as Albus Dumbledore threw down the Prophet in disgust, another, younger hand performed the same action in the Great Hall. Harry growled at the paper, then glanced around the hall. There were a higher than usual number of eyes on him today. He looked over at Hermione, but she was busy opening a letter from her mother.

*Oh well , he mused. We'll talk about the article later.*

Hermione unfolded the letter and began to read.

*Dear Hermione,*

*I just wanted to drop you a note, telling you that your Dad and I look forward to seeing you tomorrow, but we do wish it were under better circumstances. Tonks assures us that the Ministry has no plans of allowing this to be swept under the rug.*

*I understand that a faculty member will escort you and Harry down from the school to The Three Broomsticks, where the Board meeting will take place. We will meet you there.*

*By the way, how are you and Harry doing? When your father and I were that age I needed eight arms to keep his hands to himself! And I'm not ashamed to admit that my hands did a bit of roaming at the same time.*

*See you tomorrow.*

*Love,*

*Mum*

Hermione frowned. She knew that the hearing was necessary, but that didn't mean she was looking forward to it. At least Harry would be there with her since the Board requested his presence. The board, it seemed, had questions about his attack as well. Hermione looked up at Harry, her mother's letter fresh in her mind.



Harry watched as Draco and Luna entered the Great Hall. He found it hard to suppress a wry grin watching the aloof Slytherin watch Luna's every movement. Hermione followed the direction of Harry's eyes and couldn't help but grin herself. Draco and Luna weren't a couple, they may never make it that far, but they had a strange attraction to each other that mystified those around them.

Hermione went back to looking at her letter and thinking. Her mother was a very intelligent woman in her own right. She had turned down a teaching position at the Royal College of Dentistry so that she and her husband could enjoy working together. Her parents had met in their teens, attended the same school and, despite separations caused by later decisions, they stayed close.

Hermione glanced at Harry once more. He had his nose buried in a book, which in itself wasn't surprising. His reading preferences had undergone a major topic shift of late. He had taken a break from reading magical books and shifted to muggle texts ranging from history to philosophy.

She wasn't sure exactly what he was searching for, and when she pressed him on it, offering to help, he told her she had given him the project and he'd bring it to her when he was ready. She could honestly admit to herself that she was pleased by his independent streak starting to show up again and in such a positive manner. Harry's skills concerning magic, and in particular, fighting, were far above hers or anyone else she knew. In applying his talents to other areas, he was only confirming what she had suspected all along. Harry was every bit as smart as she was when he decided to apply himself.

Harry, sensing her contemplative mood, looked up from his book and smiled at her. She smiled back and leaned into him, enjoying his closeness.

---

On the Road to Hogsmeade...

Professor McGonagall met Hermione and Harry in the Entrance Hall after breakfast to escort them to the meeting of the Board of Governors. With school in session, the Board opted to use Madam Rosemerta's conference room in The Three Broomsticks.

Professor McGonagall eyed Harry and his cane carefully. "Mr. Potter, are you sure you're up for this? Remember what happened the last time," she reminded him.

"I think I'll be fine, Professor. That was several weeks ago and I've been exercising my leg daily. I'll just take it easy and, if it gets too bad, I'll rest," he replied, smiling devilishly at her.

McGonagall stared at him a moment before chuckling. "Your father often tried the same smile with me, Mr. Potter, and for far less deserving reasons I might add," she said before suddenly turning serious. "I want you both to hold onto your tempers today, you especially, Mr. Potter. As we both know, the press has been unkind to you both in the past, and they are at it again. Do not give the Board a reason to suspect that the reports of you in the press are factual. I know it will be difficult, but you must hold your temper in check. Both of you," she said.

Hermione and Harry exchanged a worried glance, then nodded to their Head of House.

They walked to Hogsmeade in silence and, surprisingly, Harry's leg did not slow them down. In fact, both Harry and Hermione sped up slightly when The Three Broomsticks came into view and they could see the people waiting out in front of the building.

Professor McGonagall arched an eyebrow when Harry embraced a woman who could have easily been mistaken for his older sister.

Stepping up behind the two of them McGonagall spoke. "Mr. Potter, aren't you going to introduce me?"

Harry looked surprised for a moment, and then chuckled. He laid one arm across the other woman's shoulders. "Professor, this is my guardian."

As he said those words, the woman's hair straightened and fell to her shoulders. Her eyes changed to a deep purple and her features softened.

McGonagall shook her head in surprise and extended her hand. "Nymphadora! How did you manage to obtain guardianship over this troublemaker?"

Harry stepped away from Tonks and put a hand to his forehead dramatically. "Professor! You wound me!" he said, and then grinned impishly.

McGonagall and Tonks laughed. Hermione shook her head in amusement, while Dan and Emma grinned.

"Well, let's just say it was a decision done in a hurry, Professor," Tonks replied once the laughter had faded.

"She's my cousin, after all, and I wouldn't be surprised if someday she ends up leashing a certain wolf I know. That would make her...what? My god-wolf-ette?" Harry offered, innocently.

Tonks grinned back at him, while Hermione rolled her eyes and pushed him towards the door.

"OY!" Harry protested, a mock scowl on his face. "No shoving, wench!"

When Hermione's eyes narrowed, Harry went through the front door of The Three Broomsticks rather quickly and under his own power.

---

The Board Meeting...

Laughing, the six of them entered The Three Broomsticks, heading for a private dining room Madam Rosemerta had set aside for the meeting.

Entering the room, Harry looked around curiously. He noted the long table behind which, he

assumed, the Board would sit. In front of the table was a single chair, presumably for those who were going to give testimony. A few feet behind that single seat were rows of chairs for those invited to the meeting.

As people filed into the room and took seats, Harry and Tonks sat with Hermione and her parents. Hermione looked grim, but she held Harry's hand firmly in her own and was playfully tickling his palm with a finger.

Harry watched silently as Ron entered, Arthur and Molly on his heels. Arthur held Ron firmly by one shoulder as he steered the still scratching young man to a chair near the main table. None of the Weasley's so much as spared a single glance at Harry or Hermione when they came in. A moment later Dumbledore entered and took a seat behind the Weasley's so that he was able to lean forward and talk to them.

Finally another door opened and a group of witches and wizards filed out, taking seats at the main table. Harry recognized only three of the people at the main table, Narcissa, Amelia and Mrs. Longbottom. Narcissa was filling in on the role of her husband, who was, after all, an escaped prisoner from Azkaban.

The stately witch in the center chair introduced herself as Esther Hampton, the chairwoman of the Board of Governors.

"We are here for two closely related matters. But before I begin, may every one please stand and identify themselves and their reason for being here for our records?" Hampton asked.

"Ronald Weasley, and I'm here because I was ordered to be here," said a sullen Ron.

"Arthur Weasley, I'm Ron's father."

"Molly Weasley, I'm his mother and I just want to say these proceedings are illegal..." she started to say, but was cut off.

"MRS. WEASLEY! I can assure you, you will have a chance to speak. However, unless you are asked to speak, I request you refrain from doing so, else I will be forced to summarily rule against your son."

Molly sat down heavily in her seat, her cheeks puffing in and out. Harry was disconcerted. For a brief instant, Molly looked almost like a chubbier Aunt Petunia. Shaking his head, he turned back to the proceedings in time to see Dumbledore sitting down from his introduction.

"Dan Granger, I'm Hermione's father."

"Emma Granger, I'm her mother."

"Hermione Granger, I was asked here by the board."

"Nymphadora Tonks, I'm the guardian of Harry James Potter."

Dumbledore and the Weasley family spun in their seats to stare at Tonks and Harry with varying degrees of disbelief. Dumbledore's expression quickly changed to outrage as he tried to catch Tonks' eye. When she ignored him, he turned his angry eyes on Harry, who simply raised an eyebrow in question, then turned away from the Headmaster with a small smile playing about his lips.

"Harry James Potter. My presence was requested by the board."

"Minerva McGonagall, Deputy Headmistress and Head of House for all three students."

"Thank you all for attending today," Chairwoman Hampton said. "As you are aware, we are here to discuss the two attacks that occurred in late September. The Ministry has graciously supplied us with a Pensieve memory of the event, as well as written statements from the alleged victim. Does anyone wish to review either of those before we begin?"

After a moment of silencing Hampton spoke again. "Very well, let us start with Mr. Ronald Weasley."

Ronald stood and walked over to the empty seat in front of the board. He sat heavily and stared at them, his arms crossed.

"Mr. Weasley, you are aware that the Board may still elect to expel you from Hogwarts and have your wand snapped?"

Ron stared at Hampton sullenly for a moment. "Yeah," he finally muttered, scowling.

Hampton frowned. "I say this, Mr. Weasley, because if you refuse to cooperate with this board, then that is precisely what will happen. It is to your own benefit that you cooperate with us in this matter. I hope you understand that."

Ron glared at her, then nodded angrily.

"Very well then. The Ministry has authorized the use of Veritaserum for this hearing. You can, of course, refuse to take the potion, Mr. Weasley. If you refuse however, we will expel you and turn you over to the Ministry for criminal proceedings."

Dumbledore looked surprised that the Board and the Ministry appeared to be working together on this issue. His eyes narrowed in speculation when Tonks approached the Board and got the potion from Amelia.

Tonks turned to face Ron. "Tilt your head back and stick out your tongue," she told him firmly.

Ron glared at her for a moment before complying. She quickly applied three drops to his tongue, and then gave the bottle back to Amelia, who pocketed it.

Tonks waited for a few minutes, and then checked Ron. Noting his dazed expression and unfocused eyes, she nodded to Hampton to begin.

“What is your full name?” the Chairwoman asked.

“Ronald Bilius Weasley.”

“Where did you get the ring from?” Hampton asked.

“I purchased the ring from Mundungus Fletcher.”

“Do you know where he got the ring?”

“He said he picked it up in Knockturn Alley and had an Order member put the charms on it.”

Hermione grabbed Harry’s hand again. She could see by his body language that his anger was building quickly. She gave him a little tug and he glanced at her, then his eyes softened. The fire hadn’t gone out, but it was banked, making his eyes shine brightly.

Together they both turned back to the questioning.

“...An un-removable charm and a love charm,” Ron was saying.

“Tell me, Mr. Weasley, was it your intention to rape Miss Granger after you forced the ring on her finger?”

“NO! After I put the ring on her finger, I wanted to kiss her. When she refused, she made me angry. She and I struggled for a moment, and then she relaxed. I assumed she was accepting my advances, so I released one of her hands. I thought she was willing at that point.”

Harry sat fuming, one hand tightly gripped by Hermione. She tugged him again and he glanced down to see Emma holding Dan’s hand. Emma was keeping Dan from exploding as well.

Tonks checked her watch. “Madam Chairwoman, the Veritaserum is about to wear off. Unless you wish him to be re-dosed?”

“No, thank you Miss Tonks. I think we have enough information. Now if I may, I’d like to address some questions to Headmaster Dumbledore.”

Tonks grabbed Ron and heaved him out of the chair, pushing him towards his parents. Molly glared at Tonks, who ignored her.

Dumbledore took the empty seat and smiled benignly at the Board.

“Albus, this matter concerns us greatly. We’re most concerned by your apparent lack of response to this. In fact, I believe you docked house points from Harry Potter for defending himself after Ronald Weasley attacked him in anger when he discovered Mr. Potter was responsible for removing the ring. Why did you not punish Mr. Weasley?”

“Esther,” began Dumbledore, “I was under the impression this was just a simple case of teenage

love gone awry. I was intending to let things calm down a bit before I took action.”

“So you’re saying you were going to wait a few days before doing something about it?”

“Correct,” Dumbledore said, smiling genially.

“Why?”

“Tempers, Esther. They were running far too high. Had I merely been allowed to wait a few days and then issued appropriate punishments, tempers would have cooled. The chances for violent reactions would have been less. Unfortunately, that same evening, Mr. Potter was assaulted in his dormitory and everything was taken out of my hands.”

“Yes, the attack on Mr. Potter was unfortunate, but we’ll get to that back to topic in a bit.”

Dumbledore nodded agreeably at this.

“Tell me Albus, why did you dock points from Mr. Potter on the evening in question?” asked Hampton.

“Madam Chairwoman, both boys in question come from the same house. Does it matter which one gets the points removed since it affects the same house?”

“If you were talking strictly about points, I would agree, Albus. But by placing the onus of the points on Mr. Potter, he unfairly bore the brunt of this housemate’s displeasure.”

“Perhaps I was wrong to put Mr. Potter at fault for the loss of points, but they would have happened anyway,” replied Dumbledore, shrugging.

“Very well. Let’s turn to Mr. Potter’s attack, which I believe the Ministry is now saying the most likely cause is someone in his own house.”

“Well, I wouldn’t go that far, but it definitely came from someone inside the school,” granted Dumbledore.

Esther turned her attention to Harry. “Thank you, Albus. I’d like to hear from Mr. Potter now.”

Harry stood and walked up to the chair in front of the board and sat down, leaning his cane up against the side of the chair.

“Mr. Potter, I understand you were instrumental in removing the ring from Miss Granger’s fingers after two faculty members failed to do so. Can you explain how you managed to accomplish such a feat?”

“I can’t really offer much of an explanation, Madam Chairwoman, except to say that Professor Flitwick suggested that my feelings for Hermione... I mean Miss Granger...might have had something to do with why I was able to remove the ring.” In fact Harry knew exactly how he had

removed it, but he wasn't about to reveal those abilities here.

Esther Hampton motioned for him to continue. "Professor Flitwick suggests that our feelings for each other allowed me to overpower the non-removal charm. As to the Love charm, he says that it wouldn't have worked since Herm.... er... Miss Granger already has those feelings for someone."

Most of the Board nodded in agreement. A love charm was useless if the person was already in love. Esther's eyes narrowed and she looked at Harry's cane for a long moment.

"Mr. Potter, I understand that you need a cane as a result of your injury. Will you always need a cane?"

Harry picked up his cane and looked at it, frowning while he spoke. "I'm not entirely sure, Madam Chairwoman. The school healer, Madam Pomfrey, says I will always have some impairment in my leg. It's been getting steadily better, but I still need the cane. The walk down from the school was tiring, and I'm not looking forward to the walk home. I guess for the foreseeable future I'll need the cane," he replied with a heavy sigh.

"Thank you, Mr. Potter. You may take your seat please."

Hermione watched him carefully as he walked towards her and sat down. The days walk had been excessive for his leg, even with his use of the weights full time. He didn't show any sign of being in trouble yet, but that was part of his problem. He wouldn't show any signs until he was far past the point of being in trouble.

"Miss Granger, would you please take the chair?" asked Hampton.

Hermione swallowed nervously, stood up and moved to the central chair.

"Miss Granger, according to Mr. Weasley you relaxed during his assault, giving him the impression you were accepting his advances..."

"No, Ma'am. I relaxed enough to convince him that I wasn't willing to fight him. As soon as he released one of my hands, I began fighting him as best as I could," said Hermione, interrupting the Chairwoman.

Esther Hampton smiled. "Very well then, let's talk about your announcement to the school later that day, shall we? It was quite forceful. Perhaps it was a bit over the top?"

"Absolutely not, Madam Chairwoman! By dinnertime, a boy who'd assaulted me was still running around the school unpunished, despite the attempts to punish him by my own Head of House, Professor McGonagall. I felt it was necessary for me to warn the other girls in school to the danger we were all in," replied Hermione forcefully.

Hampton blinked in surprise at hearing the Deputy Headmistress's name brought up.

"One final question, Miss Granger, about the attack on Mr. Potter. How is it you happened to be

the one to stumble onto him in the Gryffindor common room?”

Hermione glanced at Harry for a moment and he nodded. “Mr. Potter and I have a relationship, Madam Chairwoman,” Hermione said, turning back to face the Board. “As a part of that relationship, and because of certain incidents in school, I have taken the precaution of enchanting several objects that let me know when Harry is in danger. I believe he has done the same for me, as well.”

“Do you really feel so insecure in Hogwarts, Miss Granger?” asked Hampton curiously.

“Madam Chairwoman, since returning to school, both Mr. Potter and myself have been subject to several attacks, one of which nearly killed Harry. If you look further into Harry’s school career, you will find a pattern of him being placed in harms way on numerous occasions. I don’t mean to mock your efforts, but I find the idea that anyone would consider Hogwarts safe as being blind to the facts.”

Esther Hampton blinked in surprise at such a strong statement. She looked thoughtful for a moment before dismissing Hermione from the chair. “Thank you, Miss Granger. I think that covers everything we needed to ask you for now. Professor McGonagall, if you would, please?” Hampton said, pointing to the now empty chair.

Professor McGonagall took the seat before the Board, looking at them firmly.

“Professor, we were unaware of your involvement in this. Would you please tell us what you know?”

“Certainly, Madam Chairwoman. I was on my way to breakfast in the Great Hall when Ginevra Weasley approached me, saying that Miss Granger was in the girl’s bathroom, and quite upset about something. Miss Granger is one of the finest students Hogwarts has seen a very long time. Her only violations of the rules have been in the service of the school or to protect the lives of others. Therefore, I knew if she was upset, it was something serious indeed.

“I found Miss Granger disheveled, her blouse buttons popped off and there were bruises forming on her chest. She was tearing at a ring on her hand, nearly hysterical, trying to remove it. When I could not remove it, I sent Miss Weasley to find Professor Flitwick, asking that he meet us in the infirmary.

“When Professor Flitwick proved to be unable to remove the ring, I searched out Mr. Potter. Given their relationship, I felt that perhaps he could calm her down enough to find out where she had gotten the ring. To our surprise, Mr. Potter was not only able to calm her down, but also able to remove the ring. After that, Miss Granger told her story about how she had gotten the ring and what Mr. Weasley had done to her.

“Mr. Potter was incensed. Had it not been for Miss Granger talking him out of it, I am quite certain that we would now, today, be speaking about how one student killed another...”



“That’s impossible! Harry loves Ron like a brother. He’d never hurt Ronald,” shouted Molly.

A cold voice cut across the murmur of voices in the room, silencing them instantly. “If he hurts Hermione again, I will,” said Harry.

Molly stopped in mid-tirade and stared at him.

“And I’ll help him,” growled Dan. Hermione looked between the two of them, not knowing how to react to such a rush of testosterone fueled rage. It embarrassed her, but it also made her feel safer knowing how Harry and her father felt.

She glanced at her mother, curious to see her reaction and was surprised at what she saw. Emma looked between Molly and Ron, her eyes cold and calculating, her lips pulled back, almost snarling, and Hermione realized that her mum was as angry as her father and Harry. *So much for the testosterone theory*, she thought to herself and nearly rolled her eyes.

There was a cough from Ether Hampton and heads turned as people turned their attention back to the proceedings. “Professor, did you try to punish Mr. Weasley?” the Chairwoman asked.

“Yes. In fact, I recommended immediate expulsion. The Headmaster said that was a drastic and unnecessary measure.”

“Thank you, Professor. That will be all for now. This Board will adjourn and make its decision,” said Hampton grimly.

As McGonagall returned to her chair, the Board members left the room, adjourning to a connecting suite through a previously unnoticed door. When it closed behind them, the buzz of conversation started.

When Harry noticed Molly Weasley glaring at him, he stared back at her, his eyes cold. When she threw back her shoulders and marched towards him, he drew his wand and cast a shield around his small group.

When Molly opened her mouth to berate him, Tonks cast a muffling charm and shook her head at the enraged witch, now stomping her foot in frustration. When the redheaded woman raised her hand and began to shake her finger at them, Minerva drew her own wand and cast a privacy charm, so they could talk without being overheard.

“Well, that was fun,” Tonks exclaimed, her eyes dancing merrily.

Dan and Emma grinned, Hermione snickered, Harry grinned and shook his head and Minerva laughed outright.

“Yes it was, actually,” the Professor said, her eyes twinkling.

Dan eyed Molly for a moment, noting her complexion and the expression on her face. “She’s turned the color of a boiled lobster,” he noted casually.

“Looks more like a beet to me, dear,” Emma said, cocking her head and contemplating the furious witch.

When the Board entered the room ten minutes later and took their seats, McGonagall removed the charms and the group faced forward once more. Hermione reached for Harry’s hand and he smiled at her reassuringly.

“In situations like this,” the Chairwoman began, glancing around the room, “we of the Board need to walk a fine line between protecting the school and protecting our students. Sometimes, unfortunately, there’s a conflict between the two. Miss Granger and her parents are obviously quite capable of taking this case to the Government, which will take it out of our hands entirely.

“The fact that they have not yet done so says that they are at least willing to allow us to attempt to resolve this for them. That is a vote of confidence for which I am grateful.

“In the matter of the assault by Mr. Ronald Weasley on Miss Hermione Granger, we, the Board of Governors, decree that Mr. Weasley will serve two months in-school suspension, working as an assistant to Mr. Filch. He is further stripped of his Quidditch Captaincy and banned from playing the game for the remainder of his time at Hogwarts. He is to make a formal apology to Miss Granger and her parents here and now, and to make another public apology to the school at an evening meal.”

Hampton then leaned over the table, looking towards Amelia Bones. “I believe you had something you wanted to say, Amelia?”

“Thank you Esther, I did. Mr. Weasley, the Ministry has in fact sent your case to the juvenile courts and they have made a summary ruling. The use of a charmed, un-removable ring was deemed as meeting the criteria of Virgo Vituperium.” Amelia paused and glanced up as both the elder Weasley’s gasped in surprise. Even Dumbledore seemed shocked by Amelia’s words. This was an extremely old law relating to marriages and one that would be very costly for the Weasley family.

“As a result, Mr. Weasley,” Amelia continued, looking directly at Arthur, “you have been assessed at fifty percent of your liquid assets. As such, the amount of 48,698 galleons has been seized from your vault and transferred to a vault set up in Miss Granger’s name.

“Furthermore, your son has been given a one year suspended sentence. If during the next year he does anything out of line, we will place him in prison.

“Miss Granger, you will receive an owl within the next few days detailing your new Gringotts account,” Amelia said in conclusion.

“Thank you, Amelia,” said Hampton. Then she turned a steely eye on Ron. “I do believe you have something you need to say, Mr. Weasley?”

Ron glared at her, his arms crossed in front of him. Arthur said something in his ear and he turned

to glare at his father for a moment before standing and facing the Grangers.

“Hermione, I apologize,” he growled.

Professor McGonagall looked up sharply at Ron. “Mr. Weasley, surely you can do...” She stopped when Dan placed a hand on her arm, shaking his head.

“Don’t bother, Professor. A forced apology is worthless anyway,” he murmured to her.

McGonagall nodded and glared again at Ron. Her expression clearly stated that she was not done with him yet.

“I thank everyone for coming today, I know this business has been most unfortunate for everyone. Albus, if you would kindly stay, we have some further business with you,” said Hampton.

Harry filed out with Hermione and the Grangers, Tonks and Professor McGonagall. The Weasley’s stayed behind for a moment longer.

In the main room of the Inn, Harry turned to speak with McGonagall. “Professor, can we sit and have an early lunch? My leg isn’t up to making that trip back yet,” he said in a whisper. He didn’t want Hermione or the others to worry.

Minerva looked at him briefly, and then reconsidered. A lot had happened in there that they needed to talk about it. Nodding in acceptance, she let Harry lead her and the others to a table.

The group was distracted as they picked out their seating arrangement and sat down, so no one noticed when the Weasley’s stormed into the room. Molly took one look at them and made a beeline for Hermione.

“You hussy! You probably teased him into doing something. I’ve seen you flaunting yourself, throwing yourself at Harry all during his forth year,” she screamed.

She then raised her hand, intending to strike the girl before her, but a hand shot out and caught her by the wrist. She was quickly spun around and came face to face with Harry. She noted the fury blazing from his eyes and, almost absently, that he was now taller than she was...much taller.

“No one hits Hermione,” Harry hissed angrily. Dan had pulled Hermione into a protective embrace.

Molly’s features softened. “Harry, what are you doing? Can’t you see what a bad influence she has on you? I can assure you that whatever pleasure she might give you isn’t worth the fact that she’s only after your money.”

Harry straightened to his full height and an eerie, unseen wind swept through The Three Broomsticks. “Leave now,” he said flatly, his voice devoid of emotion.

“But Harry...” she started to reply.

“Leave,” hissed Dan Granger, still holding Hermione to him. Molly glanced over at them and started to take another step towards Hermione. Harry moved again to place himself between them. This time Molly noticed the raw power radiating from Harry. It was hard not to notice as the entire building groaned and trembled. The Weasley’s eyed Harry warily and edged towards the door.

As soon as they were out of reach, Hermione broke from Dan’s embrace and rushed to Harry. He wrapped his arms around her and closed his eyes.

A few moments later, he led her to a seat. He sat down next to her, putting an arm around her shoulder and she leaned in to him. The incident with Molly had shaken her badly. When Madam Rosemerta appeared at the table, Harry told her to take their orders and just charge it to his vault.

After Rosemerta left, Dan was the first to speak. “What the devil was Amelia talking about in there? Virgo Vituperium? Insult to the virgin, if I remember my Latin. But I don’t understand what happened at all.”

“It’s a very old custom, Mr. Granger,” said Professor McGonagall. “As you might have surmised, the wizarding world lives in an age more closely resembling early Victorian England than modern Muggle society. We’ve come a long way from that time period, and don’t honestly expect our younger generations to go to their wedding beds as virgins, however in the day when that was expected, an attempted or successful rape resulted in a lower bridal price. The assessment performed by the Ministry amounts to fifty percent of the Weasley’s money. That money is automatically given to Miss Granger to offset the fact that her reputation has been sullied. Had it been rape, rather than an attempt, it would have been ‘Virgo Vituperium Fait Accompli’ and their wealth would have been stripped from them, including any houses they own.”

Dan thought about it for a moment before nodding. “So the money is to offset the loss of her reputation?”

“Precisely, Mr. Granger,” the Professor replied.

Harry sniffed. “Personally, I think she’s worth a lot more than a paltry fifty thousand galleons.”

Dan started to chuckle, then his eye’s turned speculative. “Oh, what would you give for her then, Harry?” he asked with a quick wink.

Harry caught the wink and thought about his reply. “Oh, at least ten million galleons, and a herd of cows. Yes, I think two hundred cows would be adequate. Don’t you agree?”

“Cows are so old fashioned these days, Harry. How about a couple Rolls Royce Bentleys instead?” Dan counter offered, trying to hold a straight face.

Meanwhile, every woman at the table was close to full-scale explosion.

Harry turned to Hermione for support. “Hermione, help me out here. Don’t you think two hundred

cows are better than a couple cars? I mean, he'd have fresh milk, cheese and butter if he wanted to make it."

Hermione was sputtering at him and was about to rip into him when she noticed the smirk he was trying to hide. He was teasing her!

Hermione went for payback. She grabbed him by both ears and kissed him soundly. When she released him, he stared at her for a moment, then shifted his gaze to her parents and figured that surrender was clearly his best option.

"Er... Dan? I don't own enough money to pay you what she's worth. You'll have to find another way to earn your cows," he said.

"That's quite alright, Harry. I have a feeling they would only dirty the carpet anyway," Dan replied, uneasily eying the look that both his wife and daughter were giving him.

Harry decided to save Dan's life by getting serious. He cast a privacy charm on the table, and then leaned across it towards Professor McGonagall. "Professor, there's a lot going on. More than anyone here knows at this point. I can't and won't go into any details here, but I'd like to invite you and Professor Flitwick to spend Boxing Day with my friends and I. I think you'll find it well worth your time."

Tonks looked at Harry shrewdly. "Something tells me I'm not going to like what you have up your sleeve."

Harry laughed at her. "Auntie, I think you'll find this more fun than a barrel of kittens."

"Just what do you have in mind, oh nephew of mine?" asked Tonks acidly.

Harry buffed his nailed against his chest before looking at them again. "Oh, a little bit of larceny, some kidnapping, random mayhem and, for fun, breaking at least a dozen international treaties. Believe me Tonks, it's enough to make the Marauders stand up and cheer. I'm planning on pulling the prank of the century and, when it's done, three different sides will have no clue what hit them. Don't worry. Everyone, and I mean *everyone*, will have a part to play in this. It's going to be loads of fun!"

"Oh, Merlin! The last time I saw a look like that was the night before James, Sirius, Remus and Peter put a Fidelis charm on every bathroom in the school, then sold the locations to people for a galleon per bathroom," exclaimed Minerva.

Harry convulsed in laughter. "I bet they never sold a single location to the Slytherins either!" he gasped.

"No, they didn't. And what's worse, we lost a few bathrooms that day and they are still missing!" replied McGonagall. "Although I think Sirius sold a few locations to the girls for other favors instead of galleons. He was quite a ladies man."

Hermione sent Harry a look that clearly said they'd be talking about it later, but she refrained from comment. Harry nodded, but grinned impishly at her.

"I'd be honored to visit with you over the holiday, Mr. Potter, and I will pass along the invitation to Professor Flitwick, as well," said McGonagall to a beaming Harry.

---

Meanwhile, Back at the Board Meeting...

Hampton watched the retreating backs of the Weasley's and waited for the door to close before turning back to Albus Dumbledore. She was about to speak when the whole building groaned and rumbled ominously. Alarmed, she looked around wildly along with everyone else, but the disturbance quickly subsided.

Turning back to Dumbledore, she studied the man for a moment. He had been Headmaster of Hogwarts for the past forty years now. And while everyone agreed he was slightly crazed, they also thought he was the best person for the job. In all her years on the Board of Governors, this was the first time there'd been any complaints about his behavior. Because of that, she was inclined to show a certain amount of leniency towards the man.

"Albus, I have asked you to stay behind because we have some concerns... Well no, actually the Ministry has some concerns about the safety of Harry Potter and his girlfriend," Hampton said, turning to Amelia for backup.

"Yes. The Minister of Magic is concerned that not enough is being done to ensure the safety of Mr. Potter. To be blunt, Albus, the Minister wants to withdraw Mr. Potter and Miss Granger from Hogwarts and set them up with private tutors in a secure location. We don't understand why Mr. Potter is so important to V-V-Voldemort. But we figure that if V-V-Voldemort wants Mr. Potter dead, then keeping him alive must be a good thing.

"Esther says that moving him out of school would send the wrong message to the parents of our students. So instead she suggests letting the two use the private Head Boy and Girl quarters in Gryffindor tower, since neither Head Boy or Girl is from Gryffindor this year."

At first Dumbledore was in a near state of panic. Remove Harry from the school? Move him to a safe location? Listening further, his sense of panic abated somewhat. Yes, moving them into the Gryffindor Head quarters would be no real problem.

"Yes, it would be no great hurdle to relocate them. And since Harry was attacked in his dorm at night, giving him a private bedroom may prevent a repeat of that event," Albus said agreeably.

"Is that acceptable to you, Amelia?" asked Hampton.

"Yes, it will quite acceptable to us I think and it will fall very well into the other security measure's we've taken."

“Other security measures? At the School?” asked Dumbledore.

“Nothing you need worry about, Albus,” said Amelia. “We’ve just taken some additional steps to ensure the castle remains safe.”

The meeting of the Board of Governors broke up shortly afterwards. The Headmaster was seriously concerned. Although no blame had been placed at his feet, he knew the Ministry would be watching him closely now. To make matter worse, he had no idea what security measures the Ministry now had in place in the castle.

Frustrated, he apparated to the edge of the wards and hurried up to his school. *HIS SCHOOL DAMNIT*, he thought viciously. And he’d do everything in his power to keep it that way!

---

Back in The Three Broomsticks...

Their meal over, Harry, Hermione and Professor McGonagall decided it was time to return to the school. Harry said goodbye to the others, but he was getting rather worried. Dan seemed different somehow. He had been fine when they were teasing Hermione, but he’d become distant shortly afterwards. He couldn’t shake the feeling that Dan Granger was examining him, looking for some fatal flaw.

McGonagall and Hermione were deep in a discussion concerning transfigurations of inanimate objects to animate objects and whether they were truly alive at that point. Harry didn’t mind the conversation in the least. His leg was starting to go lame on him again and he was hoping for a distraction. He had only a few hundred yards to go before entering the castle, so he clenched his teeth and slowed his pace.

Hermione and McGonagall were just entering the castle when Hermione noticed that Harry wasn’t with them. Both turned around to see Harry about a hundred yards back, limping badly, but still moving. Hermione made a move to go to him, but McGonagall stopped her.

“He’s a proud man, Miss Granger. I know his type well, for I was once married to one. Stubborn and proud, they are. He’ll accept your help, but only after he makes it to the castle on his own,” she said softly.

Hermione blinked in surprise and there was a slight flicker of a smile on McGonagall’s face. “What’s the matter, Miss Granger? Is it so impossible a thing to think that your Head of House was once married?” she asked.

Hermione blushed. “No, Professor. I just... I mean it never...”

“It’s alright, Hermione. Right now I do believe your young man needs your help,” McGonagall said, interrupting her.

Harry was at the entrance and all he wanted to do was sit down somewhere and pretend he’d never

have to walk another foot in his life. Fortunately for him, he and Hermione only had two classes to attend that afternoon, Ancient Runes and Charms.

---

Later That Evening in the Room of Requirement...

Harry sat on the edge of the large hot tub, dangling both of his legs in the hot water. The day had been long and tiring for him and his leg had nearly given out after the walk back from Hogsmeade. Hermione was off in the library looking for a book while Harry was reading a text he had borrowed from Madam Pomfrey.

Putting the book to one side, he slid into the hot water and stretched out, letting his leg soak. He closed his eyes and let the water lull him. A good twenty minutes later, he felt someone slip into the hot tub with him. Cracking one eye open he smiled, seeing Hermione leaning against the edge of the pool, looking at him thoughtfully.

She grabbed his leg under the water and started working on the knots. "Alright, Potter. I know you're planning something. Spill it."

Harry had known this conversation was coming all day. Sighing, he stared into her eyes, seeing the keen intellect behind them. He had to suppress a laugh because she still hadn't figured it all out! "I'm only planning to do exactly what you told me to do. Save what I can. Think about your prophecy and why we came back to this school instead of going to another like Bauxbatons or the American Institute for Magic.

"Honestly Hermione, I know your smarter than me. If you just think about it, you'll understand what I'm doing."

Hermione's eyes widened for a moment as what he said struck home. Nodding slowly, she asked, "When will you let me in on the full scheme?"

Harry laughed. "I promise that you'll know before anyone else does, but I still have some details I need to work out."

"All right, but I'll hold you to the promise," she replied, smiling back at him.

She moved closer, nestling between his arm and his shoulder. Harry began to show all the classic signs of nervousness as she started to kiss along his shoulder and neck. Harry was acutely aware of just how little they both had on.

Hermione knew she was driving Harry crazy. She swung a leg over him and sat up, straddling him, a knee either side of him.

"Hermione, are you deliberately trying to torture me?" he growled as he wrapped his arms around her.



“No, just checking to see if you’re still alive. I swear, you and Ron used to yell at me to lighten up, but sometimes I think it’s you who needs to lighten up.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, think about. You’re sitting in a hot tub and you’ve got a girl in a bathing suit sitting on your lap,” she said, watching him carefully.

Harry blushed as the meaning behind her words finally sunk home. He reached up and caressed her cheek softly, then pulled her down and kissed her. He let his hands roam, rubbing her back and her arms, but always mindful of their location, careful to keep them in safe areas.

It was Hermione who broke the kiss, her expression frustrated. “Harry, it’s alright to touch me in other areas,” she said, taking one of his hands and placing it on her breast.

Harry’s eyes widened and he made a strangling sound. His eyes were glued to his hand as if he expected it to explode at any moment. When he finally looked away and into Hermione’s eyes, she smiled at him and, still holding his hand to her breast, she leaned down and kissed him gently.

“It’s alright Harry,” she murmured softly. “Just go slow.”

Harry nodded and she tried very hard not to laugh at the expression on his face. She leaned in and kissed him again, this time more passionately than she intended at first. However, when he quickly responded she almost laughed.

Harry was still uncertain, and he’d often stop to look in her eyes, as if asking for permission. Much later they broke apart and returned to the Gryffindor common room. They’d only progressed another small step in their relationship, but it was a significant one.

---

Malfoy Manor...

“How go our plans, Lucius?” asked Voldemort.

“My Lord, tonight we begin moving against selected targets. There are a lot of targets, but by New Years day we will be able to give people a surprise they won’t soon forget. In the meantime, we have halted all attacks until we’re ready for an all out push.”

Voldemort cackled evilly and he caressed Nagini, who lay curled next to his chair. “Excellent! Excellent! And what of the hunt for your wife and son?”

“My wife is still missing, my Lord. My son, however, is in Hogwarts. I can either have one of our agents kill him there, or I can have him abducted at your command. Just say the word and we’ll have him here.”

“I think it’s time you bring him in, Lucius. Perhaps if I had a talk with the lad, we might have

more success finding his mother,” suggested Voldemort in a cruel tone.

Lucius bowed low. “It will be as you command, my Lord.”

---

Double Potions Class, Several Days Later...

Harry and Draco were working on the Draught of Cleansing, an anti-infection potion, as Professor Snape prowled the room. Harry was about to add powered uni-roo spleen, a key ingredient, when he was nudged from behind. Harry immediately cast a shield over the cauldron to protect it, and then he glared back over his shoulder to see Snape sneering back at him.

“Potter!” barked Snape. “Look! You’ve ruined your potion by adding too much Uni-Roo spleen.”

“Actually sir, I haven’t yet added the Uni-Roo spleen, so the potion is not ruined. But I do appreciate your watching to make sure the potion wasn’t ruined,” Harry replied politely.

“Don’t lie to me, Potter. I saw you put the Uni-Roo spleen into the cauldron! Just like your dead father, lying to get himself out of trouble. You’re nothing more than an overbearing, arrogant, insufferable brat. You expect everyone to bow to you because you’re the Boy-Who-Lived. Well not in this class...”

Harry stood, his attention firmly fixed on Snape, his arms crossed over his chest. The class seemed to be split between watching Harry and watching Snape. Harry’s eyes became slightly unfocused. Snape continued to yell at him even after the door to the classroom swung open with a loud crash. Peeves glanced at Harry and winked. Then the poltergeist turned his attention to Professor Snape.

Harry shook his head, and then carefully reached down to grab his book bag. Draco noticed the motion and reached down for his own bag. Peeves began circling Snape, who tried to swing at the pesky poltergeist. Peeves reached into a spectral pocket and pulled out a cube. Harry took one look and ran to Hermione. There, he grabbed her bag and pulled her from her chair. He met Draco at the door just as Peeves threw the cube.

It landed at the feet of Professor Snape.

Harry, Hermione and Draco were out of the room when they heard a loud booming sound, followed by people yelling. Hermione and Draco looked into the classroom and choked back their laughter when they realized that it had been completely replaced by a Patented Weasley Wizarding Wheeze portable swamp!

One by one the students crawled out of the classroom. Within the room, they could all hear Snape shouting at Peeves. Once all the students were out, Draco reached up and swung the door closed.

“I wonder if Snape will run across any of the alligators the twins put into those things?” asked Harry conversationally.

“I don’t know, Potter,” said Draco in a haughty tone, “but I dare say class has been dismissed early today.” Then he stared at the door for a moment, raised his wand and muttered under his breath. A flash of purple light shot out and hit the door. Noticing the questioning looks from Harry and Hermione, he shrugged. “An old Malfoy family locking charm. After all, we wouldn’t want any of the Weasley’s alligators to get out and scare the first years, would we?”

Over their laughter, they could hear Professor Snape’s shrieks from within the classroom as he met his first alligator.

---

## **Author’s Notes...**

And once again, we come to the end of a chapter. Before we start answering questions however, we’d like to let everyone know that we now have a Yahoo group. The address can be found in Bob’s author profile as the homepage link. Everyone’s welcome to join us, and we’ve posted copies of our stories there as well. You can chat with us and/or recommend other fics and fic sites for those looking for great stories. Now, on with the questions!

Ah, Percy. Never fear, Percy will be back. He doesn’t know about what his parents are doing (the theft) because the MLE isn’t using names in the investigation (example: Harry Potter is known only as “Subject P”). What would his reaction be if he did know? He’d probably be horrified... because he would think that it reflects badly on him as a Weasley and would hamper his rise in the Ministry.

Why don’t the DE’s use the Dark Mark over their muggle targets like they do in the wizarding world? They’re trying to sow the seeds of confusion and misdirection by leaving no evidence behind. If the Dark Mark appeared over their muggle targets, the Ministry and the rest of the wizarding world would know exactly who was behind it, wouldn’t they?

Htman: Sure, you can borrow the idea. We’re flattered.

We never mind long reviews, so don’t apologize for them. We read them eagerly and are quite thankful that folks want to review our little tale!

Will it ever come down to a fight (curses and hexes being thrown) between Dumbledore and Harry? Read and find out. (Cackles evilly)

We’ve had a few folks ask about our update rate. Something’s changed and ya’ll need to be aware of it. We were running 3-4 chapters ahead. With this update, we’ve now drawn even. Chapter 11 is being written as I type this and it’s all your fault. Yes, YOU! Okay, that’s not entirely true, but it’s close enough. In order to keep up with the demands to update, we’ve been posting chapters faster than we normally would have. What can we say? We’re weak and your demands won us over...this time! So what does this mean for you, the reader? Basically, we’ll update as soon as we’ve finished a chapter now. We can’t give you an estimate because some chapters come

quicker than others. Confused yet? Yeah, we are too. Moving on then!

Someone asked where this story would end. The answer is: at the end of the 6th year. How many chapters will that take? We don't know...we'll answer that question once we've finished the story. Now, before you panic, there WILL be a sequel to the story, picking up the summer of 7th year and ending with the final battle and the clean up, perhaps even a glimpse into the future.

Ah yes...Hermione's prophesy. We have to say that many of you impressed us. Tearing apart the prophecy and going through it line by line was a lot of work! Some of you came close to figuring it out, while some of you were way off the mark. There were a lot of questions about it and you know what? We're not going to answer any of them! Muahahahaha! Yes, we know, we're evil. Patience, grasshoppers...all will be known in time.

Ah yes, Dumbledore's new law and the Dursley's. They were Harry's guardians BEFORE the passing of Albus' law. Because the law was passed however, muggles can no longer be guardians to magical children UNLESS they are the child's parents. No other relationship would be acceptable under the conditions of Dumbledore's law. We hope that helps explain things a bit better for you.

Our opinions on book 6? I (Alyx) enjoyed it, although it felt very rushed to me. Bob hasn't read it yet but, for a variety of reason (of which I'm sure he'll chime in shortly), he doesn't like it.

Will Harry ever blow his top? Read and find out! (Isn't that annoying?)

We say the story is AU to stop the canon-ites from bludgeoning us with repeats of the same old "You screwed up because this didn't happen in canon" or "Did you know this isn't to canon?" statements. The term "AU" may be overused, but it's also easily recognizable to those who read fanfic and requires little explanation. Call us lazy, but we didn't want to waste time making up new terms that would require us to answer loads of questions. :D

So you want to know what our plans for Romany are, do you? Well, you know the drill...read and discover what happens!

That's it folks. We hope you enjoyed the chapter. We're working on 11 now, you evil, slave drivers. We'll post it as soon as it's done...and don't make us pull out the whip and chair to keep you all back, either!

Until next chapter!

~Bob and Alyx~

Pet Peeves:

This is really an unfair peeve. And I don't want to make people angry. BUT!!! If English isn't your native language, PLEASE find yourself an English native or even an American for your beta reader. Do you know how confusing some of these stories can be when the sentence structure is

skewed?

We want to read your story. But its impossible to read a story when the structure is so bizarre.

## **Sunset Over Britain A House Divided**

### **Standard Disclaimer:**

Act I, Scene III. The spotlight centers on the stage where Ron Weasley is being led into a tall box resembling a telephone booth by Hermione Granger.

“Are you sure this is safe ‘Mione?” Ron asked.

“Oh absolutely Ronnie, just get in the box and say the magic words for added protection.”

“Alright, if you say so,” Ron replied climbing into the box. “The authors, Bob and Alyx, would like you to understand that JK Rowling owns the Potterverse. We do not.”

“Alright ‘Mione, I said the words, what now?”

“Just be patient Ron.”

Harry sneaks onto the stage and starts piling wood at the bottom of the box, then turns to Hermione for a match...

---

### **Sunset Over Britain Chapter 11**

---

Hogwarts Great Hall, Dinner...

The hall fell into an uneasy silence as Professor McGonagall escorted Ron Weasley up to the main table. Dumbledore and Snape were conspicuous in their absence and Ron looked angry enough to spit nails.

McGonagall clapped her hands loudly causing all the heads to turn in her direction. “May I have your attention please? Mr. Weasley has something he needs to say to everyone,” she said, and then she motioned for Ron to start talking.

Ron shot her a defiant glare before he pulled a slip of parchment from his pocket. “Students of

Hogwarts,” he said woodenly, reading from his parchment. “I am deeply sorry for my actions against Hermione Granger and hope that you all accept my apology.”

Ron looked up to face the student body. At that moment, Peeves wandered into the Great Hall. He took one look at Ron and shouted, “Oh, go bugger Dean Thomas, Weasel!”

Ron’s face turned scarlet and he bolted from the hall. Peeves followed in hot pursuit as the hall erupted in laughter.

---

## A New Place to Lay One’s Head...

The day after Professor Snape met the alligators in potions class, Harry and Hermione were moved from their sixth year dormitories to the Head suites in Gryffindor Tower. The suites were available from a password-protected portrait in the Gryffindor Common Room and were decorated in a similar manner, except that the bedrooms contained a separate study area. The suite shared a huge bathroom and a very cozy common room.

Professor McGonagall showed Harry and Hermione their new quarters, and they were generally pleased with what they found. Harry did have one concern, however. During the brief tour, Professor McGonagall had glanced at several portraits with a worried expression on her face. It wasn’t the first time Harry had had to deal the Headmaster’s painted spies and he knew he have to disable these as well.

He waited until Professor McGonagall left the small common room between the two suites before turning to Hermione. He placed his fingers on her lips for a moment and she nodded in understanding. Closing his eyes, he reached out with his senses. Dealing with the portraits would be an easy thing to do. As he had done with several other paintings around the school, he adjusted the magic in them so that Harry and Hermione were effectively non-existent. The portraits would not see or hear them. They still functioned normally, but would have little to report back to the Headmaster.

Harry then walked into Hermione’s bedroom and repeated the process on the portrait there as well. He was about to leave her room when he sensed something else. Turning to the bed, he concentrated on it. Hermione, who’d followed him into the room, watched as he worked.

“Interesting,” he murmured, more to himself than anyone present.

“What is it?”

“There are a lot of enchantments on the bed, all of them are benign though. There’s also a passage behind the bed. I don’t remember it being on the Marauder’s Map,” he replied.

“Where does it lead?”

“I’m not entirely certain. I can seal the passage so only we can open it, seal it off entirely or just

collapse it, Hermione. It's your bed and your room. What do you want me to do?"

"You're certain you can seal it so only you or I can open the passage?"

"Yes. No one would be able to open it from the other side. And only you or I would be able to open it from this end."

"Do it that way, then. We can explore to see where it leads later on."

Harry took Hermione's hand in his and smiled at her. He then raised his other hand and placed it on the headboard of the bed.

The headboard glowed for a moment. When the glow faded, he lifted her hand to his lips and kissed it before he let it go. He then turned back to the bed and looked at it for a moment in silence.

"There are charms on the bed. A self adjusting comfort charm, a warming charm. There's residue of several failed charms..." Harry stopped and gapped for a moment, startled. Then his face turned bright red.

"Harry, what's wrong?" asked Hermione, concerned by his reaction.

"There's a charm on the bed that feels..."

"Feels like what?"

"It feels familiar... like I should know the caster. I can tell when you've cast a charm on something by the way it feels, Hermione. It's the same now...I know this caster..." he stammered.

"Is it Dumbledore or Snape?"

Harry shook his head firmly. "No, neither. This is different, it's almost like... smelling a whiff of home?" he asked, puzzled by his own words

Hermione's eyes lit up in recognition. "Could it have been cast by one of your parents?"

Harry closed his eyes and shuddered for a moment. "Maybe. I've been told my mum was excellent with charms and quite powerful in her own right and she was head girl, but... Oh, blast it all! Why would I have this kind of luck?"

"What are you on about, Harry? If you've run across a legacy of your mum's handiwork, I would think you'd be happy to know it."

"Because it's a contraceptive charm, Hermione!" Harry blurted, then whirled away from her, his face flaming.

"Oh," came the quiet reply, then she started to giggle. "Oh honestly, Harry. Your parents had to



be intimate with each other. After all, they had you didn't they?"

"You're right Hermione, but this is like walking in and catching them doing it!"

Hermione turned a few shades of red herself. "Ah, I think I see your point."

Harry snickered. Obviously he'd touched a nerve with Hermione. "Do you want me to dispel the charms or leave them?"

"Go ahead and leave them. I doubt I'll need the contraceptive charm, and if I do, I'm not going to rely on a charm that's nearly twenty years old."

"Alright, I'll go check my room for portraits and other surprises," he replied.

---

### Ron's Change of Heart...

Ronald Weasley still spent his nights in the Gryffindor Tower and he still ate in Great Hall, but from eight in the morning 'til seven in the evening he followed Mr. Filch around the castle fixing, cleaning and listening to Filch moan about the good old days when teachers could torture students legally. In-School Suspension they called it. What Ron called it didn't bear repeating.

It was four in the afternoon and he was repairing floor stones up near Myrtle's bathroom on the third floor when he heard a noise behind him. Standing, he turned and relaxed when he saw it was only Professor Dumbledore approaching. Dumbledore smiled benignly at him, Ron relaxed and started to turn back to the stone he was trying to fit into the floor.

"Adjungo compescor!" came a voice from behind him and the world spun crazily for a moment, and then went dark.

Ron blinked his eyes a few times. There was a voice speaking to him. Quickly trying to muster enough concentration, he turned to the speaker.

"Ronald, I realize how unfair this punishment is for you, and now that you've become more interested in your Defense class than Miss Granger, I'm sure you'll do well in that subject. In fact, I might be able to arrange some extra dueling lessons with Professor Snape. That is, until you can return to your regular classes," Dumbledore offered.

Ron nodded gratefully at the Headmaster. Anything would be better than fixing floor stones for Mr. Filch.

Dumbledore smiled and walked away from Ron, his real goal accomplished.

Because of the punishments assigned at the Board meeting, he was unable to do a simple memory charm. Instead, he had transferred the emotive context Ron had felt for Hermione to his Defense classes. As far as Ron is concerned, he once loved Hermione, but no longer.

Things are Starting to Get Ugly...

Flying. It was one of the greatest joys of Harry's life. He streaked along the Quidditch pitch only inches above the grass, his Firebolt putting out every bit of speed it could. With a slight shift of his weight he went nearly vertical, rocketing upwards out of the pitch.

At nearly one thousand feet above the pitch, he tilted over into a vertical dive, pushing his Firebolt for every ounce of speed it could provide. At the last minute he pulled out of the suicidal dive, his feet skimming the tops of the grass.

He grinned. Nothing felt as good to him at flying.

He landed his broom nearly center of the Quidditch pitch. His ban had not been lifted, but the ban only prevented him from playing Quidditch. It said nothing about flying for the fun of it. Clutching his broom, he walked from the pitch to the Entrance Hall.

Harry was surprised to see a group of about ten boys standing in the Entrance Hall. He recognized them as being from Gryffindor, but he didn't know any of them very well. Two were friends of the Creevey brothers.

One boy stepped out in front of the others. "Potter."

Harry turned a curious eye on the boy.

"We know what you've done, Potter. We know how you've deliberately set out to ruin our team this year..."

"I see Ron's been spinning fairy tales again," Harry interrupted dryly.

"Listen Potter, we're tired of you lording it over everyone. Your refusal to play this year ruined our chances, then you go and lose us our team captain..."

"Did you all drink stupid potions with your dinner this evening? The Board revoked Weasley's captaincy. I had nothing to do with it. As for me not playing Quidditch, talk to the Headmaster. He's the one who refused to lift my ban. If you're looking for someone to blame for the loss of the *Quidditch cup*, " he sneered disdainfully, "talk to the Headmaster about my ban, and kick Weasley for being such a prat as to lose his spot on the team.

"Look boys, this has been fun and all that, but it's old news. Find something else to complain about, you wankers, because you're starting to bore me."

Harry then shoved his way through the group of stunned Gryffindors. The silence left behind him was deafening.

---

## Gryffindor Common Room, Later That Evening...

Harry had just come through the entrance hole to the common room when something struck him from the side. Dazed he sank to one knee and tried to look around. The room was darkened, making it difficult to see his attackers. Someone kicked Harry in the ribs and he fell to his side. A few more blows fell, then it stopped and a voice he didn't recognize said, "This is what happens to traitors to their own house."

Harry's vision darkened for a moment and he thought he might pass out, but the feeling passed. As he struggled to stay conscious, the common room cleared of students. He got painfully to his feet and walked to the entrance of the Head suites.

Hermione, Ginny and Neville were in the shared common room between the two bedrooms when Harry staggered into the room. He walked to one of the couches and sat down heavily.

Hermione looked over at him in the dimly lit room and frowned. "Torca ignis," she murmured with a flick of her wand. The wall sconces flared to life. Both Hermione and Ginny gasped as the light hit him and he became fully visible.

"Er... hi?" said Harry, trying to smile.

Hermione moved quickly to his side and, kneeling in front of him, she examined his face carefully. As she did, the door opened once more and Romany walked in, followed by Professor McGonagall.

"What happened to you, Harry?" asked Hermione. His left eye was swelling shut. He had a vicious bruise on his cheek and other bruises still forming.

"I think our Housemates are upset about losing the first Quidditch match to Slytherin this past weekend and they think I'm the reason for it," he replied, while gingerly probing his lip with a finger.

Ginny conjured a basin of water and a cloth and set it down next to Hermione, who picked up the cloth and started to clean his injuries.

"Mr. Potter, do you need to go to infirmary?" asked Professor McGonagall.

Harry pressed a hand against the side of his chest and his glazed over as his hand flared with a bright halo of light. When the light died, he sighed in relief and took a deep breath.

"I don't think so, Professor. I'm just bruised and banged up a bit. I don't think they managed to break anything," he replied.

"I know a spell that will help with those bruises, Harry. Hermione, watch as I do this. I suspect you may end up having to do it again someday. You might as well learn it too, Ginny," said Romany.

While Romany showed Hermione and Ginny the spell, Professor McGonagall grilled Harry about what happened.

“Mr. Potter, are you sure you couldn’t identify the people involved?”

“Honestly Professor, if I could, I would. It was dark. All I know is they had to be mostly Gryffindor’s since it happened in our own common room,” he said, wincing as Hermione tried Romany’s spell a little too roughly. She smiled at him in apology.

Neville, Ginny and the two Professors left a few minutes later when it had finally been decided that there was nothing to be done about the situation. While McGonagall was outraged that her own house would attack one of its members, the others had almost expected it.

As the door closed, Harry and Hermione settled into an uneasy silence in the little common room. She worked on her homework, while he wrote a series of letters. The steady scratching of his quill finally attracted Hermione’s attention.

“Who are you writing?”

“Remus, Tonks, your parents and a couple others,” Harry replied, distracted by what he was doing.

Curious, Hermione walked over to him and picked up one of the parchments glancing at him for permission. When he nodded, she smiled and read the letter. As she read, her face slowly paled and her hands trembled. Placing the letter down she used her wand to move a chair next to his and sat down.

“Do you really think it’s that bad, Harry?”

“It’s your prophecy, Hermione. We have to take steps...”

“Steps yes, but what you’re talking about here... what you’re asking... no...telling people to do...”

“Hermione,” Harry interrupted heatedly, “I don’t like this anymore that you do. But everyone, including you, is refusing to let me go hunt down Voldemort and kill him or die trying. Since that isn’t an option, then I need to do something, ANYTHING...”

Harry hung his head, the desperation written in the very fiber of his being. “I can’t sit idly by anymore. I have to do something. If I do nothing, I’ll be as bad as Voldemort,” he said in a whisper.

Hermione moved forward in her chair so she could lean against him. She wrapped her arms around his neck and ran her fingers through his hair. “I know you have to do something. I just never expected it to be on such a grand scale,” she murmured.

He looked into her eyes, searching them carefully. “You’re not angry with me? This is going to disrupt everything, Hermione. Your parent’s lives, school, all your plans...”

She stopped him by placing a finger against his lips. “Shhh... You’re not disrupting anything. You’re trying to save our lives, Harry. If anyone is disrupting things it’s Voldemort and Dumbledore, not you. As far as my plans go, as long as you’re with me, I figure we can plan as we go.”

Harry smiled and pulled her from her seat into his lap.

---

Weasley’s Wizarding Wheezes, Diagon Alley...

Bill Weasley walked into his brother’s shop and headed for the back room. Fred spotted him and quickly turned the sign in the window to ‘Closed’ and locked the door before following Bill into the back.

George looked up from the cauldron he was working over when Bill and Fred came in.

“Oy Bill! What’s up?” asked George.

“I got an owl from Ginny today. It’s charmed so that it’ll only become visible if all three of us tap it with our wands,” he replied.

Fred started laughing, “That’s our Gin-Gin. She’s even better with charms than I am.”

Bill pulled out the parchment and unrolled it on a worktable. Looking at his brothers, he pulled his wand and waited for the others. With a single tap from each, writing appeared.

*Hey you three!*

*I’ve had to resort to this method because some of what I have to say is going to be really bad. First off, brothers of mine, I want to say that I love each and every one of you. Our family is going to change very soon, and I’m not sure it’s for the better or not, but there is no stopping it.*

*If you haven’t heard by now, our dear brother Ronald has been charged with attempting to sexually assault Hermione. Yes it’s true, Mum and Dad are refusing to talk to me because I know about it. I understand from Hermione that they have been fined nearly 50,000 galleons under the Virgo Vituperium laws.*

“That bloody bastard! Who does he think he is?” shouted an outraged Bill.

Fred just shook his head in shock.

“Worse than Percy, he is,” mumbled George.

*Which leads to an interesting observation. If Dad is only pulling down 3,000 galleons per year and paying for two Hogwarts tuitions, where did they get 100,000 galleons? Are you three sitting down? I know where the money’s coming from and you’re not going to believe it! Dumbledore has been stealing it from Harry’s trust account vault since he was a year old. According to Harry, our*

parents started getting payments from Dumbledore the summer before Ron started at Hogwarts. Add to that a conversation I overheard this summer and it all adds up to the fact that our parents have been knowingly taking Harry's money.

I wish to Merlin this wasn't true. I cry myself to sleep at nights knowing what Mum and Dad have done to Harry. And Harry is deeply hurt by all this, but he trusts me, and he knows that Tonks has been in contact with you three so he trusts you as well.

Now I suppose I should tell you that I've charmed this parchment so that if you try to tell talk about this to anyone but each other before I see you and dispel the curse, certain parts of your anatomy will cease having any entertainment value. IN OTHER WORDS BOYS, KEEP QUIET ABOUT THIS.

Harry asks that you all consider visiting with him on Boxing Day. I will need your help to go along. Harry says he has plans he wants to share with all of you. Bill, Fred, George, we owe Harry. I owe him a debt I can never repay.

Right now I consider Harry more family than I do Ron. As much as I would have liked Harry to like me the way he likes Hermione, that's not going to happen and it's probably for the best. He is far too moody and temperamental for my tastes

We need to help him. He's been like a brother to all of you for years now and we can't turn our backs on him. Ron and our parents have caused him more pain than those muggles he lived with because he trusted them. And our dear parents and that prat, Ron, have sullied our name enough.

Love,  
Ginny.

All three men sat back and let out explosive breaths.

"Well, this is quite a mess we gotten ourselves mixed up in," muttered Bill as he raked his fingers through his hair.

"There's no question in my mind," said Fred.

George nodded. "Oh, absolutely. I agree with you."

Bill eyed the two of them warily. "What are you two on about?"

"It's simple, Bill. Harry's..." Fred began.

"...Our brother and our investor," concluded George.

"So, what now?" asked Bill.

Fred shrugged. "I think that's obvious."

“Oh quite, very obvious. First we spring Ginny...” quipped George.

“...From Mum and Dad and dear Ronald...” spat Fred.

“...And then we talk to Harry,” concluded George.

---

Grimmauld Place...

Remus looked up from the kitchen table when the window popped open and Hedwig flew in. He was surprised to see the large owl wasn't carrying a single letter, but a whole stack of them in her talons.

“Here Girl, let me take those for you,” he said softly to the pleasant bird.

He removed the package of letters and started to thumb through them. Hedwig didn't wait around. She sprang aloft and exited via the window. There were letters for each of the Grangers, there was a letter for him and Tonks, another for Amelia and Narcissa, even one for Danni, the healer.

Opening the letter addressed to him, he picked up his cup of tea and started to read. As he read, he started to laugh. The old Marauder could see the possibilities Harry was suggesting. This would be a feat worthy of the very best the Marauders were capable of. Something that required the daring of James, combined with the intellect of Lily.

Remus put the letters aside. The Grangers, Narcissa and Tonks would be able to read theirs later tonight at dinner. Amelia and Danni would have to be brought here so they could read the letters.

Remus left the kitchen shaking his head. Here he was, afraid Harry was going to bolt when he learned the ramifications of the new prophecy, and instead he was planning on pulling this stunt! Remus shook his head again, and then he headed for Diagon Alley.

He was going to need muggle money for this, a lot of it.

---

Guerrilla Warfare...

Harry and the Outcasts sat down for breakfast at what had quickly become their end of the table. In some ways, the past few months had altered all of them. Susan and Terry had grown closer, and Terry had become more assertive. Draco and Luna were still carefully maneuvering around each other, as were Ginny and Neville.

Harry sat back and thought about the last few weeks. Things had started heating up for the Outcasts. There'd been another attack on Luna, which Draco thwarted. Several shouting matches involving Ginny, Hermione and the Gryffindor girls had broke out in the common room and in the halls. There had been several more attempts to ambush Harry that had failed in rather dramatic fashions. In one instance, a group of seven Gryffindors had lain in wait for Harry inside an unused

classroom. As Harry passed the classroom, the door was sealed and silenced. It was only two days later and after a school wide search that the missing students were found, hungry and very angry about being sealed in the room.

By mid December, just barely a week before the holiday break began, Harry found himself failing Potions, thanks to Professor Snape. And failing was just the least of his problems. Barely a class went by when Harry didn't have to endure his attacks, verbal or mental.

Harry had shown admirable restraint thus far, but his patience was starting to wear very thin. Hermione tried to help him, but even when they had the same exact answers on a test, she would pass with an E and he'd get a D or T.

Hermione nudged Harry out of his reverie. He looked at her questioning.

"Where are you this morning, Harry? You seem to be a thousand miles from here," she said annoyed.

"I'm sorry, Hermione. I just got side tracked thinking about potions class," he replied.

She laid a hand on his arm in sympathy. "I know he's being really unfair to you..."

"Unfair?" Harry snorted in amusement. "He's deliberately failing me, Hermione, even when we have two essay's that say the same thing, you get a good grade and I fail. I am ready to drop the class entirely at this point. Or I'm going to do something very nasty to him..." he concluded, scowling darkly.

Draco looked at the two then started shaking his head. Harry caught the movement. "What?" he asked in exasperation.

"You amaze me sometimes, Potter," Draco drawled. "You can be so Slytherin at times, then you get so caught up in what's happening you become so... so Gryffindor," Draco said with a sneer.

"Well? What do you suggest, Oh, Mighty Slytherin?" asked Harry with a smile.

"Simple, old boy. Keep all of the homework assignments, both yours and Hermione's. When you have enough of them, send them to the Board, demanding an explanation of why nearly identical homework generates such a disparity in grades. In the meantime, you two," he said pointing at Harry and Hermione, "keep your noses clean and let the rest of us take care of Professor Snape."

Harry glanced at Hermione and she shrugged. "It makes sense, Harry. We collect evidence to present to the Board," she said quietly.

Harry nodded. "I don't like it, but I'll do it. I still feel the need to lash out at something though," he said angrily, then his expression changed and he smiled a slow, devious smile.

His eyes became unfocused for a moment, and then a shrill scream echoed throughout the castle. They all watched as Dumbledore hiked up his robes and ran from the Great Hall.



Hermione and Draco looked at him suspiciously. “Harry,” she said, “what did you just do?”

Harry speared a slice of ham from the platter and dropped it onto his plate before he looked at her. “Me? Oh, nothing really. I just triggered one of the wards on the castle and locked the old fool out of his office for the rest of the day.”

“Which ward did you trigger?” asked Draco, trying not to laugh.

Another scream echoed through the castle.

“The one that warns when dragons attack the castle,” Harry replied, dishing up a spoonful of scrambled eggs and depositing it next to his ham.

All of the Outcasts stopped to stare at him. He looked at them questioningly for a moment, ignoring the continuing screams echoing throughout the castle. When no one said anything, he shrugged, winked, and then turned back to his breakfast, suddenly famished.

---

Grimmauld Place, That Same Day...

Tonks appeared in the main foyer of Grimmauld Place with Danni and Amelia Bones. Since Grimmauld was under a Fidelis charm, the only way to bring anyone in without revealing its location was via portkey.

Tonks led Amelia into the kitchen. It was the first time the Director had visited Harry’s London safe house. Remus Lupin looked up from the table where he had several parchments and books spread out in front of him. He motioned for the three women to sit.

“Amelia, Danni I know you’re wondering why we asked you to come today. I’m working from instructions from Harry so please, both of you, bear with me as I have to take this step by step,” Remus said.

Danni looked curious. Amelia looked intrigued as she motioned for Remus to continue.

“What do you know about the Hall of Prophecies, Amelia?” asked Remus quietly.

Amelia blinked in surprise. “It’s part of the Department of Mysteries. It’s where the Ministry keeps all of the prophecies on record. Wait a second, Harry went there at the end of the last term.”

Remus nodded. “That’s right, he did. He was tricked into going there by Voldemort, who wanted a prophecy that involved Harry and himself. That particular copy was destroyed before Voldemort could hear it, but its message has not been lost. We’re getting off topic here, however. I’m more interested in your opinion on prophecies in general.”

“According to the records I’ve seen, few prophecies have proven to be false. Based on that, I’d have to say I believe in them,” Amelia stated firmly.

A moment later, Danni nodded in agreement.

“I thought you might say that, and so did Harry. Hold onto your hats, ladies. I’m about to reveal to you a new prophecy. Harry and a few others, including your niece and her boyfriend, witnessed it. Harry sent me a copy of it and his interpretation. Let me read this to you, then you can think about it before we talk about what it means.

“THE BASTION OF LIGHT WILL FALL IN THE TIME OF THE BULL... AND THE CHOSEN CHILD MUST FLEE THE ISLE OF MYRDDIN’S BIRTH... DARKNESS WILL ENGULF THE LAND AND THE REALM OF UTHUR’S SON WILL BURN...AS LIGHT IS SWALLOWED BY DARK THE DEFENDER MUST WATCH FROM A FAR... THE BASTION OF LIGHT WILL FALL IN THE TIME OF THE BULL...”

Amelia and Danni sat at the table for a long moment. Danni had a confused look on her face, but Amelia didn’t. She reached for a cup of tea with a trembling hand, spilling the contents.

“I take it from your reaction that you have some inkling what this means, Amelia?” Remus asked quietly.

Still trembling she nodded. Remus turned to Danni and arched an eyebrow in question.

Danni shrugged. “Honestly, I failed Divination and never could make sense out of that stuff.”

“It’s simple, Danni,” began Amelia. “Correct me if I’m wrong, Mr. Lupin, but it means Voldemort will conquer Britain and very soon, within a year for certain. It also refers to a chosen child, a defender who must sit and watch it happen. Not just from another place, but another country? I’m not sure I understand that part of it. Am I right so far, Mr. Lupin?” asked Amelia.

“Very close, Amelia. The only piece of information you seem to be missing is who the chosen child is,” murmured Remus.

“You know who the child is, Mr. Lupin?” asked Amelia breathlessly.

“Director, you know him. It’s Harry,” Tonks said softly.

“Harry!?” exclaimed Amelia. She sat back, her expression shocked and stared off into the distance for a moment. Then, frowning, she pursed her lips together, thinking. “It makes sense, considering all the problems he’s had. But if this is the case, he’s in more danger than I had anticipated. My immediate impulse is to pull him and his friends out of Hogwarts, but I’m sure you and Harry have other plans,” she said, watching Remus closely.

“Harry’s given me fairly complete instructions, Director, and I have a letter from him, addressed to you. Harry asked me to explain to you the new prophecy and to then ask you a simple question. If you say yes, I’m to give your letter. Actually, the question applied to both of you,” explained Remus seriously, looking between the two women.

Danni leaned forward. She had recovered from her sense of shock, but she was frightened, visibly

so. “What question?” she asked in a tremulous voice.

“Harry intends to save as many people and as much of our world as he can and he wants to know if you both want to be part of those saved? If so, I have letters for both of you, which outline your role in Harry’s plan. He guarantees you and your families a safe haven away from the danger. In return, he asks for your help.”

Amelia raised an eyebrow. “Remus, let’s be reasonable. We’re talking about a sixteen-year-old boy here. How can he possibly...”

Tonks overrode her forcefully. “Yes, he’s a sixteen year old man, Director, who just happened to undergo a three hundred and sixty hour long Matura Magicus!”

Danni paled and sagged in her chair, while Amelia rocked backwards as if she had been struck. She looked to Remus, who nodded, confirming Tonks’ statement.

“He’s also one of the richest wizards in the world, Amelia. And he’s already spending the money to make this work. This past week alone I’ve spent nearly 45 million pounds on this plan,” he added quietly.

Danni shook her head, murmuring about such a lengthy Matura.

Amelia face cycled through shock, disbelief, doubt and finally, a steady, firm expression. Her eyes hardened and she straightened in her chair. “Count me in,” she said quietly.

Danni nodded mutely in agreement.

Smiling, Remus slid the letters from Harry across the table to Amelia and Danni. The two women ripped them open.

“Merlin,” Amelia said, shaking her head in amazement. Then she looked up at Remus. “He isn’t asking for much, is he?” she said with a hint of sarcasm.

Remus chuckled. “I know what you mean, but look at it from my point of view. I’ve been spending his money like water. He isn’t kidding, and he knows exactly how much danger he’s in.”

---

Head Suites, Gryffindor Tower, Later That Night...

Hermione entered her bedroom having just returned from dinner. Harry hadn’t been in the Great Hall and she wondered where he was.

She stopped in surprise when she noticed her bed pulled away from the wall. The hole it left behind was dark and foreboding and just looking at it made her uneasy. A quick check of Harry’s room showed he had been there. His books and his school robe were tossed on the bed.

*He must have decided to explore the passage,* she thought. Swallowing nervously, she steeled her

nerve and pulled out her wand.

“*Lumos* ,” she said and her wand flared with a bright beam of light. Holding her wand before her, she entered the dark, dank passage.

The walls of the passage were slick with moisture and lichen and there was a faintly unpleasant smell coming up the passageway. She could see that someone that recently passed through as the dust, cobwebs and spider webs had all clearly been disturbed.

The passage opened up abruptly into a large empty room with two exits. From her position she could see one passageway sloping upwards and the other sloping down. From the passage going up she could make out a faint light in the distance and heard the sound of someone whistling, badly.

She smiled. Harry couldn’t whistle to save his life, but that didn’t stop him from trying, especially when he was preoccupied with a puzzle. The light bobbed closer. He was coming down the passage so she decided she’d wait for him.

Three minutes later Harry emerged from the passageway and spotted Hermione. He gave her a very disarming grin and she growled to herself for a moment, reining in the wave of desire that flashed through her. His mannerisms of late had been wreaking havoc with her body and, intellectual that she was, she resented being controlled by her raging hormones.

Then she noticed he wasn’t using the standard light spell and frowned, trying to figure it out. Over his shoulder shimmered a bright ball of light, nearly white with just a touch of blue to it.

“What spell is that, Harry? It looks useful.” she asked quietly. Even with his calming presence in the chamber there was still an element of unease.

“This? This is *Lumos Flotima*. Unlike the standard light spell, it doesn’t tie up your wand to generate the light. The downside is, you end up with this ball of light instead of a beam, but it’s not really a problem.”

He showed her the wand movement and, a moment later, Hermione had a bright pinkish tinged light sitting over her shoulder. She smiled in gratitude for the new spell and motioned to the passageway heading upwards.

“Where does that lead?”

“It branches off about a hundred yards in. One passage ends in what appears to be a tower room similar to the Owlery, but it looks like it hasn’t been used in centuries. The other branch ends up in a room, which, near as I can tell, is right behind the restricted section of the library. It appears to be an old storage room, and it’s still loaded with books, so I expect you’ll be interested in it,” he said, grinning.

Hermione grinned back and motioned to the other passageway, the one heading down. “What about that one? Have you explored it yet?”

Harry looked at the passage for a long moment. The faintly unpleasant smell seemed to be coming from that passageway. He frowned. The smell was vaguely familiar but he couldn't place it.

"No, I haven't gone down that way yet. Do you want to see where it goes with me?"

Hermione nodded eagerly. She felt much more comfortable now that Harry was here.

Harry led her down the second passageway, breaking through the spider webs for her. She shivered every time one of the webs brushed against her.

"I don't know how you can take it Harry!" she exclaimed.

Harry glanced over his shoulder to see her shivering from another web. He smiled apologetically at her. "Sorry, Hermione. I didn't realize they bothered you. Spiders don't bother me. There were a lot of them in my cupboard," he said softly.

With a shrug, he cast a spell that erected a bright translucent orange tinted wall about a foot in front of him. The spell covered the passageway entirely from wall to wall, ceiling to floor. As he walked, the spell stayed a foot in front of him at all times, cleansing the walls of cobwebs and spiders as he walked.

Thirty minutes of steady, downhill walking brought them to a low opening with a grate covering it. Bending down, Harry peered through the grate. Then he surprised Hermione by pushing it open. The ancient metal barred door squealed in protest, the sound echoing eerily in the chamber beyond. Harry ducked down and climbed through the opening.

He held the grate open for Hermione to crawl through. Her first impression was one of overwhelming disgust because of the smell. Harry cast a bubblehead charm on both of them, filtering the smell out.

Once she was able to breath without gagging, she looked around in curiosity. They'd come out into a large chamber. In the darkness she could only see a few feet. Even the combination of their light orbs failed to illuminate the chamber.

"I recognize this place," Harry growled. "I hoped never to see it again."

"*LIGHTS!*" Harry yelled in Parseltongue.

Hermione looked at him curiously then gasped as the torches around the room flared to life, revealing a huge chamber with a row of snake statues lining the center of the room. At the far end was an enormous carving of a snake. In front of the carving lay the rotting skeleton of a basilisk.

"Harry? Is this the..."

"Chamber of Secrets, yes," Harry said softly, his eyes unfocused, but fixed on the corpse at the far end of the chamber.

Hermione moved out between two snake statues and into the central corridor formed by all of the statues. She stopped and stared at the huge, rotting skeleton. From nose to tail tip it seemed to be at least sixty feet long with the head easily eight feet tall. Harry joined her a minute later.

“You... how... how did you manage to fight that when you were twelve?” she exclaimed in awe.

“Badly, very badly. I killed it, but it killed me, or would have, had it not been for Fawkes, the Headmaster’s phoenix. I stabbed it through the soft palate of its mouth and it bit me, breaking off a fang full of poison in my arm.

“Ginny lay over there,” he said quietly, pointing to a spot on the floor. “And Riddle stood gloating over her lifeless body and my imminent death. It took all of my strength to wrench that fang out of my arm and use it to kill him. It was a time when I still believed in Dumbledore.”

Hermione watched his face carefully. It had been one adventure she had missed entirely, she had been petrified and up in the infirmary at the time. Harry’s face winced a few times in remembrance of long forgotten pain. She reached up and touched his cheek and he blinked in surprise for a moment, and then looked down at her.

“You alright, Harry?” she asked softly.

Harry nodded. “Yeah Hermione, I’m fine... this just brings back some unpleasant memories.”

“I think we should head back to our rooms. Perhaps another day we can return and harvest some parts of the Basilisk. There are a number of very rare potion ingredients in a Basilisk body,” she told him.

Harry chuckled and led her back to the grated entrance to the chamber. The walk back up to their quarters was more tiring than the walk down. By the time they exited into Hermione’s bedroom, Harry was mumbling about bringing his broom with him the next time they went down.

Hermione giggled, while Harry headed to the private bath they shared. There, he peeled out of his clothes and slipped into a steaming hot tub with a sigh of relief.

The return trip had caused his leg to ache badly. Frowning, he reached into the water and started to massage his leg. In the past few weeks it had shown no further improvements and it was something that really worried him. He could go most of the day without needing the cane, but he couldn’t run for long, or properly, and if he stressed the leg too much, it ached for hours afterwards. As much as he hated to resort to doing it, he’d have to go see Madam Pomfrey tomorrow and have her take a look at it.

Harry closed his eyes and tried stretching his leg out as far as possible. After several minutes of trying, he gave up, gasping from the pain. Frustrated, he climbed out of the tub and wrapped a towel around his waist, then walked out of the bathroom heading into his room.

Hermione spotted him coming out of the bath and frowned, noticing he was using the cane again.

She decided she'd talk to Harry about it in the morning.

---

The Astronomy Tower...

Draco Malfoy, former pampered pureblood prince and heir apparent to the Malfoy family paced nervously atop the Astronomy Tower. His late night astronomy class has been dismissed nearly an hour ago and he had yet to leave the tower.

He was an intelligent man, but not a patient one and he hated puzzles with a passion...until he met a pretty blond puzzle by the name of Luna Lovegood, anyway.

To say that she confused him was an understatement. She seemed so stupid at times and out of touch with reality. Then she's say something so profound that he was sure her vague/dreamy/loony mannerisms were an act.

And if that wasn't enough, she haunted him. For some reason he felt compelled to watch over her, make sure she was safe. *It had to be an illness! I can't actually be falling for Luna can I?* He mused. *No, it's simply not possible, I was raised to look for a better partner.* Then he snorted. *If I were honest with myself, I was raised to be a Death Eater, so who am I kidding?*

Draco swore viciously and nearly kicked one of the stone benches in frustration.

"Draco," came a familiar and very enticing voice.

He spun around so fast that he lost his balance and fell atop one of the benches used during classes. In an instant she was by his side, helping him to his feet.

"Would you like to talk about it, Draco?" asked Luna softly.

Draco stood and brushed himself off. "Talk about what? There's nothing to talk about."

"Oh," she said. For a brief moment her eyes shone with the hurt his refusal to talk caused her, then they became vague once more. "You best get back to your house then. Curfew is nearly on us."

Luna turned and started to walk to the tower entrance when Draco grabbed her by the arm, pulling her around to face him. "What are you doing to me, Luna? You haunt me..." he said softly, staring into her eyes.

"You haven't learned yet, but you're getting closer. This," she said, touching his forehead, "has yet to learn to talk to this," she continued, placing a hand over his heart.

Draco closed his eyes at her touch. His arms trembled with the need to reach out for her, but she stepped away from him and turned again to leave the tower.

"Luna," he said in a hoarse whisper.

“Hmmm?” She paused in the doorway and looked back at him.

“Can... May I have the honor of escorting you to the Yule Ball?” he asked hesitantly.

“I’d like that very much Draco,” she replied with a small smile. When she turned away once more, her smile became a grin. *Gotcha*, she thought.

---

Hogwarts Infirmary, the Next Morning...

Harry limped into the infirmary. He’d told Hermione to cover for him in Transfiguration and he’d try to get there as soon as possible. He didn’t want her to worry, so he didn’t tell her why he was skiving off class.

Madam Pomfrey looked up from her desk at the sound of the doors to the infirmary opening. She was surprised to Harry Potter walking in under his own power and, for once, not covered in blood. She noted that he was not using his cane, but his gait was still stiff.

Stepping out from behind her desk, she walked towards him. “Well Mr. Potter, I’m surprised to see you coming in here on purpose. Now then, what seems to be the problem?” she asked gruffly.

“It’s the leg, Madam Pomfrey. It was getting better, but I think it’s gotten about as good as it’ll get,” he said with a sigh.

“Not getting any better, eh? Well, up on the table, Mr. Potter. Let’s get a look at it.”

Harry walked over to her examining table and climbed on it. For the next twenty minutes Madam Pomfrey ran a series of painful tests on his leg. When she finally finished, he was panting from the pain. She gave him a small pain-relieving potion and then helped him off the table. When his feet hit the floor, he was forced to pull out his cane and expand it to normal size.

“I think you may be correct, Mr. Potter. Your leg is showing an impairment of twenty-five percent and I’m not sure it will improve. If you were going home for the holiday I would suggest seeing Healer Sorenson at St. Mungos. He’s very good with helping people recover from serious injuries,” she stated in a matter of fact tone.

Harry blinked in surprise. “But I am going home for the holiday, Madam Pomfrey.”

“Really? The Headmaster said you would be remaining in the castle.”

“Did he now?” replied Harry in a glacial tone, his eyes narrowing. “Thank you, Madam Pomfrey. I’ll make an appointment to see that healer over the holiday.”

Madam Pomfrey handed Harry a slip, excusing his lateness from class and sent him limping out of the infirmary.

A short while later, Harry limped into Transfiguration class. Both McGonagall and Hermione



noticed the use of the cane so early in the day.

Harry crossed over to McGonagall's desk and handed her the note from Madam Pomfrey.

After class, McGonagall made Harry and Hermione stay late.

"Mr. Potter, would you kindly explain to me why you went to Madam Pomfrey's of your own accord?" asked McGonagall sternly.

Harry glance at Hermione, who was looking at him curiously. He was beginning to think that keeping this from her might have been a mistake.

"I wanted to see Madam Pomfrey about my leg, Professor. For the past few weeks there's been no improvement in it," he said, then he noticed Hermione's frown.

"Yes Hermione," he said tiredly, "I know I said it was getting better. But I'm afraid I've been trying to deny the truth to you and myself. Madam Pomfrey says I have a twenty five percent loss of function, and it will always cause me pain if I overexert it. I may not be a cripple, but I'll never enter the Olympics," he concluded, staring down at his right leg as if it were a friend that had betrayed him.

"It could be worse, Mr. Potter," McGonagall said gently.

"I understand that, Professor. I guess I'm just disappointed. I had hoped it would heal better than this."

"Things will get better, Harry. You wait and see," Hermione said fervently.

---

## The Yule Ball...

Harry sat in his room examining his wardrobe. He'd spent most of his time after dinner handing out special little Yule gifts to the people he wanted to come to Grimmauld Place over the Holiday. The gifts, disguised as jewelry, were really timed portkeys charmed to activate at exactly 10 A.M. on Boxing Day.

After taking a shower, he carefully dressed in his Potter family robe. The royal blue robe shimmered in the torch light as he dressed. Similar to his Black family robes, the Potter robes were emblazoned with his family crest, as well as his rank marking, indicating his status as Lord of one of the great wizarding families.

Placing his Celtic cross earring in his ear, he checked himself out in the mirror. His hair was more manageable, but still not quite long enough to tie off. He shrugged. He was ready to go meet with his date. He grabbed his cane and shrunk it down. Then picked up the gift he'd had Remus pick up for him.

He paced nervously in their little common room, waiting for Hermione to finish dressing. A noise from the staircase caused him to look up to see Ginny and Neville walk in. Harry let out a low whistle and nudged Neville. Ginny blushed at his reaction.

Neville raised an eyebrow at Harry after giving him an approving nod for his outfit. “Still no Hermione, eh?” Neville asked with a grin.

“You know women. It takes them three hours to do what we do in one. How long does it take to shower and throw on some clothes?” Harry replied, grinning back.

“I heard that, Potter,” came a steely voice.

Harry spun around to see Hermione standing in the doorway of her bedroom. She wore a stunning white and blue robe. He quickly walked over to her.

“You look almost perfect, Hermione,” he murmured to her breathlessly.

“Almost perfect? You know, Harry, you’re not winning any points here tonight. First you make a comment about women taking too long to get dressed, then you give me a backhanded compliment,” she told him.

“Well you need this... to round out your outfit,” he said, handing her a small box.

Hermione took the box he offered and eyed him suspiciously. Ginny walked over to her side and nudged her. “Go on, open it! I want to see too!”

She opened the box to see what looked like an enormous snowflake attached to a delicate silver chain.

Ginny’s eyes widened. “Hermione! That’s an enchanted snowflake! They last forever. And because it’s made from Yule snow, it’ll always take on the color of the outfit you’re wearing. If you wear it long enough, it’ll also start to echo your emotions in color. They’re hard to come by.”

Harry pulled the necklace out of the box and opened the chain. Hermione turned away from him and lifted her hair. He placed the chain around her neck and closed the clasp “Now you’re beyond perfect,” he whispered

Hermione turned around and looked at him, her heart in her eyes as she blushed. Harry linked his arm with hers and escorted her from the suite with Neville and Ginny close behind them.

The four Outcasts met up with the others just outside of the entrance to the Great Hall. Draco had opted for stately black robes. Luna, on the other hand, had decided that this year neon pink and purple were attractive colors. Harry liked Luna, but her robes gave him a headache. Surprisingly, Draco didn’t seem to have any problem with her outfit, and Luna positively glowed over the attention he was paying to her.

As a group they entered the Great Hall, they stopped to admire the work of Professor Flitwick,

who had turned the enlarged hall into a winter wonderland. Decorated trees lined the sides of the hall and, between each tree, were snowmen. Up near the Head table was a raised stage for the band. The ceiling and walls depicted a scene of a snow covered meadow with a cloudless winter sky. Harry had to admire the mastery of charm work that Flitwick had pulled off. One couldn't help but shiver from the implied cold, even though the hall was comfortable.

The Outcasts made their way to an empty table and took seats. As they sat, food and drinks appeared. Harry watched with amusement as the other girls admired Hermione's snowflake. Looking up at the Head table, he saw all of the teachers watching Dumbledore, who was watching the hall itself.

Once the hall had filling up, Dumbledore stood to speak and all eyes turned to him. There was a scattering of applause for the Headmaster that swelled until most students were clapping. The notable exceptions being Harry and his friends, and most of Slytherin.

"Yes. Yes. Thank you one and all. Tonight, for your entertainment, we bring you a new band called the Moaning Monsters. We've also opened up the rose garden for your enjoyment. It can be reached by taking the door to the right of the stage. As this is only our second Yule Ball, I'd like you all to know that the Board of Governors is seriously considering making this an annual event. Now, I won't bore you any longer. Let the ball begin!" exclaimed Dumbledore.

With that final proclamation, every tree in the hall lit up and the overhead candles were doused. The only light now came from the stage where the band was setting up, the Christmas lights on the trees and the moon overhead.

As the music began to play every girl at the table had the same wistful expression on her face and every boy had the same expression of terror. Harry took one look and started laughing, earning him a number of scowls from his table.

Harry stood and bowed regally to Hermione, offering her a hand. "May I have the honor of this dance, milady?" he asked formally. Hermione blushed, stood up and took his hand. As he escorted her towards the center of the dance floor, he called to Neville over his shoulder. "Gryffindor's forward, Nev!"

Neville started at Harry's call and turned to look at Ginny. He had to admit that Ginny looked beautiful. He was almost afraid to touch her. Mustering his courage, he asked her if she'd like to dance. When she smiled and nodded, Neville copied Harry's actions. He stood, bowed to her, and then offered her a hand, which she happily took. A moment later, both Terry and Draco were doing the same thing.

Hermione tried to steer Harry back to the table as the music changed to a faster pace. He cocked his head looking at her curiously.

"I thought I was supposed to be leading here. Why are you steering us back to our table?" he asked, smiling.

“Your leg, Harry. I would have thought that would be obvious, even to you. If you dance the faster songs, you’ll pay for it later tonight,” she replied, exasperated with his attitude.

He didn’t reply. He just pulled her into a tight embrace and continued dancing. Hermione sighed in his arms and mentally cursed his stubbornness. Then she deliberately slowed their movements. If anyone noticed the couple dancing out of step with the music, no one said a word.

The music shifted to a slow song and Neville pulled Ginny close to him. She rested her head against his chest. For Neville, it was a moment of epiphany. He leaned down and whispered; “I think I’m falling in love with you, Miss Weasley...”

Ginny whipped her head off his chest and stared up into his smiling face. A slow blush crept up her face. She reached up with one hand to caress Neville’s cheek, but was suddenly pulled roughly away from him and sent sprawling to the floor.

Ginny looked up, outraged, to see Dean and Seamus holding Neville by his arms. Ron, still dressed in his work clothes and reeking from what ever he had been cleaning, advanced on Neville.

“Keep your filthy Slytherin loving hands off my sister,” he growled.

Dean and Seamus suddenly let go of Neville and, screaming, grabbed at their crotches. Neville staggered backwards when they released him. Harry helped steady him, while Hermione went to help Ginny.

Seamus and Dean collapsed on the floor from a spell fired by both Harry and Draco. Surprisingly, they both chose the same target areas.

Ginny stood next to Hermione, her wand out. Around the group a tight crowd formed, keeping the teachers from entering the circle that had opened up. Neville spotted Ginny’s wand and shook his head at her.

“This is my fight, Gin,” he said flatly.

Ginny’s eyes flared in anger for a moment, then she looked down at her feet.

Ron’s nostrils flared and he lunged for Neville. Neville sidestepped him and stuck out his foot, causing Ron to fall and skid along the floor.

Harry moved over to Hermione’s side and spotted Snape and Dumbledore trying to push their way through the crowd. Under his breath he whispered a spell. Both men paused in consternation then turned around and rushed for the nearest exit. Over the excited exclamations of the students, rude bodily sounds could be heard coming from the two fleeing men.

Hermione watched them running from the hall and then looked at Harry curiously.

“Bowel Loosening spell,” he murmured. She looked shocked for a moment then started to giggle.

Meanwhile, Neville kept up a dance around Ron. No matter how hard Ron tried to hit him, he missed and usually end up falling to the floor. Neville never once tried to purposely hit Ron but, as it stood, Ron was doing enough damage to himself. Hitting him wasn't necessary.

Ron slowly climbed to his feet again. As he turned to face Neville once more, his eyes crossed as he stared down the end of Neville's wand.

"Go away, Ron. You and I used to be friends, but no longer. You've turned into an arrogant bloody idiot who wouldn't know a right idea if he tripped over it. Go back to kissing Snape's arse and leave me and Ginny alone or, so help me, I'll make you regret you ever tangled with a Longbottom!" Neville said, his voice like steel.

The crowd surrounding the fight stepped back in surprise hearing Neville's words, allowing just enough room for some of the teachers to break into the circle. McGonagall grabbed Ron by the scruff of his neck and dragged him from the circle, while Flitwick told two students to take Dean and Seamus up to the infirmary.

With the fight officially over, Ginny hurled herself into Neville's embrace. Harry exchanged a grin with Hermione. He turned to see Terry and Susan smiling. Then he frowned. Draco and Luna were no where to be seen.

---

### Draco and Luna Get Cozy...

Once Dean and Seamus were down, Draco grabbed Luna's wrist and pulled her away from the group. Weaving his way through the crowd, he led her to the door to the rose garden and stepped out. The garden was enchanted to keep it warm and blooming all year and the scents of summer were strong.

Walking quickly, but mindful of her high heels, he pulled her down one of the rows until he reached a small stone courtyard. A fountain bubbled merrily nearby and benches were set back enough from the main court to offer a bit of privacy for those who wished such things.

Draco stopped near the fountain and turned to face Luna. Her expression was a mixture of pleasure and puzzlement. She watched him closely, obviously waiting for an explanation. He fidgeted nervously for a moment, unsure how to begin. She was so different from the other girls he'd dated and he didn't want to do anything to...he wasn't sure. Maybe offend her? Annoy her? *Hurt her*, he thought suddenly. *I don't want to hurt her.*

"You won't, you know," Luna said softly.

"Won't what?" he asked, a bit startled that she'd spoken.

"Hurt me," she replied.

"How did you know what I was thinking?" he asked in bewilderment.

“The look in your eyes, the expression on your face, your posture. Your thoughts are obvious to anyone who watches closely enough,” she whispered, moving closer to him. “You won’t hurt me, Draco. I’m stronger than you think.”

“Luna,” he said softly, taking the last few steps to close the distance between them. “I don’t want to make any mistakes with you. The type of women I’ve dated in the past were...well, you know what Pansy’s like,” he muttered in disgust.

She shrugged. “We all make mistakes, Draco. They’re unavoidable.”

“I know it, it’s just...” he trailed off. He looked into her eyes, saw the excitement dancing behind them and nearly groaned. Reaching out, he brushed the backs of his fingers against her cheek, much like she’d done to him. When she leaned into his touch, he did groan.

Bending down, he touched his lips to hers lightly. When she didn’t pull away, he wrapped one arm around her waist and repeated the caress. Raising his head, he gazed down at her, waiting.

Luna opened her eyes and met his gaze. She brushed a finger across his lips. “Don’t stop,” she whispered. When he bent down once more, she closed her eyes in anticipation. She knew this would happen and, while she hadn’t expected it so soon, she certainly wasn’t going to stop him.

The next instant, she was spinning away and it took her a moment to realize that Draco’s lips on hers hadn’t caused her sense of vertigo. Her eyes flew open at the same moment she heard Draco’s grunt of pain and she watched him fall to the stones of the courtyard, doubled over, with a large, heavy young man standing over him, his hands fisted.

When Luna took a step forward, intent on going to Draco, arms snaked out from behind her and pulled her away.

“I don’t think so,” a deep, thick voice said behind her. Hands delved into her pockets and came up empty. “She doesn’t have her wand. Perfect.”

Her eyes narrowed and she wondered why Crabbe and Goyle had followed them to the garden. Draco’s former bodyguards, they’d turned against the blond once it had become clear to some in Slytherin House that he’d refused the Mark and had fled Malfoy Manor to escape the Dark Lord.

“I told you to wait,” Crabbe growled. “Nott will be here with the portkey any minute!”

“Why wait?” Goyle asked, pocketing Draco’s wand. “We can have a little fun before we deliver him to Mr. Malfoy and the Dark Lord.”

“The Dark Lord?” Luna asked vaguely. “But Draco doesn’t want to take the Mark.”

“Shut up,” Goyle growled, bending over and dragging Draco to his feet. “What would a little trumpet like you know about it anyway?” He twisted Draco’s arm up behind his back and grinned when the blonde man sucked in his breath sharply from the pain.

“Trumpet?” she asked in puzzlement, relaxing in Crabbe’s arms and waiting.

“Yeah, you know, a trumpet,” Goyle said, looking at her and frowning. “A slut, a whore... a trumpet!”

Luna’s eyes widened in disbelief for a moment before she started to chuckle. She was quite at first, but as the situation sank in, she couldn’t help herself. The chuckles became giggles, which became full-throated laughter.

Draco watched her for a moment, and then shook his head. “You mean ‘strumpet’, you walking pile of Tatampur shit!”

“Actually, they don’t leave it in piles,” Luna started to inform him.

“Not now, Luna,” he said gently.

“Oh, right. Well, are we almost done here then?” she asked.

“We’ve just started,” Crabbe growled, tightening his arms. “Draco’s disarmed and you don’t have your wand. As soon as Nott gets here, we’ll be leaving.”

“You know, you’re both being rude. Draco was just about to kiss me again when you interrupted. If you don’t mind, I’d rather he pick up where he left off,” Luna said, a scowl starting to form on her face.

“You’re daft,” Goyle said. “We’re not letting you go. We got plans...”

“Shall we go, Draco?” she asked, interrupted the slow-witted lump of a man.

Draco narrowed his eyes and watched the girl carefully. He knew that Crabbe and Goyle could hurt her without meaning too. But Nott would do it purposely and deliberately, just to hear her scream. They needed to escape before he arrived.

“Whenever you are,” he said finally.

Her smile was like the sun, bright and full of joy. Moving quickly, she raised one foot and brought the heel of her shoe down hard onto the top of Crabbe’s foot. The man cried out in pain. His arms released her and he bent town to grab his foot. When he did, Luna spun around and brought her knee up as hard as she could. When it slammed into the man’s face, there was a loud, horrid crunching sound as something broke.

Crabbe jerked upright, his cries of pain becoming howls of agony. When he raised his hand to his face, she grabbed his shoulders for leverage and drove her knee into his groin. His howls stopped, his face drained of color and he dropped like a rock to his knees.

Luna spun quickly and stopped, amazed. Goyle stood, his arm twisted behind his back, while Draco stood behind him watching as she demolished Crabbe.

“Nice work,” he complimented, grinning.

She shrugged rather carelessly. “I’ve been watching Ginny,” she said, reaching up to her hair. She pulled out the stick she’d used to hold her hairstyle together and her blond tresses tumbled down. She then flipped the piece of wood around, palming it and Draco finally realized that it was her wand.

“Clever girl,” he said admiringly.

“I needed something to hold my hair up. Besides, it wouldn’t have looked right behind my ear... not with these robes,” she said impishly.

Laughing, Draco tossed Goyle’s wand to her. She caught it, then turned and disarmed Crabbe. She stepped back and threw both student’s wands out into the garden as Draco bound and gagged both men and, levitating them, moved them deeper into the foliage.

When he came back, he brushed his fingers across her cheek again. “Come, we need to leave before Nott shows up. And thank you, Luna,” he murmured, brushing a kiss across her forehead.

She sighed in disappointment, but nodded her understanding. “You can pay me back with a dance,” she said.

“Gladly.”

When he took her hand, she tightened her grip and let him lead her back into the Great Hall. The noise hit them as they stepped through the door and they both cringed slightly. Moving deeper into the hall, it wasn’t long before they ran into a member of the Outcasts.

“Are you two all right?” Hermione asked, taking in their disheveled appearances.

Draco’s robe was twisted, a few buttons were missing, it was horribly wrinkled, and he had dirt ground in around his knees. Luna’s hair was a tangled mess and her own robes were wrinkled. Both, however, were smiling.

“We’re fine,” Draco began. “We ran into a little...”

Luna placed a finger over his lips to quiet him. She then smiled at Hermione, her eyes dancing. “We’re fine, thank you. If you’ll excuse us, Mr. Malfoy owes me a dance,” she said firmly.

When she led Draco out onto the floor, Hermione watched them for a moment before shaking her head. Odd couple they may be, but somehow it seemed right. With a sigh, she turned and plunged back into the crowd to find Harry.

---

Breakfast, the Next Morning...

Harry was just starting to fill his breakfast plate when Professor McGonagall interrupted him.



“Mr. Potter, the Headmaster is concerned over your poor potions grade. He would like you to see Professor Snape before you leave today. Professor Snape has created some extra credit holiday homework for you.”

Harry sighed in resignation and nodded to his Professor. He grabbed a quick drink of his morning tea and left the Great Hall for the dungeons. He wanted to get this over with and get back to the Hall before Hermione showed up. In a little over two hours they'd be boarding the Hogwarts Express for the trip home.

Harry had just entered the dungeons proper when he was staggered by a wave of dizziness. The corridor tilted sideways and the floor rushed up to meet him as the darkness closed in.

---

Hogsmeade Train Station...

Hermione was worried. She had waited for Harry in the Entrance Hall until there was just one carriage left. No one had seen him since breakfast. Finally she climbed into the remaining carriage and rode down to the train station hoping to find him there.

Arriving at the station she started her search. Wherever Harry was, he was in good health. Her charm hadn't activated. Neville and Ginny approached her after looking in some of the forward train cars. Neville shook his head at her hopeful look.

Hermione had a tough decision to make. She could board the train, scheduled to leave in a few minutes, or she could apparate directly to Grimmauld Place. Once the train started moving, she would be unable to apparate from it. And if Harry was not in one of the few un-searched cars, she would be stuck for several hours, unable to alert anyone to his disappearance.

*I can't sound an alarm until I'm sure he's missing*, she agonized to herself. Gritting her teeth over her limited options, she climbed aboard the Express as the train started to lurch out of the station.

---

In the Darkness...

Harry groaned and rolled over. He started awake from the feel of the cold, wet stone below him. Sitting up, his first impression was of darkness. It was total. His second impression was one of nausea. His stomach roiled heavily and he fought against the urge to vomit. Shuddering, he took shallow breaths until the feeling passed.

He reached for his wand, but it and the holster were missing. Suddenly a soft light appeared above him. The light appeared as a small slot was opened in a door. From that little light he could see he was in a dank room about fifteen feet below the door. Obviously someone had tossed him into the cell after he had passed out. Carefully he raised his head to look at the opening.

A face appeared. Professor Snape sneered at Harry, looking down at his seated form in disgust. “It has been decided you are not to be allowed to leave the castle this holiday, Potter. If you are a

good boy, I may even let you come out in a day or two,” he said with a low laugh.

Then the door slammed shut again, leaving him in darkness.

Harry sat for a moment. He would have to give Snape some time to leave the area before he could do anything. With a heavy sigh, he began a ritual he had started a long time ago. Harry called it the ‘Harry Test’. Slowly, he flexed fingers, toes, arms and legs. His leg was painful and from the other sore spots he guessed he had been pushed from the door above his head.

With no discernable light in the cell, he had no way of judging the passage of time. He pushed out with his senses and he could feel the magic of the castle around him, but was unable to detect anyone nearby.

Standing, he groped in his pockets, but they had been emptied of everything, including his cane. He leaned against the wall, and then concentrated for a moment. From his cell he was unable to locate the signature of his wand. Expanding his consciousness out further, he searched the castle for Hermione but was unable to locate her. He could only hope she had left the castle with the rest of the students.

Harry grimaced for a moment, then vanished from the cell without a sound. A second later he was sitting on his bed in the Head Boy’s suite. Harry cast a pain relief charm on himself that would last a few hours. He knew he’d paid for it later, but for now he needed to be unfettered by pain. A wall clock revealed that he had been locked in the cell for nearly six hours. By now, the Express was either just arriving or unloading.

Harry rummaged through his trunk looking for a specific set of robes. He had warned Dumbledore. Now it time to stop warning and start pushing back.

Donning his Black Family formal robes, Harry girded himself for the confrontation. He carried his concealment cloak draped over his arm. Then he grabbed an old textbook and transfigured it into an elegant walking stick.

Exiting the Head suites, he placed the entire suite under a Fidelis charm. Then he limped from the common room, his anger growing with every step. As he approached the Entrance Hall, he could sense the presence of two people. Dumbledore and Professor Snape.

The two were staring out into the courtyard and talking quietly as Harry moved silently up behind them.

“I’ve taken care of our little problem, Headmaster. I daresay things will start looking better in a few days,” Snape said smugly

“Right, Snivellus. The only problem you need to worry about is whether I decide to let you live or not,” Harry said.

Both men whirled to face him.

Harry raised a hand and muttered, “Freno Regina”.

Both men froze in place, their eyes darting from side to side in panic.

“*Accio* wand,” Harry muttered.

His wand, still in its holster, tore its way free from under Snape’s robe. He caught it in one hand and lifted his sleeve to snap the holster to his forearm. Then he stared long and hard at the two men. Both were startled by Harry’s use of wandless magic.

Harry moved closer to Snape. “I’ll teach you to fear me, Snivellus. Mark my words, the next time you interfere in my business, I will leave you a lobotomized moron,” he said coldly.

Then he levitated Snape, wandlessly, up to the ceiling and placed him there with a sticking charm.

Next, he turned to Dumbledore. “I told you, old fool. I warned you. I did everything but draw you a fucking picture of what I was going to do if you pushed me again. You wanted a war, you got it, old man,” he shouted. His magic flared with his anger and the Entrance Hall groaned and creaked as waves of magic poured off him.

Harry released Dumbledore from the freezing spell and handed him a note from his solicitor. “That is the bill for damages your bird club inflicted on my home.”

“Your home?” asked Dumbledore incredulously.

“Yes. Twelve Grimmauld Place is my home. I’m the one that evicted you this past summer.”

Dumbledore started to say something when Harry stopped him by holding up a hand. “I have no wish to hear your complaints any longer, old man. I expect that bill to be paid promptly or I will see you in court and I can afford more solicitors than you can.”

“Harry, you cannot...”

“SHUT UP!” Harry roared, his magic beating at Dumbledore so strongly that the old wizard staggered backwards and looked up at him in fear.

With a flick of Harry’s hands, Dumbledore found himself stuck against the ceiling right next to his potions master.

“Your time is over, old man. I’ll give you this last warning. Stay out of my way while I’m at school,” Harry said in a cold tone.

“Happy Christmas, Headmaster,” Harry snarled. Then he donned his concealment cloak and vanished from sight. The entire castle shuddered at his disappearance.

---

**Kings Cross Station...**

Hermione dashed from the train in a complete panic. Jumping to clear the heads of some of the taller people in the crowd, she spotted Remus, Tonks and her parents near the entrance to the platform. With few excuses, she hastily started to push her way through the crowd. Draco followed, close behind.

Her parents lit up with smiles as they spotted Hermione working her way through the crowd. Then Dan's smiled faded as he saw the expression on his daughter's face. Stepping forward, he reached for her as she hurled herself into his arms.

"Harry's missing!" she cried.

"We searched the train from one end to the other. Potter's not on it," Draco drawled.

Remus and Tonks rushed her, demanding more information.

"Harry's missing. I looked everywhere for him. He never..."

"I'm right here," Harry said tiredly.

Hermione's head whipped around to stare at him. In a glance she could see he wasn't all right. His complexion was pasty white, he was swaying slightly and the right side of his face was streaked in dried blood. Remus got to Harry just as the younger man's legs started to give out. He caught Harry under his arms.

Dan pulled out his portkey for Grimmauld and everyone grabbed hold. Remus held Harry tightly, while Dan activated the portkey in its emergency mode. "HOME," Dan shouted.

---

## **Grimmauld Place...**

Remus staggered when the portkey brought them to Grimmauld Place. Draco quickly reached out and steadied Remus and Harry. Between the two, they dragged him into the living room and set him out on the couch.

Narcissa spotted them arriving and rushed down the stairs to see what the problem was. The last few months she had gone far in her own recovery. She made several sweeps with her wand over Harry, running diagnostic spells. She wasn't a fully trained healer. She had stopped her training when she had married Lucius, but she still remembered the old techniques.

"He's got a concussion. It looks like he's taken a fall. There's a lot of bruising and his leg has been badly strained as well. There may be other problems, but I'm not sure," Narcissa said doubtfully.

Tonks straighten up and walked over to the fireplace. Tossing some green powder into the floo she stuck her head in for a long minute, then pulled it out.

A minute later Tonks' friend Danni McNeil arrived via portkey. She took one look at Harry lying on the couch and pushed people out of the way to get to him. She gave the rest of them the look all healers learn early on in their careers. It said, in no uncertain terms, 'Get Out'.

Roughly an hour later, Danni came into the kitchen to get Tonks. She told the rest that Harry would be with them soon, but first Tonks needed to get a statement from him.

Tonks walked into the living room, frowning. "Harry, I need to find out what happened. If we need to make arrests..."

"No, Tonks. It's unnecessary," Harry said wearily.

"But..."

"Tonks, you know what's going to happen. Any case made now is a futile gesture. We have more important things to worry about than criminal investigations and cases," Harry said firmly.

"Harry, as your guardian, I don't need your permission to press charges," Tonks said suggestively.

"Tonks, I love you dearly, but I'm going to tell you right here and now, if you try to pull the manipulative Dumbledore routine on me, there won't be enough of you left to fill a basket. Yes, you are my guardian and no you don't need my permission to press charges. But press charges for what? So Snape gets put in jail for a few months before everything goes to hell. How does that help anything? What purpose does it serve, other than to distract us from what's really important?"

Tonks folded her arms across her chest and looked unconvinced.

"Besides Tonks, it's going to take several days for that sticking charm to wear off, and I really doubt anyone in Hogwarts will be able to dispel it," he added with a smirk.

"Sticking charm?" Tonks asked in a curious tone.

"Yep... to the ceiling, right inside those big old drafty doors." And then he laughed. A tired laugh, true, but a laugh.

---

## **Author's Notes...**

Emma and Dan Granger will remain healthy in this story. Someone pointed out a possible interesting plot twist, but it would require us to toss out most of our story and re-write it, changing the plot as we go. I'm sure you'll forgive us for not changing anything.

In the A/N's "we" is used because there are two people writing Sunset over Britain. We also wrote Dumbledore's Army and Spiritus Crystalus. If you read the A/N's we figured that our sign off "Bob and Alyx" made that rather obvious, but we guess not. Hope this clears up any

confusion.

The spider bit Harry on the calf...the area below the knee but above the ankle. The damage extends from the bite spot upwards through the calf muscle and into the lower thigh.

I (Alyx) have never seen the TV program called Winston Churchill, The Valiant Years. But then, as I was born in 1971, that's not too surprising. Bob may know it though. He's a bit older than I am (Snickers and runs like hell).

(Bob's reply) GRRRRRR

No, no, no! We got blamed during the writing of our last stories for everything from not getting homework done, to being put on restriction by parents, to being late for work because people stayed up too late reading! We refuse to accept the blame here. However...umm...here's a silencing potion for your husband. Slip it in his coffee (or drink of choice) and go about your reading in peace.

For those asking to borrow our ideas for their own fics, our answer is sure, go ahead. All we ask is that somewhere in your fic (Authors Notes, or wherever) you mention who you borrowed the idea from.

Harry's leg is going to be a bit of a problem, isn't it? Ah well, no true hero is perfect (Grin)

How long will it take Harry and Hermione to grow 'closer' in their relationship? However long it takes (aren't we evil?).

Will Harry learn the AK? Doubtful, but then, you never really know, do you?

For those who think Ron's punishment was to light, relax. Ron's going to find out just how bad it really is.

We can't tell you how long the story will be. With each chapter we find ourselves fleshing out and adding details, thereby making the story progression a bit slower and requiring more chapters. But we think those details are important to the story to help add body.

We don't accept howlers from anyone's parents, so get that idea out of your head right now! We of course willing to accept donations however, so grab your parents credit cards and send us all the information contained on them. (just kidding!)

That's it, folks. For those who haven't done so, you can join us at our Yahoo group. The address can be found in the Author's profile. Chapter 12 is being written, so we can't give you an update schedule yet. On one last note however...we have both recently quit smoking, so if we seem a bit...er...grumpy, you know why :D

We hope you enjoyed the chapter!

Bob and Alyx

PET PEEVES:

Excessively long update periods.

Why pray tell does seem to take some authors MONTHS to write a 3K word chapter? I don't get that at all.

## **Sunset Over Britain Plans Revealed**

### **Standard Disclaimer:**

Ronald Weasley creeps silently onto the stage and looks around nervously. The lights come up revealing Albus Dumbledore and Severus Snape wearing thongs and dancing to a disco beat in hanging cages above Ron's head.

Ron nervously holds up a sign saying, "Bob and Alyx want you to know that they own nothing of the Potterverse. It all belong to JK Rowling."

Ron puts the sign down and looks around, breathing a sigh of relief. As he does, the lights shift slightly to show Harry, Hermione, Draco, Ginny, Neville, Luna, Susan, Terry, Bob and Alyx sitting in the front row holding submachine guns. Ron swallows nervously and a puddle appears at his feet. Harry shouts "FIRE!", then the stage vanishes and a message floats in your screen. "Please standby, we are experiencing technical difficulties."

---

### **Sunset Over Britain** Chapter 12

---

### **Hogwarts, Entrance Hall...**

Minerva McGonagall left her apartment to take her early morning walk. She always enjoyed the Christmas Holiday. Usually there were a few students around and, on more than one occasion, she had gotten to know some of her students much better in the relaxed atmosphere of the holiday at school.

This morning's walk was interrupted when Mr. Filch caught up with her.

"Professor McGonagall! You must come. I don't know what to do to help them," said the surly caretaker.

McGonagall arched an eyebrow at his insistence, but followed him anyway. Filch led her into the great Entrance Hall and she shivered slightly from the cold. She pulled her cloak about her tightly and looked at Mr. Filch enquiringly.



“Up here, Professor McGonagall,” came the tired voice of Headmaster Dumbledore.

Looking up she spotted both Professor Snape and Dumbledore stuck to the ceiling. She fought down the urge to burst out laughing.

“My word! Albus, what happened to you? How did you get up there?” asked McGonagall breathlessly.

Before Dumbledore could respond Snape cut in. “That arrogant Potter brat did this to us yesterday evening and we can’t dispel the charm!”

McGonagall frowned. “Potter assaulted you? But didn’t he leave on the Express? This is unheard of, Headmaster. I’ll contact the Aurors at once and we shall get to the bottom of this. We cannot allow students to assault faculty. No, it just isn’t...”

“Professor, please. Aurors are not necessary. Right now what is necessary is trying to find a way to get us down,” Albus said in a pained tone.

McGonagall hid a smirk. *If he doesn’t want to call in the Aurors then he was probably doing something and Harry caught him at it again*, she thought. *Why did Harry come back to the castle? Or was it a case of him never having left in the first place?*

Several minutes later, Minerva tucked her wand away and sighed. “I’m afraid I’m unable to dispel the sticking charm, Headmaster. I’ll send a message to Filius. Maybe he’ll have better luck.”

“Send a message?” asked Snape ominously.

“Yes, Professor. Filius decided to spend some time with his family this year, so he’s currently in London.

Now, Mr. Filch,” she continued, turning to the squib, “have a few house elves bring the Professors some food and keep them warm. The draft from that door is quite chilly.”

Snape began to curse loudly and struggle against the charm.

“Oh do be quiet, Severus,” Dumbledore said tiredly. “The charm will undoubtedly wear off soon. Your comments will not hasten that process.”

McGonagall left the stuck duo and made it all the way to her apartment before she burst into laughter.

---

Grimmauld Place, That Same Morning...

Harry awoke to one of the best smells in the world. Bacon. He cracked one eye open to find Hermione waving a slice under his nose. Dobby stood next to the bed holding a heaping tray of food for him.

Stretching carefully, he sat up. Dobby placed the tray on his lap while Hermione moved to a seat next to his bed. She then reached out and grabbed a slice of bacon from his tray.

“Haven’t you eaten yet?”

“I had something, but I was waiting for you to get up. Oh and Danni said she would let you have some breakfast before she gave you a look over this morning. So eat up, until she checks you out, you’re stuck in that bed.”

“Well, that wouldn’t be bad if you were in here with me,” he replied with a smirk.

She laughed and slapped him on the arm. “Oh, you’re a bold one this morning, Potter. I can just see explaining that to my parents. Now eat.”

“Oh, right, probably not a good idea,” he said, grinning wickedly for a moment. “I hope Danni’s in a good mood today. I want to get to Diagon Alley today and I suspect that our friendly healer’s going to have something to say about that.”

“So how are you feeling this morning?”

“Fine, just fine.”

“Harry…”

Harry sighed and looked down at his breakfast. “Alright, I have a headache still and my leg is throbbing like mad. But what do you expect, Hermione? I was thrown down fifteen feet into a locked cell. And I suspect our resident healer will yell at me for putting my leg through so much yesterday.”

“You have that part right, Mr. Potter,” said a voice from the doorway.

Harry looked up to see Danni and Tonks entering the room.

Danni gave Harry a potion for his headache and warned him to avoid any sudden movements for another day. She wanted to see him in a few days to see if anything more could be done for his leg.

“Tonks, I need to get into Diagon Alley today. Do I need an escort or is it alright if I just go?” Harry asked.

Tonks frowned for a moment, then she shrugged. “I’d prefer that you didn’t go alone, Harry. If you can wait an hour, Remus and I will go with you.”

Harry nodded, then decided to broach another subject with her. “Tonks, about last night. I’m sorry…”

“No Harry,” she said, waving a hand at him. “You were right to say what you did. I shouldn’t have pushed that hard.”

“Pax?” Harry offered with a smile.

“Pax!” Tonks replied smiling back as her hair changed to a bright blue.

Harry watched Tonks and Danni leave the room before turning to Hermione. “Would you like to come with me to Diagon Alley? We could sort of make it a date. I have some Christmas shopping to do and some business at Gringotts. Hey! You can visit Gringotts and check out your new vault with the money taken from the Weasleys,” he offered.

Hermione sat for a moment, thunderstruck. She hadn’t thought about that money since the hearing. Then another thought occurred to her and she scowled at Harry. “I can’t use that money. It was taken from your vaults,” she exclaimed.

“Oh, don’t bother yourself over a few galleons. Use it to buy yourself some books and some Christmas gifts for your folks.”

Hermione shook her head at him and vowed to have a serious talk with him about money one of these days.

Harry chuckled to himself and promised he’d have a talk with her about money one of these days.

---

The Burrow...

Ginny stepped out of her bedroom and checked the hallway before heading to the stairway. Since her arrival at the Burrow last night, the tension in the house had become almost unbearable. As soon as she sat down at the dinner table, both her mother and Ron had started lecturing her about her choice of friends, and it had quickly become an exercise in temper control for her. On more than one occasion she’d come very close to hexing everyone at the table.

Her father was the one she’d been most disappointed with. His soft-spoken ways and moral values had been the linchpin of her upbringing. To know that those values had been little more than a deceitful act wounded her deeply.

Entering the kitchen, she ignored the glares of both her mother and her brother as she poured herself a bowl of porridge. She knew she only had to hold out for a while.

Ron scowled. “Mum, you’ve got to talk to Ginny. You won’t believe who she’s been whoring herself with,” Ron said venomously.

“Oh, and you would know all about whoring wouldn’t you, Ronald?” spat Bill Weasley, standing in the doorway. He crossed his arms and glared at his brother.

Ron and Molly whirled to face Bill. “Billy, hush now. You haven’t any idea what Ginny has been doing. Besides, your brother was unjustly punished,” said Molly primly.

“No, perhaps I don’t, mother. But I do know which side of this family has lost its honor and which side still maintains it. Percy was right about you all,” Bill retorted, glaring at his mother and brother, daring them to reply.

“Bill! You don’t know what...”

“Enough! Your son assaulted a woman who we considered to be part of this family. Doesn’t that mean anything to you? What about the Life Debt this family owes Harry Potter? Yet you have been treating him like dirt!”

“POTTER! I’m sick of hearing that fucking bastard’s name!” Ron shouted.

He shoved his chair away from the table, stood up and stormed out of the kitchen, leaving Molly facing Ginny and Bill alone. From the living room came a muffle yelp and the sound of something heavy hitting the floor.

“What are you doing to Ron?” screamed Molly.

“Fred and George are showing him the error of his ways, Not that we really think it will do any good, but it makes us feel better,” Bill said with a slight smile. Then he turned to Ginny. “Are you ready?”

“I just have to get my trunk, Bill. It’s upstairs,” she told him, grinning widely.

“Well, go get it, Gin. I’ll finish my conversation with dear old mum here,” Bill said, turning back to the older woman and frowning.

Molly moved to block Ginny but Bill stepped between them. Ginny looked between the two nervously for a moment, then whirled around and ran for the stairs.

“I’m ashamed to be a Weasley, Mother. Your actions and your acceptance of our brother, the would-be rapist, are a stain on our family’s honor. Where is the honor you raised us with? Where are the ethics you instilled in Fred, George, Ginny and myself? Has our entire life been a lie?”

The sound of her hand meeting his cheek was as loud as a clap of thunder. The silence that descended on the kitchen was deafening.

Bill reached up to touch his cheek where his mother had struck him and his eyes turned hard. “I’m taking Ginny with me. She’ll stay at my place. You’ve had your one shot and I’ll not leave Ginny here to be abused by you and Ron,” he said coldly.

He turned around and left the room and Molly was left alone, shaking with anger.

In the living room Bill saw Ron trussed up and spinning slowly like a top. Fred and George were busy casting delayed action charms and hexes on his various body parts as he spun.

Ginny came down the stairs, dragging her trunk behind her and Bill smiled at her. Taking the

trunk from her, he led her over to the fireplace. With a nod to the twins, he threw a pinch of floo powder into the fire. Within moments, he and Ginny were gone.

With a glare, George sent a final delayed charm at Ron, then tucked his wand away and moved towards the fireplace. Fred joined him a moment later and they used the floo to return to their shop on Diagon Ally.

---

Diagon Alley...

In the end it took more than a single hour, but Harry, Hermione, her parents, Remus, Tonks and two additional Aurors met up outside of the Leaky Cauldron to go to Diagon Alley. Everyone was wearing their concealment cloak. Draco had opted to stay at Grimmauld Place with his mother.

Harry had one piece of business he needed to take care of before he could start his Christmas shopping. Entering the Alley from the back of the Leaky Cauldron, he made a beeline for Gringotts with everyone following him.

Inside, he pushed back the hood on his cloak and walked up to the nearest Goblin. “Excuse me, Sir, but can you direct me to where I might find Rotfoot, the Property Manager?” he asked.

The goblin smiled toothlessly. “Follow me.”

They were led to an interior office containing a high desk. The room was austere, save for a single complex tapestry on the wall depicting a combination of Goblin Runes and Runes from other species.

Behind the desk was an aged Goblin who peered down on them from his desk. “I am Rotfoot, Property Manager. How may I help you?” he asked.

“Ah, Rotfoot. I would like to have the following properties set up under an interdiction,” Harry said, handing the Goblin a parchment.

Rotfoot blinked in surprise and then recovered. “Ah... Sir...”

“Lord Harry Potter-Black,” Harry offered with a closed grin.

“My Lord, we have not interdicted any properties since the 1500s,” protested Rotfoot.

“But surely you still have the capability, yes?” pressed Harry.

“Well yes, my Lord, we can...”

“Very good, Rotfoot. How soon can you get the interdictions set up?”

“We can have them in place by the end of the month, my Lord. Is there any other business I might be able to help you with today?”

“Can you make account changes?” asked Harry.

“Not directly, my Lord, but I can see the account changes routed to the proper department.”

Harry handed Rotfoot a parchment. “I’d like a one million galleon account set up for each of the individuals on this list. Preferably, I’d like the account vaults to be located at the Stonewall Lane branch. Also,” he paused and turned to Hermione. “What’s the number of the vault you were assigned?”

Hermione looked at him for a moment. “Vault 1081. Why?”

“We’d like the contents of the Potter Family and Black Family vaults, as well as vaults 1081 and vault 679 transferred to Gringotts on Stonewall Lane,” Harry said.

Rotfoot rocked back in his chair as if he had been slapped in the face. Lord Potter-Black had just asked for the relocation of nearly half a billion galleons!

The goblin nodded weakly and quickly scribbled a note, which he dropped into a basket. The note vanished in a bright flash of light and, a moment later, another appeared.

Rotfoot picked up the note and scanned it briefly. “My Lord, Ragnok, the chief executive of Gringotts, would like to have a word with you and your friends if you don’t mind. Meanwhile, your account changes have been routed to the appropriate department and should be completed by the end of the business day.”

The door opened and another goblin appeared. They were quickly led to a plush office with a large conference table. After taking seats, another goblin appeared with tea.

After the tea was served, Ragnok, chief executive officer of Gringotts world wide entered the room.

“Ah, Mr. Potter. It is an honor to finally meet one of our most distinguished depositors,” Ragnok said smoothly with a polite bow before sitting at the head of the table.

“The honor is all mine, Ragnok,” replied Harry with another small smile.

“I am curious Mr. Potter...”

“Please, call me Harry,” Harry said interrupting him.

“Very well, Mr...ah...Harry. I’m curious. You made a number of requests of us today that we find somewhat alarming. It’s not unusual for a family vault to be relocated to another branch. But when that comes with a request to put fifteen manor houses scattered throughout Britain under an interdiction, an act usually reserved for times of war, it piques our curiosity.”

Harry glanced at Remus. He had tutored Harry extensively on Goblin culture, but this was a situation not covered in those lessons. Remus shrugged in response. The situation was too unique

to offer any substantial advice.

Harry decided at that moment to take an approach of honesty. “Ragnok, I assume it’s safe to say that anything I tell you is covered by Gringotts usually efficient confidentiality?” he asked.

“Of course.”

“Very well, then. We’ve come across a prophecy that specifically states that four or five months into the coming year, Lord Voldemort will win supremacy here in Britain. With that in mind, I am protecting those assets that I cannot move by placing the manors under an interdict. The vault contents are being moved for the same reason. I pray that the move will be temporary and I will be able to return everything to my rightful vaults, but I must take steps.”

Ragnok clasped his hand together in front of him, his eyes closed. “How reliable is this seer, Harry?” he asked quietly.

Hermione bristled, but Harry stayed her anger, placing his hand over hers. “I owe this seer a life debt, Ragnok. I trust her implicitly and would lay down my life to protect her. In addition to this particular prophecy we have a second, from a non-human source, confirming parts of it,” he replied in a serious tone.

“Very well, Harry. You have done Gringotts a great service and we, too, remember our debts. We shall, of course, take steps to begin relocating all our floating accounts, as well as increasing security around the vaults of the other great families,” Ragnok said with a toothless smile.

“That is all any of us can do, Ragnok. As always, I appreciate the service provided by you and your people. May you find safety within your ancestors halls,” Harry said, concluding the meeting with the ritual goblin blessing.

Ragnok’s eyes widened in pleasure as he stood up and he bowed low, acknowledging the blessing. A moment later, a goblin arrived and they were led from the room and escorted to the doors of the bank and out into Diagon Alley.

After spending several hours shopping, Harry stopped in front of Florean Fortescue’s Ice Cream shop and held up a hand imperiously. As one, they skidded to a halt and Harry threw back the hood on his cloak.

“Look folks, I know there’s a specific reason for the body guards, but do you think it would be possible, if just for a little while, my girlfriend and I can have half a date without the entire Brotherhood sitting at the next table?” he said, exasperated.

Remus and Tonks started laughing, while Hermione pushed her own hood down and managed to look embarrassed.

Then Harry pulled out the big guns...Puppy dog eyes. Giving the adults a piteous look, he waited for them to decide.

Emma finally shook her head and chuckled. “Alright, you two. We’ll be back here in an hour. And I’m sure Tonks will be somewhere nearby. I doubt seriously that you’ll get into much trouble alone in an ice cream shop for an hour.”

Harry and Hermione took seats inside the shop while the other adults, still laughing walked off to various shops to burn an hour.

“Harry, what’s this all about? We’ve had plenty of time together at school and I’m sure we’ll even have some time together during the holiday, since we’re all staying in the same house.” Hermione asked, perplexed by Harry’s behavior.

Harry shook his head in dismay. “I don’t know much about relationships, but I thought it would be nice to make sure we have some time for us. Oh, I’m not talking about sneaking off to snog each other, as fun as that is, but time for us to do things. You know... couple stuff...”

Her expression softened and she eyed Harry, a bit bemused. “Couple stuff?”

He nodded. “You know, dates. Going to the movies, or out to eat. Maybe take a walk in the park. I still want to kiss you until your toes curl, but I thought it would be nice to do other things too. I’d like to be able to sit down and talk about things other than our problems or our plans. Things are going to get real crazy in the next few months and I want to make sure there’s always time for us. Am I making any sense?”

She reached across the table and took his hand. “You’re making a lot of sense.”

He frowned for a moment. “I think your dad’s starting to worry about me. Have you seen the looks he’s been giving me?” he asked her seriously.

Hermione laughed. “He won’t be too hard on you, Harry. He knows Mum and I would never forgive him. But it might be a good idea to talk to him when you can.”

---

Ministry of Magic, Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Office...

Arthur Weasley sat in his chair, uncomfortable and out of sorts as he thought about the last few months. Since the summer, he’d had an uneasy feeling about what was going on in his life. His family seemed to be fracturing and his wife and youngest son had turned into near strangers. And when Ron assaulted Hermione, he’d felt a deep abiding shame that one of his sons could treat a woman so badly.

To top it all off, his sweet, loving wife had become a complete shrew in the last few years.

With a sigh and a last glance at the clock, he stood and went to the office floo to return home. With a flash of green flame, Arthur stepped out into the Burrow.

“Arthur! You aren’t going to believe what those sons of yours have done!” screeched Molly as he



stepped out of the fireplace.

Arthur walked to his chair, dropped into it heavily and listened to Molly rant about Bill, Fred and George. Then she began to complain about the spells that had been cast on Ron and how she had spent most of the day trying to dispel them.

Rubbing his tired eyes, he made a decision. He couldn't do this any more. Standing, he brushed past her and walked back to the fireplace.

"Arthur, are you listening to me?" Molly asked, obviously annoyed.

"No dear, I stopped listening to your ranting years ago," Arthur replied, his lips pressed into a firm line.

"Well?!? What do you plan to do about William? He took Ginny!"

"What do I plan to do? I plan to apologize to my children. I don't know you any more Molly and I don't care to. Doesn't what Ronald tried to do to Hermione bother you in the slightest?" he asked angrily.

"She probably asked for it, running around in those tight fitting muggle clothes. Everyone knows how bad they can be. It was just a misunderstanding that she blew all out of proportion!"

"Oh really? And what about Harry Potter? With the exception of Ronald, our children consider that young man part of this family. He saved our daughters life in her first year! He saved my life last year! What about that?"

"Oh pish posh! Albus would have saved Ginny if Harry hadn't and Albus would have found you in time."

At that point a rainbow colored Ron stormed into the living room. "I don't believe this family! You're fighting over that rich bastard again? Look at me. Look what Fred and George did to me. Look what I'm going through at school. Do you care? No! Everyone has to fight over the bloody Boy-Who-Lived!"

Arthur looked at his youngest son in disgust. With tired sigh, he turned back to the fireplace.

Molly's eyes widened in disbelief as Arthur turned away. "If you leave, don't expect me to take you back!" she all but shrieked at him.

Arthur looked at her sadly. "I know, Molly. Forgiveness became something foreign to you a long time ago."

Tossing the floo powder into the fireplace, he stepped in and returned to his office, the echo of his wife's outraged shriek ringing in his ears.

Digging out an old cot and setting it up, he glanced around the office and shrugged. It would do

for the night. Tomorrow, he'd see about trying to fix things with the rest of his family.

---

Grimmauld Place...

Later that afternoon they returned to Grimmauld Place with their purchases. While everyone was off either hiding or wrapping Christmas presents, Harry went in search of Narcissa and Draco.

He found the two talking quietly in her sitting room. Knocking, he waited patiently for permission to enter before joining them. Narcissa smiled, welcoming him.

"You know Harry, this is your house. You don't have to knock," she said as he joined them.

"That might be true, Mrs. Malfoy, but it certainly wouldn't be polite."

"So what brings you visiting?" she asked.

He handed both her and Draco keys to a Gringotts vault, along with a balance statement. "I've taken the liberty of setting up an account for you both at Gringotts. It might not be as big as the Malfoy fortune, but properly managed, one could live quite comfortably on it."

Draco scowled and crossed his arms.

"Draco, I know we've never gotten along well in the past and our friendship/truce is only a few months old, but I'm not trying to buy anything here," Harry said hotly, watching the blond Slytherin.

Narcissa placed a hand on Draco's arm. "Dray..."

"I know, Mother, I know!" he exclaimed, running a hand through his hair.

"When Sirius named me Head of the Black family it made us cousins of a sort, Draco. I'd like to think we could put our past differences behind us. Besides, I'm going to need your help for what I have planned. I'll need help from both of you, in fact. But by the same token, as family, it's my job to see that you're taken care of."

"Has Mr. Lupin shown you the paperwork I filled out, Harry?" asked Narcissa.

Harry smiled. "Yes, I signed off on them this morning and I'm sure that, within a day or so, Lucius will discover his wife and son have disowned and divorced him."

Both Narcissa and Draco grinned at the thought of what Lucius would do.

Harry ran a hand through his hair. "I want you both to understand one thing. There will be a time, hopefully not too far in the future, when I'll be forced to confront Voldemort and Lucius. I have to kill Voldemort and if Lucius gets in my way..." he left that thought unsaid.

“He will,” Draco said quietly.

Narcissa reached out and grabbed Harry’s hand in her own. “Harry, the man I thought I was marrying didn’t exist. The man who fathered my son was cruel to both of us and has tried to kill you and your friends. I can promise you, I’ll not shed a single tear when the time comes.”

Harry looked at Draco, who nodded his agreement.

“Thank you. I know this hasn’t been an easy time for either of you, and I do know you’ve had to make some serious adjustments in how you live and think.”

“Yes,” Draco drawled, “we’ve made changes, but don’t get all Gryffindor gushy on us, Potter. I’ll admit that Granger is probably the smartest witch I’ve ever met, even if she is a mud... muggle born. But if you tell her I said that, I’ll deny it!”

Harry grinned. He left a few minutes later after telling them that he’d like to see them join the rest of the household at meals, rather than isolating themselves.

---

Dan, Brandy and Potions...

Dan Granger found Harry in the main study on the first floor. From the doorway, he watched as the young man walked around a small ornate box he had purchased earlier in the day. As he circled it, his hands flared with magic and the box glowed brightly.

He waited until Harry finally sat down before interrupting him. “I hoped I’d find in you in here, Harry. Can we talk?”

“Of course, Mr. Granger. Please, take a seat,” Harry said, waving him to one of the comfortable chairs.

Dan walked into the room and sat down. He carried two brandy snifters and a bottle with him. Setting the snifters on the table, he poured two fingers worth in each glass and handed one to Harry, who eyed it suspiciously.

“Napoleon Brandy, Harry. It’s from your own cellar, so it should be perfectly safe. Unlike so many other drinks, Brandy is truly a gift from the gods to civilization.”

Harry cautiously sipped from the large round glass and his face lit up in pleasure.

Dan watched him carefully. When Harry leaned back and began to relax, he pounced. “Harry, I wanted to talk to you about Hermione. I’d like to know what your intentions are towards my daughter.”

Harry paled and took a large swallow of brandy. “Mr. Granger, your daughter means the world to me. I’d rather die than see her hurt in anyway.”

“Yes, I can see that, Harry. I’m more concerned, however, with her future. I hope you can understand that as an only child, Emma and I tend to be overprotective towards her.”

He took another swallow from his glass. “Are you going to ask me to stop seeing her? I respect you and your wife, sir, but I love her and I’m not sure...”

Dan blinked in surprise. “Good lord no, Harry. I’m not going to ask any such thing. I may be an overprotective father, but even I can see that you’re good for each other. You both seem to balance each other out.”

“It does seem that way, sir. But I also know that she’s in a lot of danger by being with me,” Harry replied, taking another swallow from his glass.

“That’s true, but Remus and Tonks explained it to Emma and myself. Basically, we’re in danger anyway because of who and what we are. By being with you, she gains not only the benefit of those who are protecting you, but she gains your protection as well.”

“I think I can understand that, Mr. Granger. Her safety and well-being are very important to me. As far as her future goes, I would like to be there for her as long as she’ll let me. But I know just how smart she is. Someday she’ll realize that herself and move on. Sooner or later she’ll understand what a mistake she’s making by being close to me. I just hope that she’ll allow me to remain her friend. As for her immediate future, you know the danger we all face and you know what we’re doing about it. I can’t say that everything will be perfect, but we’ll be safe,” he concluded, and took another drink of brandy.

“I think you’re being too harsh on yourself. From what I can see, Hermione doesn’t need to find anyone better. My daughter is showing all the same signs that her mother showed when she was dating me. I was too dense to spot them then. But now, watching Hermione, it’s pretty obvious,” Dan told him, refilling both of their glasses.

Harry smiled gratefully and took another large swallow from his glass. “I hope you’re right, Mr. Granger. I’d like nothing better than to be able to someday come to you and your wife and ask for permission to marry her. We have a lot to do before we get to that point, or at least I think we have a lot to do. Hermione has her own ideas, as I’m sure you know. She’s so smart, I can’t help wonder why she’d want to stick around with me.”

“Like I said, I think you’re being unfair to yourself, Harry. One day you’re going to wake up and realize that you actually do deserve to have the same kind of happiness that everyone else has. And if I know my daughter, she’s going to be the one to teach you that lesson.”

Harry blushed and took another gulp from his glass.

Dan refilled their glasses again and then pointed at the ornate box Harry had been working on. “So, what project is this?”

Harry lifted the box proudly and turned it around so Dan could see it better. “This is a Christmas

present I'm working on..."

---

Hermione, Mum and Blinking Lights...

While Dan and Harry sat in the study talking, Hermione went in search of her mother. Finally she located her mother in the sitting room off her parents bedroom.

She tapped on the door lightly. "Mum, can we talk for a moment?"

Emma looked up from a surgical journal she was reading. "Of course, dear. Come in and tell me what's bothering you."

Taking the chair next to her mother, she sat down and looked at her for a moment. "Mum, would you tell me about Nana. Please?"

Emma blinked in surprise. "Nana? I thought you'd want to talk about Harry. Hmm...Nana. Very well, what would you like to know about my mother?"

"Was Nana a little strange at times?"

"Is this about the prophecy you gave, dear?" asked Emma gently.

Hermione looked down at her slippers. "Yes, Mum."

Emma reached for a cup of tea on a nearby table and, taking a sip, she thought for a moment. "Nana was always a little strange, dear. She was a wonderful woman, but she had an uncanny ability to know when I was in trouble."

Hermione poured herself a cup of tea and pulled her legs up under her on the chair. "The day I gave that prophecy, Harry created a charm that he put on a piece of parchment. He said it was a gift he was giving to us, his friends. The parchment was charmed to give each person three minutes with a person from his or her life that had died. Three minutes to say goodbye. Ginny saw her uncles, Luna her mother, I saw Nana... she told me things."

Emma stared at her daughter for a long moment before nodding for her to continue.

"She told me about Harry. She said I was his anchor to the light. She also said she was going to give me a gift. She said I had the gift of sight and she was going to awaken it for me. Then she said some more stuff about Harry and I, before fading out. But I got to say goodbye to her," Hermione said, trying to choke back a sob.

"Is such a thing possible?" asked Emma in a whisper.

Hermione wiped an unshed tear from her eye and nodded. "It's incredibly difficult, but it can be done. And where Harry is concerned, the impossible is often the truth."

“What else did she say about Harry?”

“She said that Harry and I would be famous one day, and that Harry would give me a family to be proud of,” she replied, her face flaming.

Emma nodded and smiled gently at her daughter while considering her words carefully. “My mother was a different sort of woman, Hermione. I loved her to death, but I’d swear there were times when she knew what was happening before it happened. I remember when I first brought your father home. We had only been on a few dates at that point and hadn’t progressed beyond handholding. Nana took your father’s hand in hers and turned to me saying, ‘You’re very lucky to find the right one so early in your life.’ I wasn’t sure what she was talking about then, of course, but it became clear later on.” Emma’s stared into the fire, her eyes unfocused as she remembered the event so long ago.

“When you were born she held you and trembled. She said that you were destined to greatness, but you were only part of a whole, not to be complete until joined with another and together you both would be great. I didn’t understand it then, but I think I’m coming to understand it now. Watching you and Harry together I think I see what she meant,” Emma said softly, turning to look at her daughter.

Hermione thought for a moment. *In a way, it confirms some of what Nana said.* She was startled out of her thoughts when Emma continued.

“When you first came in here tonight, I expected you wanted to talk about Harry. It’s obvious to your father and myself that he cares for you a great deal, even if he has problems telling you about it sometimes.”

Hermione was about to reply when all of the candles in the room went out. Confused, she gestured for her wand and it extended from her holster. “Torca Ignis!” she said. The candles flared to life, lighting the room, then went out again.

“What in the name of Merlin? Torca Ignis!” Hermione cried, igniting the candles again only to have them falter and extinguish a moment later.

Frowning, Hermione decided to use another spell. “*Lumos Flotima!*” An orb of light appeared over her shoulder.

“Mum, I don’t know what’s going on, but we better check it out. I think you should follow me,” Hermione said, heading for the door.

Outside in the hallway Hermione could see that the wall sconces had gone out. Several of the bedroom doors were opened and she saw Draco and Narcissa looking out their doors, their faces lit up by the light from their wands.

“I don’t know what’s going on, but I’ll bet that Harry’s somehow involved,” Hermione murmured to her mother.

Emma suddenly looked worried. “Oh dear. Your father had gone off to have a talk with Harry tonight.”

Hermione looked startled. “A talk? About what?” she asked, almost afraid of the answer.

“Well... you, dear.” Emma said softly.

Hermione winced. From the landing downstairs came the sound of very off-key singing.

“God arrest ye every gentlemen, let muffin you delay...”

“Oh Merlin, what has Daddy done?” she exclaimed in exasperation, rushing for the stairs with her mother hot on her heels.

As they reached the lower landing, the singing stopped and the doors to the study opened. Dan stepped out looking rather smug with himself. From the doorway, Hermione could see Harry sitting in a chair, giggling to himself and hiccupping. With every hiccup, the fire in the fireplace flared.

Dan pointed to the empty bottle of brandy. “Ish empteer. Need anuffa,” he slurred.

“Mum!” Hermione exclaimed. “Your husband’s gotten my boyfriend drunk! No wonder the lights won’t stay on.”

Emma grabbed her husband by the arm, trying very hard to sound stern. “No dear, I think you’ve had enough to drink tonight.”

Harry burped. A whole shelf full of books fell to the floor and a scream came from upstairs. Two minutes later, Remus and Tonks came rushing down the stairs.

“What’s going on?” Tonks shouted. “Our bed started flying!”

Hermione pointed at Harry, who sat smiling at them. He waved gleefully. Only Dan waved back. He hiccupped loudly and all of the lights in the house flared again, only to go out with his next hiccup.

“Thash me buddee,” murmured Dan, then he made a gagging sound and bolted for the nearest bathroom.

“Herm... Herm... Hermiiionee,” Harry called drunkenly, waving at her. Then he slid out of the chair and onto the floor. He burped again and a chair in the corner exploded, showering him in wood shavings.

“Oh Merlin, we’ve got to sober him up before he destroys the place. Tonks, stay with him. Hermione, come into the kitchen and help me brew the potion,” Remus said.

In the kitchen, Remus pulled out a number 10 pewter cauldron and filled it with water. “We’re

going to need some dross root, finely diced, pickled murlap,” he murmured, while Hermione started rooting through the potion ingredients cabinet for what he needed.

“Remus, this doesn’t sound like the standard sobering potion,” Hermione ventured.

“It’s not. This is something that Lily invented. It works better and has fewer side effects.” A few minutes later the potion was simmering on the stove.

“No Harry, I am not going to turn myself into Hermione for you!” Tonks exclaimed from outside the door. Remus and Hermione stared at each other for a moment before bursting into laughter.

Tonks dragged Harry into the kitchen and sat him down on a chair at the table. A minute later, he slid off the chair and was sitting on the floor giggling to him self. Every few seconds the lights would come on, then go off.

“We’re going to need to redecorate the study. It’s a wreck,” Tonks said, shaking her head in amusement.

“I can’t believe my father got Harry drunk! I’m going to kill him!” exclaimed Hermione angrily.

“Not now, Hermione,” Remus said. “Hand me a jigger of that ground Abraxan kidney, then a handful of diced Old Crow’s feet. We’re almost done.”

With the last two ingredients in the potion, it turned a sickly, glowing green color. Remus scooped out a cupful and looked around for Harry.

“Tonks, get him out from under the table so I can dose him,” Remus said in exasperation.

Tonks reached under the table and pulled Harry out. He hiccupped again and Hermione’s hair turned blue, sticking straight out stiffly. Hermione’s eyes flared in outrage and she stamped her foot. “Harry James Potter!”

Remus grabbed Harry, pinching off his nose and put the cup to his mouth. Harry’s eyes bugged in his head as he swallowed and steam seemed to drift out of every pore of his body with a loud hissing sound. When the steam stopped, he shook his head and looked at Hermione in confusion.

“What happened to you hair?” he asked innocently.

“I don’t know who to be mad at, you or my father! And look at what you did to my hair!”

“I did that?”

Remus and Tonks exchanged a look and Remus grabbed another cup of the potion. “I think we should get this to Dan, while Hermione and Harry have their discussion,” he said.

When Hermione backed Harry into a corner, Tonks started laughing. Remus rolled his eyes and dragged her from the room, leaving Harry to his fate.



“Um... Hermione? I can fix it, honestly.”

“You’d better!”

Harry’s hand flared and he waved it at Hermione’s hair, returning it to normal. Then inspiration hit him, or perhaps it was merely a suicidal impulse.

“Hermione, would you like me to change it’s color? I can even make it less bushy if you like.”

Hermione’s eyes narrowed and her gaze turned steely. “Are you telling me you don’t like the color of my hair?”

*OH SHIT! WRONG THING TO SAY!* His mind screamed at him as Mount Hermione rumbled.

“No... nothing like that, Hermione, honestly! I just thought that since I could change it I’d make the offer, you know? I’m not trying to insult you. I love your hair and it’s color, really! Um... Oh bloody hell,” he muttered in defeat. “Just shoot me and put me out of your misery. Are you sure you don’t come with an instruction manual or something?” he asked, slumping into a chair.

Hermione decided to take mercy on him. After all, it was her father who’d set out to get him drunk. “Go to bed, Harry. I want to have words with my father.”

Hermione followed him to his bedroom to make sure he was going to sleep before she set off to find her father.

She stepped into her parent’s bedroom, her eyes narrowed in anger. Both her parents were sitting on the edge of the bed and Dan had his head in his hands. Remus and Tonks stood nearby, looking concerned.

“What’s going on now?” she asked loudly.

Dan winced and Emma looked up at her daughter warningly.

“Lilly’s sober up potion works for Muggles, but it apparently doesn’t get rid of the hangover,” Remus said softly.

“We could try a hang over remedy on him, but who knows what side effects it might have?” quipped Tonks with a grin.

Dan looked up at the three adults and his daughter. “You four are evil and must be destroyed. You’re enjoying this far too much.”

Hermione smiled, her eyes dancing gleefully. “Goodnight, Daddy,” she said, just a touch too loudly. “I love you.” When her father cringed, grabbed his head even tighter and groaned, she laughed and turned for the door.

She left the room, slamming the door on her way out and was secure in the knowledge that her

father was paying for his crime.

---

Christmas Eve, Hogwarts, school of Witchcraft and Wizardry...

Professor McGonagall looked up from her desk as Filius Flitwick entered her office.

“Filius! I have been trying to get in touch with you for three days now!” Minerva exclaimed.

“Why? What was so important, Minerva? You knew I was going to London for a few days.”

“We needed you to dispel a charm.”

“A charm? What kind of charm did you run across that you couldn’t dispel?”

“It was a sticking charm cast by Mr. Potter.”

“Minerva, what in the name of Merlin gave you the idea that I could possibly dispel anything that boy casts? Did the charm finally wear off?”

“Yes, at about five o’clock this morning. Mr. Potter had stuck both Professor Snape and the Headmaster to the ceiling in front of the Entrance Hall doors. Quite a drafty spot, I must say. The Headmaster had a few minute warning in which to cast a cushioning charm. Professor Snape wasn’t as lucky. His first clue was the floor rushing up to him. Broke his nose, I’m afraid.”

Filius slumped down on his chair, laughing. Minerva shook her head and sighed in exasperation.

“It’s all very well for you, Filius, but do you have any idea what it’s like to be woke up by Severus cursing the portraits off the walls? Peeves had a field day throwing stink bombs at him and even the Bloody Baron refused to help control the poltergeist.”

Flitwick made a desperate grab for the arms of his chair and missed. Sliding to the floor, he wrapped his arms around himself and howled with laughter.

“Merlin bless him,” Filius gasped out.

“Who?” Minerva asked, puzzled.

“Harry Potter!”

---

Malfoy Manor...

Lucius snarled and kicked the body of the dead house elf across the room. The elf had just returned from one of the many letter drops that allowed Lucius to still conduct some business while on the run. This time the elf had brought back something totally unexpected.

It was a clipping of the legal notices from a recent Daily Prophet that someone had sent him. Scanning the small print, he'd been enraged to discover that the Head of the noble and ancient house of Black had dissolved his marriage to Narcissa, according to the old family laws.

Under the family laws, the Head of House could dissolve a marriage at the request of his family member. In the case of children born of that marriage, both families were given the option to adopt the child into their family.

What it really meant was that Lucius could appear in court, asking to adopt his own son, or Narcissa could appear and ask the same thing. Since Lucius was an escaped convict, appearing in court was the last thing he wanted to do.

Lucius snarled again and kicked the dead elf once more.

"Damn that woman!" he shouted.

At that moment Wormtail stuck his head around the door. "Ah, Lucius," Wormtail began, only to stop when he noticed the man looming over the body of the dead elf.

"What?" Lucius exclaimed, his head whipping up to glare at Wormtail.

Wormtail smirked. Word had already gotten around in the Death Eater ranks that Lucius' cousin had bankrupted him.

"Something vexes thee, Lucius?" Wormtail asked with a grin. Kicking a fellow Death Eater when he or she was down was almost as much fun as torturing muggles in Wormtail's book and he very much enjoyed kicking Lucius.

Lucius glared at him for a moment. "That bitch divorced me! I'll find her and peel her skin from her bones! I'll set her on fire and cook her slowly!"

"While you're thinking up such wonderful entertainments, you might want to also consider that our Master would like to speak with you," Wormtail said, openly grinning now.

Lucius rushed from the room, heading for Voldemort's chambers in the basement of the building.

Voldemort watched as Lucius entered his chambers, noting that the man was covered with blood.

"Playing again, Lucius?" Voldemort sneered.

"Punishing a house elf, my Lord. He brought me some disturbing news."

"Ah, nothing too disturbing I trust?"

"My wife has divorced me, my Lord."

"Pity, that. I told you that you should have killed her last year. How fared the attempt to kidnap

your son?"

"I'm afraid Rodolphus's Slytherins failed to kidnap him, my Lord."

Voldemort's eyes hardened. "I will deal with Rodolphus later. Now, tell me what you have managed to accomplish in the last month and a half."

"My Lord, we have taken control of two muggle armies. Once you give us the word, both armies will move out against the civilian authorities, capturing key positions. With control of these armies and a little luck, we should be able to capture the muggle government and force them to surrender in short order."

"Excellent, Lucius. I will tell you when it's time to unleash my puppet army. Now go. Oh, and send Rodolphus to me."

"Yes, my Lord," Lucius said, backing away and bowing.

---

## Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Office...

Arthur Weasley sat hunched at his desk in his quiet office, carefully writing a letter to his oldest son. His staff had left for the day, something for which he was thankful. The looks he'd been receiving for the last few days were wearing on his nerves and he wasn't in the mood to answer the questions he saw in their eyes.

His clothes were wrinkled and his hair was unkempt looking. His desk was littered with files, teacups and leftover food. For the slower members of his staff who were unable to put all of the signs together, the cot tucked into the corner of his office spelled it out for them. He was living in the office these days and while many speculated on the reason, none wanted to ask the usually mild-tempered man about his sudden change in residence.

Setting his quill aside, Arthur rubbed a hand over his balding head and sighed. Picking up the letter he'd just written, he read it through quickly.

*Bill,*

*It's my hope that you will share this letter with Fred, George and Ginny, as there are things that the four of you must know. I can only hope that, once you know the truth, you can forgive me. Merlin knows I doubt I will ever be able to forgive myself.*

And he'd told them all of it. The lies, the theft, the maneuvering to assure that Ron and Harry became friends, nothing was left out. Picking up his quill once more, he dipped the tip in ink and finished the letter.

*I've already written a statement of fact that I intend to submit to Amelia Bones. Your mother and I have broken the law and we'll pay for it. Worse, we have broken Harry's trust. Your mother*

*doesn't see it that way, however, which brings me to my next subject.*

*I have moved out of the Burrow and am currently staying in my office. When I arrived home the day Ginny left, your mother and I fought. I won't go into all the details here, but you should know that, while I may be willing to put up with many things from your mother, striking one of our children is not one of them.*

*I've made many mistakes in my life, but allowing myself to be manipulated by Dumbledore has been one of the worst. My compliance has torn our family apart, and I don't know if we can ever come together again.*

*I don't know if any of you can forgive me, or even if I deserve it, but I do so hope to hear from you.*

*All my love,  
Dad*

Rolling the parchment, he sealed it and, before he could change his mind, he sent it off. Looking around his office, he thought vaguely about dinner but nothing appealed. He was too tired anyway.

Dragging his cot out from the corner, he climbed in and thought longingly of his children, the Burrow and, strangely, Harry. As images of summers past danced behind his closed eyes, images of family meals taken outside under the stars and Quidditch matches that had lasted for hours, the enormity of just what he'd lost became a crushing weight upon his heart.

In the darkness of his office, Arthur Weasley wept for what he had lost.

---

Grimmauld Place...

Harry had spent the entire day locked in his bedroom. Dobby brought him something to eat, but he wouldn't let anyone into the room. Hermione was annoyed, but Harry said he was working on Christmas gifts, so she couldn't complain too much. Finally, just before dinner, the house rumbled and shook for a good minute, and then Harry emerged from his room looking inordinately pleased with himself and joined everyone for dinner.

"Alright there, Harry?" asked Remus.

"Couldn't be better, Remus. I finally figured out what I needed to do," replied Harry, still looking smug.

"Was that you shaking the house a moment ago?" asked Hermione. Tonks looked at him, curious about his answer.

"Yeah, I'm sorry about that. I didn't think extending the spell would make the place shake like that," he said, looking embarrassed.

“What spell?” Hermione asked eagerly.

He looked at her for a moment, and then shrugged. “Well Hermione, it’s like this, I can show you the spell, or you can wait until tomorrow morning to see it in action. I did promise you that I would show you my notes on it, but I’ll give you the notes when I show you your present.”

“I’ll wait then,” she told him, smiling.

After dinner, Harry and Hermione went off to ‘The Muggle Room’, a room that Dan and Remus had set up with a television, stereo and a DVD player. The two sat for several hours watching Ghostbusters and Scrooged before heading off to bed. Tomorrow was Christmas morning and they wanted to be up early.

---

### Christmas at Grimmauld Place...

The next morning Harry awoke early and headed downstairs with both arms loaded down with presents. He placed the presents under the Christmas tree and went into the kitchen.

Christmas for Harry has been a very hit and miss affair. Last year he’d spent it here in Grimmauld with Sirius. Previous years it was either with the Dursley’s, in which case there was no celebration for him, or at Hogwarts.

Getting a cup of tea from the kitchen he went back into the living room and sat down on a couch to look at the tree that Dobby and Winky had put up for them. His pile wasn’t the only one under the tree. Apparently several other people had put some presents under it as well.

“Harry?” asked a familiar voice.

“Happy Christmas, Hermione,” he replied with a gentle smile.

“Happy Christmas, Harry. How do you want to handle the presents? In my family we always waited until after we have breakfast.”

Harry pondered that for a moment. “That sounds fine to me. I don’t really have any holiday traditions to follow. Before I went to Hogwarts, I wasn’t allowed to have presents, or Christmas. And since Hogwarts, Christmas was either at school or here.”

His words still shocked her, even though she had expected something of that nature. In some ways, while she was helping Harry to still come to grips with his own past, she hadn’t yet addressed his issues herself. There was so much she wanted to help him learn and experience.

“The Dursley’s never let you participate at Christmas?”

“Oh, they did, but only as a way of showing their contempt. In my fourth year they sent me a present for Christmas. I tore open the box eagerly, only to find they had sent me a tissue,” he

replied, his tone neutral.

Hermione shuddered at the mental image. “Well in that case, I suggest you ask Remus what kind of holiday traditions your parents followed. If you don’t like them, start your own,” she said.

He smiled up at her. “I like that idea. And I think I’ll start another new tradition right now. Care to join me?” he asked her while he stood up. Perplexed, she nodded and followed him as he stepped into the kitchen.

Harry told her to sit down while he started pulling pots and pans out, then ingredients. In a short amount of time he had pancakes, bacon, eggs; a full breakfast cooking, right down to the biscuits. Hermione marveled at his expertise in the kitchen and it was even more astounding as he never once used magic to cook anything. She started setting the silverware and dishes out as he piled food onto platters.

“Put out two extra settings today, Hermione,” he told her.

She looked at him curiously, but put out the extra settings anyway.

“Dobby? Winky?” Harry called. A second later there were two pops and the two house elves appeared. Both looked at Harry, wearing an apron and cooking and their ears drooped in dismay.

“Master Harry! We is sorry! We didn’t know you is hungry!” wailed Winky.

Harry pulled the last of the food off of the fire and turned to kneel next to Winky. “Do you know what today is?” he asked the distraught elf gently.

“Christmas day, sir.”

Harry glanced up at the people entering the kitchen, then turned his attention back to Winky.

“Yes Winky, it’s Christmas, and that means that today I am going to cook breakfast for my family, including you and Dobby. I would really like it if you and Dobby would join us at meals from here on, but especially today. I’d like you to enjoy the day with everyone else.”

Dobby’s tennis ball sized eyes filled with tears and he stepped over to stand next to the trembling Winky. “Harry Potter sir, we is elves. We cannot eat with your family,” he told Harry softly.

“Yes you’re elves and you work for me and my family, but you are also a part of my family and always will be,” he told the little elves.

Hermione walked over to put a hand on Harry’s shoulder. “Dobby, I think Harry is saying he considers you to be family just like he considers the rest of us.”

Winky looked up at Hermione, her lower lip trembling. “Is true, Miss Hermy?”

“It’s true, Winky. Harry has room in his heart for both of you,” replied Hermione softly.

Harry took Winky's hand, and then reached for Dobby's. He then led both elves to seats next to his. After they had taken their seats, Hermione grabbed him in a tight embrace.

"You're a good man Harry Potter," she whispered.

The two elves were shy at the table, but Harry kept offering them food as the platters were passed around. Winky finally managed to get up the courage to ask Harry if he would give her the recipe for the biscuits.

During the meal Harry tried to grill Remus on what Christmas traditions his parents had, but he came up with very little information. Remus couldn't remember anything different, but he also had to admit that he never was there for Christmas Eve or Christmas morning. He did offer one anecdote concerning Sirius stuffing a five month old Harry into a Christmas stocking and hanging him over the mantle of the fireplace, much to Lily's annoyance.

After breakfast Harry let the two elves levitate the dishes into the sink where they would be cleaned automatically, then he grabbed both elves by the hands and led them into the living room where the tree was.

Once he reached the tree, he knelt next to his pile and pulled out two packages that he handed to Dobby and Winky. Both were surprised and ecstatic over their presents. Dobby received several skeins of yarn and Winky a magical cookbook.

After giving the elves their gifts, Harry pulled out two identical packages that were roughly the size of a small trunk. He gave one package to Hermione and one to Remus.

Remus tore into the wrapping revealing an enameled box with his name monogrammed on it. The box contained a handle for easy carrying. When he looked up at Harry, curious, Harry gestured for Hermione to open her package. Her present was nearly identical to the one he gave Remus except that Harry had Hermione's name monogrammed along the top of the box using her birthstone.

Both looked at Harry, unsure. He smiled and motioned for them to open the box. Inside each was a row of books.

Hermione looked at the titles, and then arched an eyebrow at him. "Harry? *The Joys of Fly Fishing* , *Bass Fishing for Beginners* and *Trout Cooking* ? Are you trying to tell me something?"

"He must be, Hermione. My box is full of books on dog grooming!" quipped Remus.

Harry laughed. "No, the box randomly selects books when you don't think of a particular subject. Close the box, think of a subject, and then open the box again."

Remus and Hermione looked stunned, then they eagerly closed their boxes and reopened them. Remus ran his fingers reverently along the titles. Hermione sat stunned looking at the twenty different volumes of *Hogwarts: A History* .

"What else do I get my two favorite bookworms but their own personal shelf of requirement in a



box?” Harry asked in a light tone.

The next thing Harry knew he was engulfed in a double embrace. Both Hermione and Remus had grabbed him, cutting off his air supply. When they released him, Harry handed Hermione and Remus a copy of the notebook he had used to build the boxes. He cautioned them that the books would only exist as long as they were in the same room as the box. He hoped to increase the range of the box eventually, but room range was a good start in his opinion.

All in all, it was the best Christmas Harry could ever remember.

---

Christmas at Bill Weasley’s Place...

Fred, George, Bill and Ginny were opening their gifts when a knock came at the door. When all eyes turned to Bill, he shrugged in bewilderment.

“I’ll get it,” Ginny said, standing and heading to the door.

“Did either of you invite someone over?” Bill asked.

“No,” the twins replied in unison.

Ginny walked back in the room looking pale and a bit shaken.

Bill stood up, concerned. “What’s wrong, squirt?”

“We have company,” she said, as a figure followed her into the room.

“Dad?” Bill choked, staring at the man before him.

“Hello Bill,” Arthur said quietly. “I’m sorry for just showing up like this but...” He trailed off, not knowing what to say.

Ginny looked at her brothers and sighed. The anger behind their eyes was plain to see and, while she knew it was justified, she also knew that she wanted her family back, or at least as much of it as possible. She’d given up on Ron weeks ago. The bloody bastard wasn’t worth the effort. Her mother...well, she’d given up on her mother when she’d struck Bill.

“It’s good to see you, dad,” Ginny said softly.

Arthur grimaced and then tried to smile at his daughter. “I sent a letter,” he started.

“I got it,” Bill said.

“And he showed it to us,” George said coldly.

“I see.” Arthur cleared his throat. “I shouldn’t have come, but when I didn’t hear from you...”

“What do you want?” Fred asked, his tone matching that of his twin.

“I thought that perhaps we could talk,” Arthur said. “I thought that if you had any questions, maybe I could try to answer them for you.” As the silence stretched out, Arthur began to fidget. Finally, unable to stand the quiet room any longer, he raked a hand through his hair. “I’m sorry. Maybe this was a bad idea. Happy Christmas.”

When he turned and began to walk to the door, Ginny jumped forward and grabbed his coat. “Wait,” she said. When her father turned around, she smiled at him, and then turned to face her brothers. “If I thought I could get away with it, I’d hex all three of you,” she exclaimed. “Dad’s at least making an effort! The least we could do is talk to him.”

“Ginny,” Bill said quietly, staring at Arthur, “you know what he’s done. Not just to our family, but to Harry.”

“Yes, I know. I also know that I want my family back, or as much of it as I can get. For Merlin’s sake, it’s Christmas!” she said, stomping her foot and glaring at her brothers.

“Gin,” George began.

“Don’t ‘Gin’ me, George Weasley. What would it hurt to listen to what he has to say? And I don’t know about you three, but I have some questions I’d like to ask him and I’m not likely to get another chance anytime soon, once school starts.”

“It’s all right, Ginny,” Arthur said, placing a hand on her shoulder. “You can ask me anything. I’m staying at the office, so you can pop in over the holiday and we’ll have lunch and visit.”

“No,” Bill said, scowling, “she’s right, dad. We all have questions and you’re the only one who can answer them. You might as well stay.”

“What?” Fred exclaimed.

“Bill, you have to be joking,” George said, staring at his older brother as if he’d suddenly grown another head.

“Oh shut it, you two. After reading his letter you both said you had questions you wanted to ask him. Well, now’s your chance.” Bill then turned to Arthur. “You might as well make yourself comfortable, Dad. It’s going to be a long day.”

---

Christmas Evening at Grimmauld Place...

Hermione was heading to bed when she heard a noise coming from upstairs. The third floor of Grimmauld was largely unused except for the muggle room. Curious, she climbed the stairs to the dimly lit corridor above and noticed a light coming from under one of the doors.

She paused by the door for a moment, listening. The sounds were definitely coming from inside the room. She was about to open the door when she stopped. Whoever was in the room was obviously upset about something and she wasn't sure if she should disturb them.

Finally she mustered her courage and opened the door. A single candle lit the room. In front of the wide windows stood Harry. Startled he hastily wiped at his eyes.

“Hermione w-w-what are you doing here?” he stammered.

She stepped up behind him and wrapped her arms around him. “What’s bothering you?”

“Look at it,” he said, gesturing out the large window. In the distance, Big Ben could be seen, the city alight with holiday lights even at this late hour of the night.

“In a few short months this will be a ruin, lit by fire. All the people who’ll die Hermione! So many...” he choked up and she tightened her grip on him.

“Can you save them all?” she asked him softly.

“N-n-no, I can’t,” he replied and let loose with a sob.

Hermione pulled him away from the window towards a nearby couch. She sat him down and held him as he cried softly on her shoulder. He was the most powerful wizard the world had ever seen, and in the face of prophecy he was still powerless to prevent the coming catastrophe.

He calmed in her embrace. He buried his head in her shoulder and breathed deeply. Something about her scent he found enticing. Lifting his head off her shoulder, he looked into her eyes. “What would I do without you? In the past year you’ve come to mean more to me than anyone else I know,” he whispered.

She blushed. Then she shuddered as he trailed soft kisses along her neck and up to her lips. Snow began to fall outside the window but neither noticed. They remained in each other’s embrace for some time before returning to their own beds. Neither was ready to take their relationship to the next level yet.

---

## The Boxing Day Meeting...

The day after Christmas started slowly. It was a dreary day with a cold, biting rain. Even with many of Grimmauld’s fireplaces roaring, the chill seemed to permeate the building. Harry slept in that morning, comfortable under his heavy blankets. He would have stayed there except for the fact that Hermione attacked him mercilessly.

With a little over an hour to go before his guests started to arrive, Hermione burst into his bedroom. She had a maniacal gleam in her eye. She rushed over to Harry’s bed and threw back the blankets, exposing his feet. Then she gently grabbed one of them and started to tickle it. He was

awake in an instant and howling as he tried to get away from her. He finally fell out of the bed when she released his foot and she collapsed on the bed, laughing.

“Hermione!” he exclaimed. “Are you barmy? What did you do that for?”

Hermione sat up and smoothed out her skirt, then she smiled at him. “Remus told me that both your parents were only ticklish on the bottoms of their feet. I’ve spent hours massaging your legs and your shoulders and you’ve never shown a single sign of being ticklish! But now I know your weakness, Potter!”

“I may be ticklish on my feet, but you’re ticklish in a lot more places!” Harry growled. Then he blinked in surprise as he noticed Hermione suddenly blushing like crazy. He sat for a moment, puzzled, until he realized he hadn’t put on pajamas last night. He’d gone to sleep in just his boxers.

Standing, he looked at her and smiled slyly. “I need to get dressed, Hermione. Unless you want to help?”

She stood, her face flaming and tried to maintain her dignity. “Ask me another day and I might give you a different answer. Right now you need to get dressed and get ready to meet with your guests.”

“I’ll look forward to that day,” he said softly. “And to the day when I can return the favor.”

Her blush deepened. She walked over and kissed him on the cheek before turning and running from the room. Harry stood, shaking his head in amusement.

As ten o’clock rolled around Harry’s guests began to arrive via their portkeys in the main foyer. Winky stood by taking their coats, while Dobby directed them all into the main dining room, which had been expanded to fit everyone.

Harry walked into the room after everyone had arrived and looked around at his guests; Remus, Tonks, Hermione and her parents, Amelia and Susan Bones, Terry Boot and his parents, Professors McGonagall and Flitwick, Danni McNeil, Ginny, Fred, George and Bill Weasley, Narcissa and Draco Black, Neville and his Grandmother, Luna and her father. As they all took seats, Dobby and Winky served drinks and placed some platters of snacks on the table.

“Before I begin, I’d like to thank each of you for coming today. Some of you are going to be surprised and shocked by what you’ll hear. Some of you know most of the story, and a few know it all. Today was supposed to be a day when I told you all about a secret government investigation into the criminal activities of Albus Dumbledore and various others. Criminal activities which involved theft, conspiracy, child abuse and even attempted murder. Things have changed, however.

“The criminal activity of Dumbledore and his cronies mean nothing now. Everything has changed and now I have to put a question to every one of you. Quite simply, do you wish to be alive in six

months time? Something bad is going to happen and each and every one of you is going to be given a choice to protect yourselves and your family. Or you can leave right now, no questions asked, although you'll be unable to discuss what you heard here today with anyone.

“Let me start by turning this meeting over to Remus Lupin, who will explain exactly what we're dealing with and why I'm taking the steps I'm taking.”

Harry sat next to Hermione, who reached out and gripped his hand tightly in her own. He had divulged his entire plan to her before they'd left Hogwarts. Then it had seemed like a dream, today it would be like the snowball teetering on the top of the mountain, slowly making its way down.

Remus stood and cleared his throat. “I'm assuming that Harry's managed to capture everyone's attention and no one wishes to leave.” When no one moved, he smiled. “Very well then. What we have is a problem involving three distinct and unique prophecies from three unique sources.

“The first prophecy, made shortly before Harry was born, could have applied to either Harry or Neville Longbottom.”

Neville sat up straight in his chair and stared at Harry, who grinned sheepishly at him. Remus noted Neville's reaction as well.

“Don't worry, Neville. Voldemort chose Harry to be his adversary, not you. We know that because Voldemort marked Harry with his curse scar. The prophecy goes as follows.

*“THE ONE WITH THE POWER TO VANQUISH THE DARK LORD APPROACHES... BORN TO THOSE WHO HAVE THRICE DEFIED HIM, BORN AS THE SEVENTH MONTH DIES...AND THE DARK LOARD WILL MARK HIM AS HIS EQUAL, BUT HE WILL HAVE POWER THE DARK LORD KNOWS NOT...AND EITHER MUST DIE AT THE HAND OF THE OTHER FOR NEITHER CAN LIVE WHILE THE OTHER SURVIVES... THE ONE WITH THE POWER TO VANQUISH THE DARK LORD APPROACHES...”*

“Yes, that means what you think it means. Harry must kill Voldemort, or die in the attempt.”

When Harry felt Hermione's hand tremble in his own, he released it and put his arm around her shoulder. She leaned against him for comfort.

“The second prophecy comes by way of the Hogwarts Sorting hat's song this past September.

*“A warning, united I told last year,*

*Ignore you did, my words so clear.*

*And now light dims and darkness falls,*

*Hogwarts to ashes 'tis the end o' all.*

*The sunset comes, it looms so near*

*Evil will spread with rule and fear.*

*The light falters, and hope undone.*

*Sunset comes with a darkening sun.*

*From blackest night will beacon burn,*

*To an emerald land all hope will turn.*

*The land will burn and death bells ring,*

*From the ashes of all will a hero spring,*

*Brotherhood arising, legends of yore,*

*Old power awakes and so much more.*

*Legends renewed, his spirit unbroken,*

*The evil's bane these words are spoken.*

“This second prophecy clearly suggests that something dire will happen to Hogwarts, most likely during this school year. And it, in turn, leads us to the third and final prophecy, which was exposed only in the last month.

*“THE BASTION OF LIGHT WILL FALL IN THE TIME OF THE BULL...AND THE CHOSEN CHILD MUST FLEE THE ISLE OF MYRDDIN'S BIRTH...DARKNESS WILL ENGULF THE LAND AND THE REALM OF Uther's SON WILL BURN...AS LIGHT IS SWALLOWED BY DARK THE DEFENDER MUST WATCH FROM A FAR...THE BASTION OF LIGHT WILL FALL IN THE TIME OF THE BULL...”*

“Again, we know the chosen child to be Harry, and the first part of this prophecy seems to agree with the part about Hogwarts burning in the second prophecy. In short, ladies and gentlemen, this third prophecy is the direst of all because it clearly says that Voldemort will come to conquer England sometime during late April or May, the time of the Bull.”

Remus stopped and passed out written copies of all three prophecies for everyone to read. Terry's father, John, raised a hand. Remus nodded to him.

“Excuse me, Mr. Lupin, I'm just a muggle who married a witch. If Harry's the one to go after Voldemort, why doesn't he just go do it and get it over with?”

“That's a good question, Mr. Boot. The short answer is, he can't. We're dealing with a prophecy conflict here. Due to the way Harry was raised, he has put the first prophecy into conflict. The first prophecy clearly stated that Harry and Voldemort would be equals. Harry has no equal in the Wizarding world in terms of raw power. And until Voldemort can reach Harry's level, they can't

face each other. The prophecy would prevent it. Should Harry try to force the issue...”

“Imagine every atom of your body exploding outwards at the speed of light,” muttered Harry.

“Total protonic reversal,” quipped Hermione.

“Ok, important safety tip. Don’t cross the streams,” added Dan.

Emma rounded on all three of them. “Will you three please stop quoting movie lines? This is serious!”

Remus smiled lightly. “Easy Emma, a little levity never hurts. But all jokes aside, no one is sure exactly what would happen if you tried to force a prophecy in conflict. There are records of conflicting prophecies in the past, but they’ve always had their conflicts resolved before the prophecy took effect.”

“Excuse me Remus, but what makes you so sure that Harry is stronger than Voldemort at this point?” asked Professor Flitwick.

“There are several indicators, Filius, but I think the key one is Harry underwent a much delayed Matura Magicus this past summer, which lasted for fifteen days...that’s three hundred and sixty hours. Then there’s the fact that he can manipulate spells that have already been cast, see and manipulate auras, both on people and objects...I could go on, but I think most of you are catching my drift here,” Remus replied softly.

He then looked at Harry, who nodded in thanks before standing up to address everyone again.

“So there you have it. Sometime in the time of Taurus, Voldemort is going to conquer England, muggle and Wizarding worlds alike. According to prophecy, I have to leave the country and watch England burn from a distance. Well, I don’t like that very much and I’m not going to go alone. Each of you and your families will be coming with me. And each of you will be helping me to save more than just we few.

“At the end of this meeting, you will all receive a package detailing what we need you to do. Also in the package will be personal portkeys for everyone in your immediate family, which will bring you all here. Finally, certain select individuals will also be given access to funds to allow them to buy the materials and help they’ll need to accomplish their tasks.

“I want to be perfectly clear just how serious I am about this. As of today, Remus has spent more than five million galleons setting up our sanctuary. That sanctuary will contain housing, a school and a hospital. It’s being constructed even as I tell you about it.”

Quite a number of people sat up at that pronouncement.

“I’ll be passing out envelopes with your names on them. In each envelope you will find a basic outline of what we need for you to do to help make this plan work. I want each of you to read it carefully, think about how it might be improved, then come see me. If you’re stumped about how

to proceed, talk to Remus, Fred or George Weasley. They're our experts at sneaking around.

"In a few moments we'll break up this meeting and lunch will be served. Please take your time and enjoy your meal. There's a library on the second floor if you wish to look anything up and I'll be here to answer any questions for you all day. I urge you all to consider staying over for a day or two so we can have ample time to discuss what needs to be done. We have plenty of spare bedrooms." Harry looked each person in the eye, and then sat down.

The room broke out into a buzz as people started reading their letters. Harry sagged in his chair and bit his lip nervously. The easy part was over and the difficult part was now beginning. The plan was in the hands of the people who would be exercising it. It was make or break time.

Hermione rubbed his thigh gently under the table as they both watched and waited.

---

### **Authors Notes:**

To the person who asked to use our t-shirt sayings to place on real t-shirts to sell, we wouldn't advise it. It's not that we mind so much as the fact that, unless you're just DYING to meet JKR's lawyers, it really isn't such a good idea. If you make any money using her work (in this case, the Potterverse), you'll find yourself sued rather quickly and we are NOT responsible in any way, shape or form.

We thought the Headmaster's motives were obvious enough by now. He's after fame, for the most part. He doesn't want to be Minister of Magic or anything like that. He wants his name to go down in history...he wants to be remembered as a greater wizard than Merlin, a wizard who's killed TWO dark wizards. Yes, he wants Voldemort to die, but it's not so much to "save the world" as it is to make a name for himself.

Many of you think Harry's leg is going to hamper him. In some respects you're right...but then again... You'll find out...but not until the sequel (aren't we evil?) so you might as well stop asking (Evil Cackle) :D

To the reviewer who mentioned writer's block, may a thousand fleas infest your armpits if you've jinxed us! :p However, one note on that subject. If you write yourself an outline, you'll do a lot to avoid that horrid condition.

How do we write so fast? No sleep, much caffeine and sore fingers. Oh, and a good outline!

Ah yes, the "Big Plan". Well, you've got a few hints of it here. You'll get more as the story continues.

Hrm...the "emasculatation of Hermione"? We weren't aware she had balls. Damn, Harry's going to be surprised, isn't he? Yes, we're kidding. We don't feel that acknowledging her desire for Harry, while still being annoyed at what her hormones can do, in any way weakens her. You're welcome to your opinion of course. We just thought we'd clarify our own.



Oh, and to all of those who guessed the leaving date wrongly (New Year, right after boxing day, etc), all we can say is: NEENER NEENER! :p We were rather surprised at some of the research some of you went to in order to find the (wrong) answer, but honestly, sometimes a cigar is just a cigar...and the “Time of the Bull” is Taurus, April/May :D

We’re going to cut the A/N short this time around. We want to get this posted sometime tonight. If we didn’t answer your question here and you really want an answer, ask it on our Yahoo group. If you’re not a member, you can find the address on the Author’s homepage link.

### **Pet Peeves:**

Obsessive Detail!!!! Just when I think I hit pay dirt and find a nice long story, it turns out that the author has spent sixty percent of the chapters describing the texture and weave, plus color of the robes Harry is buying. Is it really necessary for an author to tell us that he bought forty two rainbow colored, glow in the dark, condoms, thirty pairs of socks with optional toe holes, two hundred pairs of boxers, sixty eight pairs of slacks with bell bottoms, made from a fine weave denim with buttons instead of a zipper, but there’s a zipper in the back in case of emergencies, and each pocket is enchanted to spew donuts on command. The belt loops are rated to hold two and a half tons of weight, and on every other Thursday the slacks will ring like bells, unless it’s a full moon at which point they hum a cute little ditty.

Am I making my point? A trip to Diagon Alley shouldn’t consume more than a chapter, hell, it could be done in two paragraphs. The same could be said for Christmas gifts. We describe a few gifts which we feel help enhance the emotional depth of the story, but never see the need to list every blipping gift that is handed out.

Oh yeah, here is another clue boys and girls! Diagon Alley is not the Wizarding World version of an international arms black market. I don’t see how this shopping center suddenly holds everything from body forming armor to swords, battle axes, tanks and nuclear submarines. Maybe Ollivanders has a backroom where he is developing biological weapons and Gringotts is really a front for ELF, the Militant Elf Liberation Front.

That’s it, folks. We hope you’ve enjoyed it. Chapter 13 is being written and will be up soon.

Bob and Alyx

## **Sunset Over Britain**

### **A Traitor's Farewell**

#### **Standard Disclaimer:**

Scene II, act I.

Hermione walks into the room and stops in surprise. At center stage is Ron, sitting in an electric chair and Harry is busy strapping him in.

Ron: “Are you sure this is what they meant in Muggle Studies when they talked about learning about elektrikity?”

Harry: “Trust me, Ron, this is the best way to learn about it. Now, say the words please.”

Ron: “Ahem...Bob and Alyx are insisting that you understand they are not JK Rowling... Hey, Hermione what’s that thing?”

Hermione: “It’s an electrified butt plug, Ron. Just relax. It won’t hurt too much.”

---

#### **Sunset over Britain**

#### **Chapter 13**

---

Grimmauld Place...

Harry watched as the meeting slowly broke up and the crowd formed into tight knots of people. He had assigned them into teams and each person sought out members from their own team. The Outcasts, along with Professors McGonagall and Flitwick, congregated around Hermione.

Harry expected to have to meet with each team either today or tomorrow, so he retreated to his private study. Hermione would bring up the Outcasts first.

Five minutes later, Hermione led the group into the study. He looked up, smiling, as everyone grabbed a seat where ever possible. Flitwick, surprisingly, took a seat on the floor and just looked up at Harry in amazement.

“Harry, is what they said about your Matura true? And can you truly alter auras?” squeaked the little charms Professor.

Harry smiled briefly and, concentrating for a moment, he caused every wand in the room to light up. With a shrug he extinguished them.

“Bloody marvelous!” piped Flitwick, clapping his hands exuberantly while Harry grinned in amusement.

Still smiling Harry turned to address the group as a whole. “You’re all part of the Hogwarts evacuation team. Each of you has a specific role to play and none of this will happen until its time. In the meantime, our job will be to prepare a place to carry out the plan,” Harry said seriously. “Ginny, we found a perfect place to do this, but I have to warn you, it’s...”

“The Chamber of Secrets,” she said in a near whisper, her small frame wracked with shudders. Harry placed a comforting hand on her shoulder.

“I’m sorry, Ginny, but it’s the only secure place we have in the castle. I promise that you’ll be safe there,” Harry said softly to the younger girl.

He looked up then at the rest of the group. “ We’ll need to go down there the first weekend we get back and start to clean the place up. It’s going to take a lot of effort to make it useable for our needs.”

“I thought the Headmaster sealed off the entrance to the chamber,” said Professor McGonagall.

“He may have sealed off the third floor girls bathroom. That was Salazar’s main entrance into the Chamber, but it wasn’t the only way in. We’ve found another passage leading from the Head Suite, Professor.”

“A passage from the Head Suite to the Chamber of Secrets? How curious!” murmured McGonagall.

“When we return to Hogwarts I’ll place the Chamber under an Fidelis charm. That’ll make it harder for anyone to find and should annoy Voldemort when he finally takes over the school and can’t find his ancestor’s hiding hole,” Harry said.

“What are you going to do about the Headmaster? Remus and Tonks told me what he did you just before the holiday break,” asked McGonagall.

Harry looked thoughtful for a moment. “I think it’s time for the Brotherhood to make an appearance inside Hogwarts. And I think, my good Professors, that it would be best if you were in the school when it happens.”

---

Headmaster’s Quarters, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry...

Dumbledore bounced out of his bed when the alarms started screeching. It seemed like every ward in Hogwarts had been triggered. He quickly slipped into his slippers and threw on his robe. His quarters were situated outside of his office, so he had to go through his office to get to the school proper. Rushing down the stairs of his office, he came out to find several of the professors huddled around the entrance in their bed clothes.

“Headmaster, what ward was triggered?” asked Professor Flitwick

“Most of them, Filius. Which, of course, is impossible,” replied Dumbledore.

Professor McGonagall rushed up to the group. “Headmaster, I think you should come to the Great Hall. There’s something you need to see.”

Dumbledore eyed his assistant for a moment, then strode purposefully towards the staircases and the Great Hall with the teachers trailing behind him.

Reaching the Great Hall he skidded to a halt in surprise. He gaped in amazement as he gazed at the ceiling of the Hall. It no longer echoed the sky outside. It now displayed a message.

“THE BROTHERHOOD PROTECTS HARRY POTTER AND HIS FRIENDS. THIS IS OUR LAST WARNING!”

After a moment the message faded from view and the ceiling returned to normal. Then there came a hissing sound from the Head Table. The chair Dumbledore normally used for meals burst into flame. The flame burned a specific pattern into the back of the chair, a Celtic cross. Once the cross had been fully formed, the fire went out and an image appeared in the ceiling. This time the ceiling was echoing correctly what floated above the castle. Not the Morsmordre, but a gigantic Celtic cross.

Dumbledore ground his teeth in anger. *The damn Brotherhood again! They were the ones who had trained Harry Potter to be so strong, and to stand up to me. They were the ones who trained him in Occlumency! They’re almost as bad as Death Eaters*, he thought furiously. *Hmmm... now there’s an idea*, he mused. *Why not get people to think that they are an elite class of Death Eater sporting a new look?*

“Albus,” breathed McGonagall, “what does this all mean?”

“I think, Professor, it should be obvious. The Brotherhood is coming down off the fence and they aren’t coming down on our side,” replied Dumbledore tersely.

Minerva and Filius exchanged a quick look while Dumbledore stared into the Great Hall.

---

Grimmauld Place, that same night...

Harry crept back into his bedroom well after midnight. He’d just returned from a trip to Hogwarts,

the results of which would have made Sirius and the rest of the Marauders proud. He stepped over to his bed and started to peel out his clothes, never noticing the figure that closed the door behind him.

“Out late, Mr. Potter?” asked a familiar voice.

Harry panicked for a moment and whirled with his pants down around his knees. As he did, he tripped, falling backwards and landing on the floor.

Hermione moved out of the darkness and stood over him. She wore a robe over her nightgown and stared at him angrily with her hands on her hips.

“Honestly, Harry! I think you take this family bit too far. You seem to be adopting Tonks’ clumsiness,” she said, smirking. “Now, are you going to explain where you’ve been tonight? Or should I go wake Remus and Tonks and have them ask you?”

“Hermione! What are you doing in my bedroom at this hour? Do you know what your parents would think? What your father would think? What would he do to me?” Harry fired back at her.

Hermione clapped her hands. “Bravo, Harry, nice show. But it won’t work. Now, tell me where you’ve been,” she said, her eyes turning flinty.

Harry sat up and looked down at the jeans bunched up around his knees, then he mumbled to himself.

“I can’t hear you, Harry.”

“I said I just came back from Hogwarts. I wanted to try that projection spell you worked up to display the Celtic cross.”

She stood watching him, waiting.

“Well and I did a few other things...” he added lamely.

“Such as?”

“I set the ceiling in the Great Hall to give a message about the Brotherhood.”

“And?”

“I sort of burned a Celtic cross into the Headmaster’s chair in the Great Hall.”

Hermione sat down heavily on his bed and her shoulders started to shake. At first Harry thought she was crying, but he quickly realized she was laughing softly.

“You really went to Hogwarts tonight?” she asked when she finally calmed down.

“Oh yeah, and when I left I triggered every ward the castle had. No one could sleep through that racket. I imagine Dumbledore’s rather upset right about now. The Brotherhood gets into the castle, vandalizes a part of it, and then leaves without a trace.”

Hermione stood and looked at him, still unsure of what she should be feeling. “I’m not sure whether to laugh or yell at you for being reckless. You know Tonks wouldn’t have let you do that tonight.”

“That’s why I didn’t tell anyone what I was doing,” he replied with a sly grin. It was one of those grins that she had trouble ignoring.

Harry started to stand when he realized his advanced stage of undress. “Um... Hermione? could you turn around? I’m nearly naked here.”

“Oh really, Harry. It’s no different than if you were wearing a bathing suit.”

“My bathing suit doesn’t have an open, unsealed flap in the front, you know?”

“Oh...,” she replied, then turned away long enough for Harry to stand and pull up his pants and button them.

“There, that’s better. You know, this is the second time you’ve snuck into my bedroom and caught me in my boxers. If I didn’t know better, I’d say you’re doing it deliberately.”

“N-N-No, not really,” she stammered.

“Then why did you wait until I was taking my pants off before you said anything? When she stared at him, not speaking, he grinned wickedly. “You are so busted.”

She turned on her heel and moved towards the door, her nose in the air. “You can think whatever you want, Mr. Potter!”

Harry chuckled and sealed the door wandlessly. Hermione jerked on the door several times but it wouldn’t budge. She whirled to face him angrily. “Open this door, Harry!”

“No, I don’t think so. We need to talk and right now is as good a time as any.”

Hermione glared at him, fully knowing she’d been caught with her hand in the cookie jar, but she wasn’t about to back down now. “I don’t have anything to say to you. Now open this door.”

“We can talk, or I’ll undress, climb under the covers and go to sleep, leaving you locked in here. And I’ll let you explain your presence in my bedroom to your parents.”

Hermione’s quick mind thought up several exquisitely painful deaths for the young man who stood smirking at her before she finally surrendered to the inevitable. She walked over to the chair furthest from his bed and sat down, staring at him. “Alright, talk then,” she said in a careless tone.

Harry walked over to her chair and knelt down in front of her. He ran his fingers down her cheek. “It’s alright to want to see me in my boxers, or with even less on. But I don’t think it’s fair to me when you do it sneakily. I don’t sneak into your bedroom to see you undressed. And I could apparate to your bedroom silently, throw in my invisibility cloak and you’d never know I was there,” he said gently.

Hermione buried her face in her hands. “Oh Merlin, this is too embarrassing!”

Harry pulled her hands away from her face. “Please don’t hide from me, no matter how embarrassed you feel. I’ll be honest with you. I’ve wanted to see you in similar situations. I’ve dreamt of you in with less on.”

She looked at him sharply. “So what is this? A game of ‘you-show-me-yours-and-I’ll-show-you-mine’?”

“Merlin, no! It’s no game. You and I both know I could answer some fan mail and get twenty witches here in an hours time. But I don’t want those witches, I want you,” he said hotly.

She looked at him for a long moment before she stood up and opened her robe.

He gapped at her, dumbfounded, as she dropped her robe. When she pulled her night shirt over her head and dropped it on top of her robe, he stood up in a rush.

Harry’s thought processes derailed as he stared at her breasts. She wore nothing more than her knickers and he couldn’t do a damn thing, as his brain suffered from lack of blood. He bit back a groan when he realized just where the blood was going.

“Y-Y-Your beautiful,” he whispered.

She very nearly laughed at his stunned expression. She stepped closer and wrapped her arms around his neck.

When his hands fell to her hips and pulled her closer, he sighed. The feel of her soft breasts against his bare chest was wonderful!

“Thank you,” she whispered shyly. Then he kissed her hard.

“Harry? Is everything all right? Who do you have in there? Why is the door stuck?” Remus called from the corridor.

Hermione and Harry sprang apart and exchanged a look of sheer, absolute panic. He scooped up her clothing and pulled her into his arms again. With a whispering pop, he tandem apparated to her bedroom. He gave her a brief hug, a quick kiss, and then dropped her clothing before he apparated back to his own room.

Releasing the lock on the door, he then walked over and opened it. He made a show of examining the door knob mechanism.

“I don’t know what’s wrong with the door, Remus. It’s been sticky of late. I’ll have Dobby look into it,” Harry said, careful to avoid looking Remus in the eye.

“I thought I heard voices in here, Harry.”

“No, there’s no one in here but me and I was about to crawl into bed.”

Remus smiled knowingly. “Yes, well, it’s late. Get to sleep. We still have guests to talk to tomorrow.”

“I know. Good night Remus,” Harry called, heading for his bed.

“Oh, and Harry? Don’t forget to say good night to Hermione for me,” Remus called as he closed the door.

Hermione untangled the heap of clothing at her feet and pulled on her nightshirt. As she reached for her robe, she realized that she wasn’t the only person awake in the room.

From Ginny’s bed came the clear sound of giggling. Sighing, she turned around in the dimly lit bedroom and saw Ginny sitting up in her bed, grinning madly at her.

“So tell me, Miss Granger. What were you up to that resulted in Harry returning you to the bedroom at this late hour wearing only your knickers?” she asked impishly.

Hermione blushed and Ginny laughed. Pointing to her own bed, Ginny raised an eyebrow at her friend and waited. Shrugging her shoulders, Hermione knew she’d been caught twice that night and went over to sit on Ginny’s bed.

“So, tell me all about it...” Ginny whispered breathlessly.

---

## A Trip to St. Mungos...

The next morning Harry was awoken by Tonks and Danni knocking on his door. Groggily he climbed out of bed and let them in. As they took seats, Dobby appeared with morning coffee for Harry.

“Harry,” Danni began, “I’ve made arrangements for you to visit Healer Sorenson in about an hour. I realize this is short notice, but if anyone can help improve your mobility, it’s him.”

Harry sighed and looked down at his leg. “Will this take long?”

“It shouldn’t. This will be an evaluation exam. He’ll test your leg for its range of mobility and see if there’s anything that can be done to improve it,” Danni told him seriously.

Harry looked at Tonks and she nodded. “I think you should give it a shot, Harry. I’ve seen how much your leg bothers you by the end of the day.”



Harry ran a hand over his leg, then shrugged. “I’ll tell Hermione to keep on top of things here and then we can leave, if that’s alright with you two. There’s still a lot to be done today.”

Once the two women left, he dressed quickly and went in search of Hermione. The house was still full of guests, so he had to dodge the crowd in the corridor as people made their way down to the kitchen for breakfast.

He stood outside Hermione’s room a few minutes later and, knocking, he waited. Ginny opened the door and let him in, a smile on her face. He was sure that she was trying very hard not to laugh. Hermione looked up from her bed where she sat. She and Ginny had been talking again this morning and she was not yet dressed for the day.

“I’ll need you to handle our guests today, Hermione. Danni wants me to visit Healer Sorenson this morning. It’s supposed to be a short exam, but I’m not sure when I’ll be back,” he told her.

She climbed out of the bed and walked over to him. He waited until she was within arm’s reach before pulling her close to him and burying his face into the nape of her neck. She shivered in delight and held him tightly.

“I’ll see you later,” he whispered. He released her and stepped away.

She nodded and watched him worriedly as he walked out of the room

Harry met Tonks and Danni in the foyer on the main floor. Tonks pulled out an old shoe she’d turned into a portkey for St. Mungos and grinned. He put his finger on the shoe and the others followed suit. A moment later, they were gone.

---

Malfoy Manor...

Lucius Malfoy knocked back another drink of fire whiskey and watched as Wormtail led a group of five recruits on a training mission. He frowned, watching Wormtail get them ready. Even though he was currently one of the Master’s favorites, he knew that could change in a flash. Voldemort didn’t keep favorites long and he often played his inner circle members against each other for his own amusement.

There wasn’t much for him to do these days. Voldemort had decided that he needed more Death Eaters before unleashing his armies on muggle Britain. That meant Lucius was stuck running around and performing the odd *Imperio* us curse on various muggles of importance to make their final assault go more smoothly.

He finished his drink and gestured to a fearful house elf for a refill. As he did, he stood by the window of his study shaking his head in dismay at the poor quality recruits they were getting these days. Wormtail actually had to resort to kicking a few of them.

With a sigh, he turned away from the window and went back to his seat, wishing for the good old

days when he could assault a muggle town, burning and raping at will.

---

Ginny and Hermione...

Ginny watched Hermione watching Harry leave the room and snickered to herself. Their conversation last night after a nearly naked Harry had returned an equally naked Hermione to her bedroom had been interesting. Settling herself in one of the comfortable armchairs, she considered what she really needed to talk about.

“Hermione,” Ginny began, “I need your help and advice about something that involves Harry, and I’m clueless what to do about it.”

Struck by the strange tone in her friends voice, Hermione felt a brief stab of fear. She knew that in some ways Ginny had never gotten over her crush on Harry and she prayed that wasn’t what the younger girl wished to speak about.

“What’s the problem, Ginny?” asked Hermione, her voice carefully neutral.

“We...that is, Bill, Fred, George and myself, haven’t told anyone about this yet, but my father’s left the Burrow and my mother. He’s written a letter to Madam Bones in which he confesses to knowingly accepting money taken illegally from Harry’s vault. He and my Mum have had a falling out. He’s left her and is sleeping on a cot in his office at the Ministry,” Ginny told her.

Hermione felt a wave of relief, then her anxiety returned as she realized that Ginny’s family was falling apart over what had been done to Harry. “I see. What do you and the others in your family think about this?” she asked carefully. She wanted to understand where Ginny was going with this.

“They’re furious with him, Hermione, what do you expect? For nearly six years he’s been robbing a boy we considered to be a Weasley. They’re angry and hurt, but also proud that Dad’s finally standing up for himself and doing the right thing. They don’t like what he did, but have told him they would be willing to stand up with him when he went to trial. My family’s falling to pieces in front of my very eyes and I’m trying to save what I can of it,” Ginny ended on a pleading tone.

“So what do you need from me? I can see what you’re trying to do, but I don’t see how I can help.”

“I’d like to see if we can get Harry and my Dad to talk. Dad owes Harry an apology at the minimum. The problem is getting Harry to agree to meet with Dad. My father doesn’t know that I’m trying to set up a meeting between him and Harry. As far as my father is concerned, he’s hurt Harry and could never be forgiven for what he’s done.”

Hermione looked thoughtful. “I think I know Harry well enough to say that he’s not going to want to speak to your father unless several of us make it apparent that your father isn’t looking for Harry’s forgiveness, but he just wants to explain what happened, maybe even why. I won’t say it will be easy, Ginny, but I’ll speak to Harry about it and try to soften him up enough that you can

talk to him. But, please understand that Harry may not want to talk to your father. And if you push him too hard, he could turn away from you as well.”

Ginny nodded. “I know, but that’s a risk I’m going to have to take. I’m trying to salvage my family. If you can make him understand that, I’ll be forever grateful,” she said, then her eyes danced impishly. “I won’t even try to blackmail you over the fact that you appeared nearly naked in the bedroom in Harry’s arms.”

Hermione’s eyes turned flinty and she glared daggers at the younger girl. “That wasn’t my fault! Harry... he... no that isn’t quite right either.”

She sighed, slumping her shoulders in defeat. “Alright, it was my fault, I was playing with fire and he caught me at it.”

“What do you mean?”

“Let’s just say that I’d been arranging to occasionally catch him less than fully clothed and he called me on it. He then pointed out that it wasn’t fair to him, and that he would not have stooped to such sneaky tactics. And if that wasn’t guilt worthy enough, he had to go ahead and tell me that if I ever wanted to see him like that, or with even less on, all I had to do was ask! Where’s the fun in that?” she said with a hint of a growl.

Ginny murmured something that Hermione couldn’t quite make out, but it sound too important to let go. “What did you just say? Something about the Quidditch locker room?”

Ginny colored and looked away for a moment. “Last year Katie Bell installed a peep hole in the wall of the boy’s locker room. It let us look in on Harry while he was changing for games and practice. I think you’re probably the only Gryffindor girl that hasn’t seen your boyfriend naked.”

Hermione was appalled. “All of them? Even the younger ones?”

“Katie wouldn’t let the first and second years have a peek. But third years and up, yeah, if they had the galleon.”

“She charged for a peek? I don’t believe this! Half the Gryffindor girls have seen my boyfriend naked? Does Harry know?”

“Are you kidding? Look at how long it took him to get used to having us around while you worked on his leg in the pool and there he was wearing a bathing suit and t-shirt. If he’d known, he would have quit the team! Besides, it’s not like it’s still going on. Harry isn’t playing this year and he doesn’t use the changing room when he just wants to go flying.”

Hermione’s expression hardened. It was a look of a competitor who’d just been told their record had been broken...it was time to set a new one.

---

## Hogwarts, Headmaster's office...

Dumbledore watched the raging man before him and wondered briefly if a silencing charm would be out of place. It wasn't that the Headmaster disagreed with the idea behind the rant, but he knew there wasn't much that could be done about. Something the younger man currently pacing his office didn't understand.

"And this last little stunt of his is the last straw, Albus! The boy is a menace and must be stopped," Severus Snape exclaimed, whirling to face Dumbledore.

"Severus, I understand what you're saying, truly I do. However, I believe you've failed to realize that the situation has changed," Albus said calmly.

"Changed? Of course it's changed! Potter now knows he can attack a teacher and the Headmaster of this school with impunity. I know we can't expel him for his behavior without raising questions with the Board of Governors, but surely you must see that the quicker we find out what the boy is up to, the better off we'll be."

Dumbledore sighed heavily. For an intelligent, observant man, Severus could be remarkable blind where Harry Potter was concerned. "Yes, I do see that. I also know that you cannot break through Mr. Potter's shields."

"No, but I can break through Miss Granger's. She's not as strong as Potter."

"Perhaps, Severus. But the moment she leaves this office, she'll run straight to Harry. Do you want to deal with the boy's wrath over the perceived attack on his girlfriend?" Dumbledore asked.

"She can't report to Potter something she doesn't remember, Headmaster," Snape said slyly. "A simple memory charm after we've obtained the information we want, and she'll leave the office unaware of what has happened."

"A memory charm? You tried that once before and it didn't work. What makes you think..."

"I was trying to be gentle," Snape interrupted sharply. "We've talked about this before, Albus. Nothing has changed. I knock her unconscious with a stunning spell, harrow through her memories for the information we're looking for, then perform the memory charm before she wakes up. Why are you suddenly so reluctant?"

"Prudence. Mr. Potter's display of power just before the holiday started made that perfectly clear. If something goes wrong with our plan, we'd be facing an enraged, immensely powerful child who's made it clear that if we got in his way again, we'd pay for it."

"He's an arrogant boy who needs to be put in his place," Snape sneered.

"Oh, grow up, Severus," Dumbledore exclaimed angrily. "The boy is dangerous! For all your sneering remarks about Gryffindor courage causing students to charge into things without thinking, you're acting remarkably lion-like yourself! Harry Potter can snap either of us in half as

quickly as he snapped your wands.”

“But...” Snape began.

“No!” Albus said, cutting the younger man off. “The plan will be used only as a last resort. We have another plan that may work just as well, and we will try it first.”

“And are equally likely to enrage Potter if he finds out about them!”

“Enough! I have made my decision and I am through discussing it. You are excused, Severus.” Albus said coldly.

Drawing his robe about him, Snape glared at the Headmaster. “I still say your plan is a mistake, Albus. And when it blows up in our faces, we’ll be lucky if we live long enough to regret it!”

Spinning on his heel, robes flaring, Snape walked to the office door and exited the room.

---

At St. Mungos...

Danni led Harry and Tonks up to the third floor of St. Mungos and into a waiting room for the general recovery wing where the healers dealt with non-specific, long term injuries such as Harry’s. Danni left them, seated comfortably, and went about her duties.

Harry leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes. He reached out with his senses and immediately pulled back. The hospital was rife with magic, but it was the auras that disturbed him the most. The people around him were physically injured, in some cases even emotionally injured, and it was reflected in their auras.

A witch approached them thirty minutes later and Harry was grateful for the interruption. Tonks had been tormenting him by showing him back issues of Teen Witch Weekly and what they thought about the famous Boy-Who-Lived.

“Mr. Potter? Ms. Tonks?” asked the mediwitch.

“Yes, that’s right,” replied Harry.

“Follow me to examination room 12, please,” the young witch said with a smile.

The room didn’t look much different than any doctor’s examination room he’d seen in the muggle world. Thanks to the Dursleys, he’d seen plenty of them.

“Healer Sorenson will be along shortly. In the meantime, I’m to get you ready for your examination. I understand that the Healer will be looking at your leg, so I’ll have to ask you to remove your pants,” the witch said, smiling, her eyes dancing with pleasure.

Harry’s head whipped around and he stared at the mediwitch with narrowed eyes. She had the

good grace to flush guiltily before looking away, but she didn't withdraw the request. In desperation, he turned and cast an appealing glance at his guardian.

Tonks shrugged. "You knew you'd have to show the Healer your leg. Unless they have a removable pant leg, you'll have to shuck them," she quipped, grinning.

"Fine," Harry said tersely. He peeled off his jumper revealing another t-shirt that read, 'Everyone is entitled to be stupid, but Voldemort's abusing the privilege.'

Tonks' eyes widened when she read the shirt and the mediwitch swayed, nearly fainting in shock. While Tonks leapt to her feet to grab mediwitch, Harry slipped out of his pants, thankful for the commotion. Hopping up onto the exam table, he glared at the two woman as if daring them to ask him to remove anything else.

Once the mediwitch had recovered from her shock, she threw him a reproving look. Then, running several diagnostic spells, she wrote down the results on a piece of parchment. One test she reran multiple times and seemed to be more displeased with the results with each run. Then, with a polite smile, she gathered up her notes and left the room.

A few minutes later the mediwitch returned, followed by someone else. "Mr. Potter?" asked the newcomer.

Harry looked at the man. He looked to be fit, middle aged, and his hair was just starting to go gray. "Yes, I'm Harry Potter."

"I'm Healer Sorenson, Mr. Potter. I understand that I'm supposed to be looking at an old injury to your leg and see if we can do anything to improve it. If you would budge up on the table and lay on your stomach, I'd like to examine both of your legs visually before we start looking at the range of motion and impairment you have."

Doing as he was asked, Harry laid on the cold table. He commented about the temperature of the table, which surprisingly resulted in the mediwitch bringing him a blanket.

The healer looked over both of Harry's legs for several long minutes, taking measurements and questioning both Harry and Tonks about the cause of the damage. Even with the muscle regeneration potion course Harry had endured, the calf muscle on Harry's right leg was significantly different in size and shape than his left leg.

After the visual examination, Healer Sorenson started him on a series of exercises designed to show him the range of motion and flexibility in the leg. The testing lasted several hours and, by the end of the examination, Harry was in considerable pain. When the healer had finally finished, he was instructed to get dressed and the healer left the room.

Tonks watched Harry with a worried expression as he struggled painfully with his pants. Both looked up as Healer Sorenson entered the room again with the mediwitch and Danni McNeil. Danni looked at Harry and smiled, but both the witch and Sorenson looked concerned.

“Mr. Potter, it seems you posed several problems for us today. On the issue of your leg, the damage is quite extensive. That you’ve managed to recover as well as you have is a testimony to your determination. There is little we can do to help the leg any more than what you’ve already done. If you continue with your therapy, you may see as much as a five percent improvement. Right now, your leg is impaired by twenty four percent. In time, you may be able to achieve eighty percent of its original function.

“I understand the pain issue and the fact that you need a cane by the end of the day. If we medicated for the pain, we run the risk of addiction. What I’m going to suggest is that, rather than medication, you start learning to take hot baths with the mineral salts I’ll be prescribing for you. They’ll help relax your muscles and help relieve the pain without resorting to pain relieving potions.

“The second issue came to light when Kally here,” he said, pointing to the mediwitch, “ran a routine Hammerstein magical index on you. Normally this test gives us an indication of the quality of your magical core…”

“That isn’t an issue, Healer Sorenson. As his regular Healer, I can assure you that the HMI is normal for him,” Danni said firmly. “Further, his HMI is considered classified by the Ministry. I’m sure you understand the consequences of leaking classified information.”

Danni smiled at Harry and Tonks’ questioning looks and shrugged. “I figured this might come up. That’s why I had to check in with Amelia.”

Healer Sorensen and the mediwitch stared at Harry for a long time. He started feeling increasingly uncomfortable under their gaze. “Are we done then?” he asked.

Healer Sorensen blinked and shook himself out of his shock. “Yes, Mr. Potter. I’m sorry we couldn’t do more for your leg,” he said, while handing Tonks a list of salts he could try.

He swayed a moment while he expanded his cane to normal size and steadied himself. Nodding in thanks to the healer, he left the examination room with Tonks right behind him. He leaned heavily against his cane and gritted his teeth.

Walking down the stairs and to the exit was painful. Harry could have apparated, but Tonks couldn’t, so they had to go to the lobby’s apparation point. They only had a few stairs left before reaching the bottom when a scream pierced the silence and a green beam of light crashed into a nearby wall. Harry pushed Tonks down the remaining stairs and then jumped the rest of the way himself.

He landed next to her and his leg gave out. He lay beside the dazed Tonks for a moment and the sound of screams came from all around him. From the lobby entrance came the shouts of people using the killing curse over the sound of the panicking crowd. One sound carried over the din, however. A very young voice cried out over and over,

“Mama, please get up!”

It was the child's voice that snapped Harry's carefully leashed anger and a terrible rage raced through him. His magic flared and the lobby rumbled like an oncoming train. He climbed painfully to his knees and look over the chair that was blocking the Death Eaters from view.

His eyes narrowed and he snarled when he noted one Death Eater wore a silver hand. Pushing himself to his feet, he stood. He would not sit by and let this happen, he couldn't.

He raised one hand and pointed it at Peter Pettigrew, the man responsible for the death of his parents. "Levitatus ossis torqueo magnopere," Harry said quietly.

Pettigrew's curses stopped when the dark purple nimbus surrounded him and he felt himself levitated a good three feet off the floor. He looked around wildly and whimpered as pain enveloped his body. When it increased, his whimpers turned to screams as every bone in his body was twisted and bent. When the bones started to break, he began to shriek in agony. Then, just as suddenly as it began, it ended. With a sudden, violent sound, Pettigrew's vertebrae shattered, driving bone fragments up into his brain.

Everyone stopped and the only sound came from the injured. The Death Eater recruits turned towards the floating corpse of Wormtail, shocked.

Harry swayed and struggled to remain standing, then he raised his hand again. "Lucerna judico" he said firmly. The room filled with a bright white light.

When the light faded and everyone's eyes had adjusted, the five remaining Death Eaters were groping around the room, blindly. Every so often one would try to cast a spell, only to fail.

"I can't apparate!" screamed one recruit.

"Can you see? I can't see," yelled another.

That was all it took as healers and the survivors of the lobby attack swarmed over the Death Eaters. Tonks surged into the crowd, trying to get control of the situation in her capacity as an Auror.

Harry looked around at the carnage in the lobby and, in particular, the source of that pitiful cry that had tugged at his heart. She was a small child, maybe four or five years old. She sat next to the body of a poorly dressed young woman and, every so often, she'd push against the woman's shoulder and beg her to get up. The woman had been a victim of the killing curse.

Harry staggered back to the stairway and sat down heavily. The sight of the small girl tore at him and he started to weep. He never noticed as Danni shoved a cup of cocoa into his hands, then looked him over for injuries.

The scene in the lobby was pure pandemonium. Eventually more Aurors arrived on the scene, and Tonks was able to talk to Harry. "Are you alright?" she asked worriedly.

He nodded dumbly. He was having trouble focusing on her through his tears. He pointed to the



little girl. “Make sure she has family to go to, Tonks. Make sure they take care of her.”

Tonks eyed the little girl that a mediwitch was trying to calm down and nodded after a moment, then she turned back to Harry. “I have to stay here and help out. You go home and I’ll get a statement from you later.”

Wearily he nodded and vanished from the lobby. Tonks shook her head, still amazed that he could apparate without making a sound. With a sigh, she turned back to the chaos and went back to work.

---

## Children of Gaia...

Bertrand Lovegood had two woman whom he loved in his life, his wife and his daughter. Both were quite strange in their own ways, but he wouldn’t have changed either if he could. When he lost his wife, his daughter had stepped in and helped him recover from the loss as much as she could. But some pain never heals and, in Bertrand’s case, the loss of Lorna had been particularly painful.

Now he sat with his daughter in a strange house owned by Harry Potter, one of his daughter’s closest friends. They were at a table in the Black family library and while Luna read a book, upside down of course, Bertrand considered all the things he had learned in the past day.

They both looked up when the door opened to admit Narcissa Black and her son, Draco Malfoy. According to Draco, he would remain a Malfoy until shortly after the New Year. Then the courts could process his mother’s request to adopt him, after which he would become Draco Black.

“Miss Black,” Bertrand said, standing and offering his hand. “What a pleasure it is to finally be able to meet with you.”

“Narcissa, please. It’s going to take me a long time to get used to being Miss Black again,” she replied, smiling.

Narcissa shook the offered hand and let herself be guided to a seat. She wasn’t sure why Draco had insisted on having this meeting. Surely he didn’t expect her to give this little man an interview for his tabloid, did he?

Draco smiled shyly at Luna who looked up at him and returned the smile before going back to her book. Narcissa would have shrugged that off except that, when the girl made room for Draco to sit next to her, he did! *Could Draco have feelings for this pretty young woman*, she asked herself.

Luna looked over at Narcissa, her expression dreamy. “I hope that to be the case, Miss Black. And no, my father isn’t looking for an interview. Draco wanted you and I to get to know each other better. We didn’t get much of a chance for that in Hogsmeade.”

Narcissa blinked in surprise as the young woman answered questions she hadn’t vocalized. Luna

and Draco? She looked at her son, noting his posture shifting from his usual defiance to deference towards Luna. She also couldn't help but notice that he was holding her hand. She knew Draco had all the wrong kind of experience with women thanks to his father, who used to share his doxies with him. No, he wasn't acting like that this time.

"Do you really think I'd allow him to, Miss Black?" Luna asked curiously, still staring at her book.

Narcissa's eye's narrowed in concentration as she watched the young woman, then it struck her. She was deliberately masking her attention. But why would she do that? Unless she was... Her eyes widened in realization.

Luna smiled at the older woman and Narcissa felt the full brunt of her attention as a wave of pleased emotions washed over her. "You're much faster than your son is. He still hasn't figured it out."

"Figured what out, Luna? What are you on about?" asked a confused Draco.

"He doesn't know," Luna murmured to Narcissa.

"Of course he doesn't, dear. He's never been exposed to someone with your talents and, even if he had, he would have been taught to hate you. Let me explain it," replied Narcissa.

"Hate Luna? Why would I hate Luna?" Draco asked, outraged.

"Dray, listen to me carefully. I'm sure by now you've noticed that Luna tends to get somewhat preoccupied at times?"

Draco nodded.

"She's that way because of what she is. Your friend is what we call a Child of Gaia. It's a very rare and unique talent, even more rare than your cousin Nymphadora's metamorph abilities. A long time ago, some humans and fairies found a way to mix the two species, to make a human sized fairy. The mixed breeding didn't last long, but some of the fairy abilities bred true into their human offspring."

"Humans? Fairies? She's not human?" Draco asked. Then he winced, realizing just how hurtful the comment may have been. Glancing at Luna he could see the flicker of pain in her eyes before she assumed a dreamy gaze once more.

She leaned over and touched first his lips and then the top of his head. "Someday soon I'll teach these two things to talk to each other," she said firmly, then went back to her book, humming softly.

"No, Draco, Luna's as human as you and I. The mating between human and fairy took place so many generations ago that all of the fairy physical characteristics have been bred out. Only some of the abilities remain. A Child of Gaia is more closely attuned to nature than we are. She walks

through life seeing things we couldn't even imagine. She can see nature's experiments before they're born as a species and, to a small extent, she can affect things around her. A Child of Gaia masks her attention because most people can't stand the intense feelings they feel from them. That's why she appears so inattentive.

"Once she reaches a certain age, a Child of Gaia begins a search for a companion, someone to be her protector and champion. It's a precious gift they offer, but it comes with a price. Loving a Child of Gaia makes it impossible to ever love another person again."

Draco look at Luna, his expression wavered between hope and disbelief. "Why me?" he whispered.

His mind reeled with the onrush of emotions as she turned her attention to him. "Because you're worthy, Draco. Because, despite your father, you've managed to keep a pure heart. You're a lot like Harry in that way. Both of you should have been evil with your upbringing and both of you came out of your childhood largely pure and good. Even Harry saw that in you. You'll be great one day, great in ways you've never imagined, if only you believe in yourself the way I do," she told him gently, then she reached up and caressed his cheek with one hand. Draco's eyes closed and he leaned into her touch.

Draco's mind whirled with emotion. This wasn't a sexually charged contact, but the emotion of love that he was feeling from Luna held a hint of promise of far greater delights to come. He was confused by it all. Luna seemed to be asking him to believe in himself, something he'd never found easy to do. In many ways, he had as much self doubt and lack of confidence as Harry. He just hid his doubt behind a façade of arrogance. He opened his eyes to see Luna gazing softly at him. He could get lost staring into her sky blue eyes. They ignited a desire to make her happy and safe, always.

"I'll try to be worthy of you, Luna," he told her softly and she smiled back at him gently.

Bertrand shot Narcissa a knowing look and even Narcissa smiled. She couldn't be more pleased. Luna seemed perfectly capable of awakening the honorable man she had tried to raise Draco to be. That the two cared for each other was obvious, but it warmed her heart to see Draco treating her with love and respect.

Narcissa turned to Bertrand. "Would you care for a cup of tea in my sitting room? I think we should give these two a little time to themselves."

"Tea would be excellent," he replied, standing and offering her a hand.

---

Grimmauld Place, just before dinner...

Tonks walked into the kitchen at Grimmauld place, her expression grim.

"Tonks?" asked Remus.

“Where’s Harry?” Tonks asked, sitting in a chair heavily and ignoring Remus’ implied question.

“Isn’t he with you? I thought you both went to St. Mungos today.”

“No, I sent him home after the attack. I had to stay behind and help. Remus, Harry killed Peter Pettigrew.”

Remus exploded from his chair. “He did what? What was he doing going after Wormtail? You were supposed to be watching him Tonks! How could you,” he shouted at the young Auror, stalking towards her.

“Petrificus totalus,” Tonks said calmly, her wand pointed at Remus.

Remus froze and stiffened. His eyes narrowed angrily.

“Now get this straight, old wolf. I didn’t let him do anything, he just bloody well went ahead and did it! We were leaving St. Mungos when a group of Death Eaters attacked the lobby. Harry spotted Wormtail and killed him in a most painful manner. Then he disabled five others with a single spell, saving everyone who was present. But the damage was already done. Ten dead, another fifteen seriously hurt.

Now, I’m going to release you from the spell if you think you can behave yourself. Otherwise, I’ll leave you down here all night.

“Finite Incantatum,” Tonks whispered and Remus sagged, nearly falling. Tonks leapt to her feet and helped him to a seat. Once Remus was seated, she turned to the others. “Now I’ll ask again, has anyone seen Harry today?”

Hermione looked between her parents, Tonks and Remus, who sat silently, tears streaming down his face. “I haven’t,” she said. “But that doesn’t mean he’s not here. Let’s ask Dobby. He should know if Harry is in the building.”

Tonks chuckled to herself. Leave to Hermione to find the quickest way to any answer. “Dobby?” she called to the house elf.

With a soft pop, the little elf appeared in the kitchen. “Yous call for Dobby, Miss?”

Tonks and Hermione smiled. Then Hermione asked the question on everyone’s mind. “Yes Dobby, we did call. Tell me, is Harry in the house?”

“Oh mys, yes! Master Harry came back many hours ago. He is not very happy right now, and I thinks his leg is hurtings him bad. But he’s in his room.”

“Has he eaten at all today, Dobby?”

The little elf’s ears drooped and his clutched at his shirt. “No, Master Harry is not wanting food today he says.”

“Dobby, please bring dinner for two up to Harry’s room in about an hour,” Hermione said firmly.

Tonks looked at her carefully. “Are you sure you want to do this?”

“I’m the only one who can, Tonks. Remus needs you,” she said.

A few minutes later Hermione slipped silently into Harry room. He sat on a couch in the sitting room adjacent to his bedroom, staring into the fireplace. He had pulled a chair close to the couch and was using it to prop up and stretch his leg out on.

She walked over to him, but he didn’t notice she was there. “You know, people normally stare into a fireplace only after a fire’s been lit,” she said quietly.

Harry sighed and rubbed his face tiredly. “I’m assuming Tonks finally returned from St. Mungos?”

“A little while ago. She seemed upset and very worried about you. She would have come here herself, but Remus took the news about Peter rather hard.”

A single tear slid down his cheek. Hermione watched him and worried about how much he was holding back.

Sitting next to him on the couch, she reached out with a hand to touch him. “Alright there, Harry?”

“I don’t know. I killed a man today. It wasn’t an accident either. I deliberately used a spell that broke every bone in his body. He screamed horribly...he screamed until the vertebrae in his neck shattered, killing him. And yet I feel... nothing... no remorse over killing a person... no pain... just satisfaction that the man responsible for the death of my parents, death of Cedric and Sirius’ imprisonment is now dead himself and that he’ll never kill again.

“He was a friend to my parents once. He was nearly as close to them as Remus or Sirius, and I suppose I should mourn the loss of another Marauder. But he wasn’t even that in the end. He was just a Death Eater with no respect for the lives of others.”

He turned his palms upwards and looked at his hands. “I held his life in my hands, and I took it without a second thought, Hermione. I’ve sat here since I came back from St. Mungos trying to figure out what I’m supposed to feel. Should I be angry? Hurt? Shocked? Sad? I just don’t know...” he trailed off and his hands trembled slightly.

Hermione sat quietly for a moment, watching him. She knew he had to work through this but, like so many other events in his life, working through them was the hardest part for him. She reached out and touched his cheek softly and his expression screwed up in misery. He let out a single cry and tried to turn away from her but she wouldn’t let him. Wrapping her arms around him, she pulled him into her embrace where he cried against her shoulder. She knew he wasn’t so much crying for the death of Wormtail, but for the loss of his own innocence. This was very different from the attack in Diagon Alley, where everyone agreed that he ‘probably’ killed a Death Eater.

This was a known act, not a maybe.

Thirty minutes later, his body relaxed against her as the tension seemed to drain from his body. She rubbed his back and closed her eyes. “You needed that, Harry. Even if you don’t mourn or feel bad for killing a Death Eater, it still hurts you every time you’re forced into a situation like that. Wormtail was a disgusting human being and he deserved to die. Ask yourself this question. What would you have done if he hadn’t been firing on a crowd of helpless people?” she asked him gently.

“I-I-I would have tried to capture him. But he was using the killing curse on people, Hermione!” he protested.

“And so you did what you thought was right to protect yourself, your guardian and everyone else in the lobby. Remember when we talked about this being a war? People are going to die, Harry, and sometimes you’re going to be the reason they die. It’s not a pleasant truth, but it *is* truth. What you did today saved lives and you need to concentrate on that. And concentrate on the fact that nearly every Gryffindor girl has seen you naked except for your girlfriend!”

Harry looked at her in confusion. When it finally sunk in, he sat up and stared at her in horror. His expression was so comical she couldn’t help but laugh. “Oh honestly, Harry. It’s not the end of the world. Besides, I was as shocked to learn about it as you are. Mind you, I don’t think it’s fair that they’ve seen you naked and I haven’t.”

Harry looked at her for a moment and seriously considered getting starkers just to see her reaction, but Dobby appeared with dinner.

Hermione never knew just how close she’d come to her goal, only to be thwarted by the arrival of dinner from an overly happy house elf.

Harry stood and offered Hermione a hand up. “Would you care to join me for dinner, my lady?” he asked with a grin.

“I’d be most honored, my lord,” she replied with a smile.

---

A Sirius Business...

Tonks placed a cup of tea in front of Remus, and then laid a hand on his shoulder. “Alright, Remus?”

“I will be, Nymph,” he said shakily. “It’s difficult to wrap my mind around it all, though. Harry must be going through hell right now.”

“Hermione’s the best one to help him right now,” Emma said quietly.

“Maybe, but I feel like I should be doing something. Sirius would...” Remus stopped and his eyes

widened.

“What?” Tonks asked, a bit alarmed.

“Sirius!” Remus exclaimed. “With Wormtail dead, the Ministry...Oh Merlin, the Ministry!” Jumping to his feet, he spun around and grabbed Tonks’ hand. Dragging her to the foyer and ignoring her questions, he wrapped his arms around her and apparated with a loud crack.

Appearing outside of Amelia Bones’ office, Remus reached for the door handle, but Tonks stopped him. “What the hell is going on here, Remus?”

“You saw Harry kill Peter, Nymph. Peter, the person Sirius was supposed to have killed! The reason he went to Azkaban!” Remus exclaimed. “As an Auror, your testimony is golden.” Reaching for the door once more, he threw it open and dragged Tonks in after him.

Amelia looked up, startled, as her office door flew open. Seeing Remus and Tonks charge into the office and slam the door closed behind them, she stood up, alarmed. “What is it? What’s happened now?”

“Director, it’s about what took place at St. Mungo’s this morning,” Tonks began.

“I’ve received the reports about it,” Amelia said, confused. “There is no need to worry. Harry won’t be charged with anything, I can assure you,” she continued, taking a stab at the reason for their visit.

Remus paled. “I hadn’t even thought of that.” He sat down heavily, not waiting for an invitation.

Amelia looked at Tonks questioningly.

“It’s not about Harry, Director, at least, not directly anyway. Did any of the reports mention Peter Pettigrew?” Tonks asked.

“According to my reports, Harry killed him. I’m not sure whether I believe it, however. Pettigrew was reportedly killed years ago by Sirius Black,” Amelia told the young Auror.

“I was there, Director and the reports are true. Harry Potter did kill Peter Pettigrew,” Tonks reported.

“But that would mean...” Amelia sat down abruptly.

“Sirius was innocent,” Remus said angrily. “He spent twelve years in Azkaban because the Ministry refused to hold a trial.”

Amelia took off her monocle and rubbed her eyes tiredly. “Mr. Lupin,” she began, “I’m not sure what you want...”

“What I want,” Remus interrupted, “is Sirius’ name cleared, publicly.”

“I don’t think it’s going to be that easy,” the Director told him.

“No? Then perhaps the Ministry will explain to Harry why his godfather is still listed as Pettigrew’s murderer,” he told her coldly. “Once he calms down, I’m sure he’ll understand. Of course, there won’t be much left of the Ministry...”

“Remus,” Tonks said warningly.

“You seem to be under the impression that I can just snap my fingers and all will be well,” Amelia retorted. “I assure you, Mr. Lupin, it doesn’t work that way. I can write up the paperwork to begin the process, but Minister Fudge must sign off on it for it to be official.”

“Then by all means, let’s go and speak with the Minister,” Remus said, standing.

Ten minutes later, the small group was seated in front of the Minister of Magic, and being served tea by his secretary. Once the woman left the room, Cornelius smiled jovially. “So what brings you to my office this afternoon, Director Bones?”

“You’re aware of what happened this morning at St. Mungo’s,” Amelia replied. “Something interesting has been discovered, Minister. Something that you should be aware of.”

“And that is?” Fudge asked before taking a drink of his tea.

“Harry Potter killed Peter Pettigrew,” Remus said, baldly.

Cornelius choked on his tea. “What?” he sputtered.

“It’s true, Sir,” Tonks said. “I was there and witnessed the event, as did many others.”

When Fudge looked at Amelia in disbelief, she nodded. “I have the reports on my desk, Minister. They all say the same thing.”

“But that would mean...No, it’s impossible!” Fudge declared in ringing tones. “Sirius Black was convicted of killing Pettigrew and I am not about to challenge the Wizengamot’s ruling on...Oh, Merlin, there wasn’t...” he trailed off, staring at Amelia in growing horror.

“That’s right, Sir,” Remus said, coldly, watching as the truth dawned on the Minister. “There was no trial. An innocent man was thrown into prison without a trial and left there to rot for twelve years.”

“But Black is dead. If the Ministry were to announce his innocence, it would make the MLE and this administration look incompetent!” Cornelius exclaimed nervously. “There’s nothing for it but to leave things as they are.”

“You’re forgetting something, Fudge,” Remus said, glaring at the smaller man. “Harry is perfectly aware that his godfather was innocent. Now that Pettigrew’s dead, he’s expecting the Ministry to clear Sirius’ name.”



“We can’t,” the Minister cried. “The public would lose faith...”

“Very well,” Remus stated. He stood up and faced Tonks. “I guess we’ll have to tell Harry that the Ministry isn’t to be trusted any more. I’m sure he’ll then want to work out his differences with Dumbledore so that...”

“Wait!” Fudge demanded. “Dumbledore? No hold on just a moment!”

Remus turned to face the little man. “Yes? Was there something you wanted, Sir?”

Twenty minutes later, Remus, Tonks and Director Bones left Fudge’s office. Tonks and Amelia looked a bit shell-shocked, while Remus smiled smugly. Clutched in his hand was a copy of the official Ministry decree, declaring Sirius Black’s innocence.

---

Grimmauld Place, later that evening...

Harry would have liked to say that dinner alone in his sitting room with Hermione was a smashing romantic success. It was anything but that, however. The first interruption came from Hermione’s parents who wanted to check in on them and make sure Harry was alright. Harry still suspected that Dan was hoping to catch him in a compromising position with his daughter.

Both looked up from their meal when the door opened and Hermione’s parents entered. Dan surveyed the room, noting that the door to the bedroom was closed, both of them were fully dressed and sitting across from each other at a small table enjoying a quiet meal together.

“Would you like to join us?” asked Harry politely, although he privately admitted he really wished they’d go away.

“No, thank you, Harry,” replied Emma. “We just wanted to see how you were holding up.”

Harry shrugged. “I’m sure it will take a while to get over, but in a way it provides a bit of closure. The man who betrayed my parents to Voldemort is now explaining his deed to them in person.”

Dan snapped his fingers. “That reminds me! Tonks and Remus took off for the Ministry. Something about starting the process of getting Sirius’ name cleared.”

Harry closed his eyes for a moment and he mouthed a silent hopeful prayer before opening them again. “I hope they succeed. It’s too late for Sirius, but clearing his name is important,” he said huskily.

“Also, Tonks said that she gave Dobby a selection of salts that you’re to start using tonight, Harry. She strongly recommended you try the sandalwood scented salt first. She said that she’d had good results with it,” Emma told him.

“What are the salts for?” asked Hermione.

“Oh, that’s right. With all of the confusion over the attack, I never told anyone what the Healer said about my leg. The salts are for hot soaks. Healer Sorenson didn’t want to prescribe pain relieving potions for my leg. He said the salts would help a lot in relaxing the muscles. The down side is, there’s not much he can do. He figures I may recover another four to five percent of function, but that’s about it,” he said with a shrug.

“I think I’ll speak to Dobby to make sure you use them then. If I know you, and I do, they’ll slip your mind,” Hermione said.

Both Dan and Emma laughed, then bid the two good night. As they left the room, Ginny waltzed in and sat down on one of the arm chairs. Harry raised an eyebrow in question at her. Heaving herself to her feet, she walked over to the table and sampled a few items from the table.

“Ginny, would you like to join us?” asked Harry, again wishing he didn’t have to be polite.

“Oh no, I just wanted a nibble. Besides, food isn’t why I’m here anyway. Neville’s off with his Gran...I don’t think she quite trusts me, you know...and I wanted to talk to you.”

Harry sighed and put his napkin on the table. Obviously the Manor was strong with Murphy’s Magic tonight.

“So what do you need, Ginny?” asked Harry.

“Well, it’s like this... you see, my father, he’s written a letter confessing it all and he’s sent it to Amelia,” she started to say, but faltered as Harry’s expression darkened.

“Harry, please listen to Ginny before you blow your top,” Hermione pleaded. Harry shot her a glare that spoke volumes.

Ginny gulped nervously, then plunged on. “I know this is distasteful. And my father did not ask for me to ask you this. But I thought I’d try anyway. He really wants to apologize to you, Harry. He knows you can’t forgive him. He isn’t seeking that. He just wants to say he’s sorry. He’s even left my mum.”

Harry sat back in his chair, fuming and scowling. Ginny watched him carefully. The longer the silence went on, the more upset Ginny became. Finally she couldn’t take it anymore.

“Harry,” she choked out through a sob.

“Fine,” Harry snapped. “Set up your meeting, I’ll be there.”

Leaning heavily on his chair, he stood and summoned his cane. Turning, he limped from the sitting room into his bedroom, leaning heavily on the cane.

Ginny turned to Hermione. “Was he mad at me?” she asked in a hushed tone.

Hermione sighed. “No Ginny, he’s had a bad day. I think you were just the final straw for him

tonight. Don't worry, I'll go and talk to him. If I know Harry, by tomorrow he'll be mortified with his behavior and be apologizing to you."

Hermione stood and walked Ginny to the door. When the younger girl had left, she turned and steeled herself to confront Harry. She walked to his bedroom door and opened it. Harry stood, wearing only a robe and leaning heavily against his cane. She could see the beads of sweat on his brow.

"Harry, what's wrong?"

"I'm sorry, Hermione. I shouldn't have snapped at Ginny, but today's been hell and, just when I thought I'd be able to relax and have a nice quiet evening with my girlfriend, Ginny comes along out of the blue and drops that on me." He sat heavily on the edge of the bed, his hand rubbing his leg and wincing.

"Is Dobby drawing your bath?"

"He doesn't have to. The bath is always ready in the master bathroom. All he did was add the salts."

Levering himself to his feet, he limped towards his bathroom, a curious Hermione right behind him. She'd not seen how her mother and the two house elves had redecorated the master bath.

Entering, she gasped when she saw a large, lavishly appointed tub capable of fitting several people. The shower was a gently cascading waterfall, and the tub had several built in cushioned seats.

Harry turned around and spotted her. He blushed for a moment then his expression turned sly. "Hermione, unless you're looking to add yourself to the list of Gryffindor girls who've seen the Bloody-Boy-Who-Lived in all his naked glory, I'll bid you a good night."

Hermione looked at him for a moment, testing his resolve. She was sure he was joking. She grinned at him and crossed her arms, sure that he wouldn't dare. Besides, she was sure he had his boxers on underneath the robe.

Seeing that she was calling his hand, he leaned his cane against the wall and carefully crossed the few feet between them. He looked into her eyes and, as he stepped across the final foot that separated them, he undid the knot that held his robe closed and let it slip from his shoulders as he pulled her into an embrace.

Hermione's eyes widened for a moment, then she remembered he was probably wearing his boxers. He kissed her hard and she melted into his embrace. One of his hands slipped under her shirt in the back and she ran her hands down his bare back and slipped lower, expecting to find the waistband of his boxers.

She gasped, breaking the kiss when she realized there were no boxers to be found, only a

wonderfully tight bum. He kissed her neck and she trembled as she felt his arousal pressing against her. Heat spread through her and she leaned into him. Sliding a hand between their bodies, she gripped him gently. When he moaned, her knees nearly buckled.

His hand slid around under her shirt to cup her breast and gently knead her nipple. He shuddered against her as her hand tightened around him and measured his length.

“Hermione,” he said raggedly into her hair, his breath coming in gasps.

Her heart raced as he panted against her. It was a feeling of power like no magic she had ever known. He growled and lifted her skirt high enough to get his hand under it. She was beyond caring as she spread her legs slightly, giving him better access. She could feel his erection pressing against her thigh and she moaned as his hands pressed against her.

His hands left her and he wrapped an arm around her while reaching out to support himself against the wall. It took her a moment to realize what was happening. Once she had, she led him over to the edge of the tub and helped him sit down. She could see the muscles in his leg cramping and his breath was coming in gasps as the muscles tightening and released in painful spasms.

“Hermione,” he hissed through the pain. “I’m sorry... I...”

She knelt beside him and took his face in her hands. “Hush. You didn’t do anything I didn’t want to you to do. Besides, once we get your leg rested properly, I expect you to finish what we started tonight.”

“I’m sure you’ll find us a book or two on the subject so we know what we’re doing,” he said with a smile.

Hermione laughed. “That’s actually a good idea.”

“Well, you got to see the Boy-Who-Lived in all his bloody naked glory. And I’ll have you know, I have no intention of letting anyone else see me like this.”

He pulled her into his arms again and kissed her. When he finally released her, she rocked back on her knees, her eyes closed. He chuckled and started to get up to climb into the tub.

“Harry, promise me one thing.”

“What’s that?”

“When you’re ready to get out of the tub, make sure Dobby is here, just to be safe. Alright?”

Nodding, he slipped into the water with a sigh of relief. “Merlin, getting to sleep tonight is not going to be easy.”

Hermione grinned impishly. “At least you’ll be alone to take care of your problem. I’ve got to share my room with Ginny.”

Laughing, the two bid each other a good night.

---

Grimmauld Place, early morning...

The deck of the sailing ship heaved in the heavy seas and the waves crashed over the bow, soaking Harry in a frigid spray of cold water.

Harry bolted from the bed dripping wet and shivering from the drenching of cold water. He turned steely eyes on Remus and Tonks who were busy laughing themselves silly.

“What the bloody hell was that for, Moony?” he exclaimed as he stalked the older man.

Remus took one look at Harry and realized he might have gone too far. Pushing a parchment into Harry’s wet hands, he bolted for the door shouting, “Mischief Managed!”

Shaking his head and vowing revenge against the aging Marauder, Harry glanced at the parchment. Stunned, he slid down to the floor reading and rereading the document.

Hermione found him a few minutes later, soaked to the bone, still wearing nothing more than his boxers, and grinning manically. She poked her head through the door and took in the scene.

“Are you and Remus playing again?” she asked with a grin.

Harry waved her in, brandishing the parchment as if it was a holy object.

“LOOK! LOOK!” he shouted, waving the parchment at her.

She took the parchment while Harry rushed around getting dressed. He was so excited, he never even took note of the fact that he peeled out of the soaking wet boxers and changed into dry ones in front of her. Hermione, on the other hand noticed it, burned it into her memory, storing it away as one of her precious memories.

Glancing back down at the parchment, phrases like, ‘The Ministry deeply regrets’, ‘unfounded accusations and unjust imprisonment’ and ‘cleared of all charges’ caught her attention. Her eyes grew moist as she realized exactly what she was reading.

She squeaked in surprise as she was lifted off the floor from behind. Harry literally spun her in the air and caught her so that she was facing him and brought her into a passionate embrace.

She laughed as he held her, her feet still hovering a few inches off the ground. He gently lowered her down and hugged her again before grabbing her hand and pulling her towards the door of the bedroom. Hermione, while very happy, was glad that Harry had taken the time to finish dressing.

---

**Authors Notes:**

Yes, once again it's time for the dreaded authors notes. This is the point where we make lame excuses and poke fun at our readers who are trying to poke us with their reviews. So listen up people. These points are important! Well... not really, but it sounded good.

First off. This chapter covers a whopping 2-3 days time frame. It starts just after the meeting on Boxing Day and ends a few days later. Talk about advancing the story eh?

Next Item. There will be no animagus activity in this stories. It's old, it's cliché, and it's been beaten to death. Let's give the corpse a rousing toast and bury it for all time.

And then we have questions concerning the other Celtic myths. No, we will not be introducing the Sidhe, little people or other Celtic myths to the story line. It's quite convoluted as it is, thank you very much.

Charlie Weasley is in Romania tending dragons, exactly where canon as of book five put him.

For those that have lived in a box for the past twenty years, the movie quote was from Ghostbusters. Rent it, see it, it's a classic.

We thank all of the people who've pointed out that they believe we're interpreting the prophecy differently than they would. That's nice. Now go write your own story using your interpretation. This is our story and we'll do what we want with the prophecy. Nana nana boo boo!

Personal message to DebTheSnapeFanNow. Snape is not going to be redeemed in either this book or the sequel. For a redeemed Snape, read our other two stories.

For the record, yes we know anonymous reviews are disabled. You can only delete a review that is signed and we had some really obscene and nasty reviews with Dumbledore's army, so we disabled anonymous reviewing.

Again we'll state this is AU. Yes, HBP makes a case for Ron/Hermione and Harry with someone, probably either the squid or Hedwig. My wife liked HBP (Alyx here...I did like HBP, but not as much as her other books. It felt rushed and awkward to me), I got so disgusted with it I stopped reading it after chapter 3. In my mind, it doesn't exist. End of story and it's the last time I'll mention it. (Alyx here again...I'll keep working on him and eventually get him to read the book. Whenever HBP questions/comments/discussions crop up, I keep telling him he has to read the book before he can take part. Nothing like a bit of persuasion-through-annoyance!) (Bob back again. FINE! I'll read it when I see you finish Stephen King's 'The Stand', you know, that book you said you can't read because it never ends even though you love the movie? I tried reading HBP and tossed it as junk.)

Yes it does look like Arthur might be trying to mend his fences with Harry. You'll find out more about it in the next chapter.

**Pet Peeves:**

Authors that refuse to stick with one story. Ever had this happen to you? You find a wonderfully written story, great plot, and few errors. But it's incomplete. So you trip over to look at the author's profile and discover the author has about four hundred stories, all in various stages of being worked on.

Some of the best stories I've ever seen are incomplete because the author has spread his or her talent out across so many stories that it's impossible for him (or her) to finish one, story let alone twenty of them.

We do one story and one story only at a time. Sunset is hard enough to do without starting another story and slowing Sunset down. Look at Abraxan or Old Crow, both concentrate on one story at a time. Melindaleo did the same thing from what I could see. One story at a time.

For all of you talented authors out there, please, finish your story before moving on to the next. We understand the attack of the Rabid Plot Bunny From Hell, but write the idea down, finish your current story, then move on to the next, we beg you!

That's it, everyone. We hope you enjoyed the chapter!

Bob and Alyx

## **Sunset Over Britain**

### **Bad News, Howlers and the Prime Minister**

#### **Standard Disclaimer:**

Scene II, Act II:

Curtain lifts. Center stage - Ron stands dressed in a clown suit. Hermione swings above him on a trapeze bar wearing little more than a see through fishnet body stocking. Ron looks up and drools at her.

“Say the words, Ronald,” she says sweetly, smiling warmly at him.

“Oh, alright then. Bob and Alyx want everyone to know that JK Rowling owns this stuff. We don’t.”

“Very nice, Ron,” she praises him. “Now for your surprise!”

From the left side of the stage comes the sound of stampeding elephants. Ron looks up in fear and tries to move, but his feet are stuck to the floor.

“Sticking charms,” Hermione informs him with a giggle.

The herd of elephants run across the stage while above them floats Harry on his broomstick, zapping the elephants in the rear with stinging hexes.

Once the elephants are gone, there is no sign of Ron. Only a red smear to mark where he once stood. Harry floats over to Hermione and she climbs onto his broomstick.

“What a big broomstick you have, Harry!”

“You have no idea Hermione, but you’ll find out!”



Breakfast at Grimmauld Place...

Entering the kitchen with Hermione still holding his hand, Harry didn't notice the sullen atmosphere in the room until he sat down. Looking at Tonks, whose features were rapidly shifting, Harry knew she was upset about something. It was the only time she only lost control of her metamorph abilities.

Silently she handed Harry a copy of the Daily prophet. He quickly spotted what had her so upset.

*Boy-Who-Lived Kills One, Permanently Disables  
Four Others in Attack at St. Mungos.*

*Yesterday morning in an attack in the lobby of St. Mungos, the Boy-Who-Lived killed one person and severely injured four others. The Ministry claims that Mr. Potter was responding to an alleged attack of Death Eaters and goes on to claim that the individual killed was none other than Peter Pettigrew, who had previously been listed by the Ministry as having been killed at the hands of the mass murderer, Sirius Black.*

*The alleged attack began at nearly eleven A.M. yesterday and resulted in a total of eleven people dead, including the supposed Peter Pettigrew and another fifteen injured. Mr. Potter, who was supposedly visiting the hospital in regard to a leg injury, got involved shortly after the attack started, according to Ministry sources. However, the Daily Prophet has located at least one witness who claims Mr. Potter started the fight.*

*In a related matter, the Ministry of Magic this morning announced that all charges against Sirius Black have been dropped and his name has been cleared. A Ministry spokesman is quoted as saying, "In light of this new evidence we have to acknowledge that a grave miscarriage of justice has occurred and Mr. Black was indeed innocent of all charges."*

*The Daily Prophet finds these latest events highly suspicious. We call on the Minister to form a special investigative team to look into the events at St. Mungos. We find it highly unlikely that a mere boy, even the Boy-Who-Lived, would be capable of defending himself against six Death Eaters without resorting to dark magic. The Daily Prophet has learned that Hogwarts has indeed been letting its students study dark magic under the approval of Headmaster Dumbledore. The Prophet urges that Mr. Potter be taken into protective custody until such time as a hearing can be held and Headmaster Dumbledore be relieved of his position.*

Harry crumpled the paper in his fist and tossed it down on the table in anger. "So? Am I under arrest then, Tonks?" he demanded of her. Hermione gasped and unraveled the paper to read the article.

Tonks swallowed nervously. "No, Harry. But Amelia did ask me to get more information about the spells you used yesterday."

Harry chuckled. "Well, if those spells were dark then you better plan on throwing most of the Wizarding world in Azkaban for using spells by the same author."

“Harry, I know you don’t like this, but help me out here. Amelia’s request isn’t unreasonable. She could have ordered you in for a formal inquest. Right now I’m just supposed to ask you for more information,” she said carefully.

Harry sighed and his shoulders drooped. “I know, Tonks. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t be angry with you.” Straightening his shoulders he looked her in the eye. “For Wormtail I used ‘Levitatus ossis torqueo magnopere’.”

Hermione looked up and frowned. “Harry, that’s an old healer spell created by Merlin himself. But you didn’t complete the incantation, you left out the restrictive clause.”

Harry smiled coldly at her, the smile never reached his eyes. “I know. Wormtail, I’m sure, found it a novel experience.”

“Harry,” said Remus cautiously.

“No, Remus! I don’t regret killing him. He was a murderer, an evil and twisted thing who gave up his rights as a human a long time ago. You weren’t there when he betrayed my parents. You didn’t see the enjoyment he got out of killing Cedric Diggory. I can still hear Voldemort’s words in my dreams, ‘Kill the spare’ and Peter did exactly as he was ordered. I don’t like having to kill, but as someone very special pointed out to me last night, sometimes, in order to save lives, you must take lives.”

Hermione reached out to touch Harry’s hand and he seemed to visibly relax.

Tonks scribbled some notes on a parchment then looked up at Harry expectantly. “What about the second spell? You took out five Death Eaters, permanently blinding them, and turned them into muggles in the process.”

Harry leaned back in his chair and put an arm around Hermione’s shoulders. “I’ll let my smart witch explain to you exactly what Lucerna judico means.”

Hermione bolted out from his grip and stood up. “Lucerna judico? You used that? Harry that spell has been un-castable for over a thousand years.”

Tonks glanced between the two looking annoyed. “Alright, I get it. It’s an old spell, but what...”

“No Tonks, you don’t understand. Merlin himself designed Lucerna judico as a means of judging criminals. Loosely translated it means ‘The Light of Judgement’. No one since Merlin has been able to cast it. It could be cast in a room full of people and only those who are evil, truly evil, would be affected by it. It’s incredibly powerful and the punishment can vary based on how evil the person is.”

Tonks nodded in understanding and looked relieved. “Good, no one will be able to mistake spells by Merlin as being a dark spell. I’ll write this up and get it to Amelia this morning.”

Harry looked at his guardian curiously. “Tell me Tonks, do you really believe that there are light

and dark spells?”

“It’s what we’ve been taught for years, Harry,” Remus said. “Why?”

Harry conjured a ball of fire in his hand and looked at it for a while. “The *Incendio* charm is a useful spell. It provides light and warmth and we use it to cook our food. But what if I hurled this ball of fire at Mr. Granger?”

Dan looked momentarily worried until he saw the look of amusement in Harry’s eye.

Harry dispelled the flame and looked up at the shocked faces. “Another example, perhaps. A patient lies dying of a disease that wracks the body with uncontrollable pain. In a few days, the patient will die but, for the moment, you can keep them alive, even if you can’t control or ease the pain. Would it be evil to use the killing curse to end their suffering early? I’ve found old medical texts which suggest that, at one time, giving ‘mercy’ was common place. And even older medical texts suggesting that the killing curse might have one time been a healer spell.”

Remus, Tonks and Hermione looked at Harry in some confusion. Dan Granger leaned over the table from his seat. “I think what Harry’s trying to say is it’s the intent that matters.”

Harry smiled at Dan gratefully. “Thanks Mr. Granger, that’s exactly what I’m wondering. We’re taught that there are light and dark spells and I’m wondering if there’s really a distinction for most spells. For example, I just gave a reason why the killing curse could be used for good and the *Incendio* charm used for evil. It boils down to intent. A *Stupefy* ing charm is considered a light spell, but Bellatrix’s intent when she cast that at Sirius was to hurt him. A light spell resulted in a death. So was it truly a light spell when it was cast?

“Now mind you, not all spells can be thrown into such light. The Cruciatus curse, for example, has no good use that I can see. But I’m coming to believe that, for a bulk of magic, there is no light and dark, only shades of gray and the intent of the caster to make it light or dark.”

“Sweet Merlin’s beard! This is exactly what Lily once said shortly after they went into hiding. She wanted us to start using some of the darker spells to protect ourselves, arguing that it was the intent that made the spell dark, not the spell itself,” Remus said softly.

“Harry,” Hermione asked now curious. “What’s the difference between say an Auror like Tonks using the killing curse and a Death Eater using the killing curse then?”

“It’s all in the intent, Hermione. The Auror takes no joy from the act and probably feels like I did when I got home yesterday, bloody awful. The Death Eater enjoys what he/she is doing. The Auror does the killing as an act of justice. It’s done for the greater good and always as a last resort. The Death Eater shares no such high minded attitude.”

“But you didn’t try capturing Wormtail,” Hermione pointed out gently.

“I know, Hermione, but I’m not an Auror, either. Wormtail was killing people. I did what I felt

was necessary to make sure he'd never kill again," Harry replied softly. He leaned back in his chair and sighed heavily. "And because of that, it looks like I'm going back to being hated by the Wizarding World again."

Hermione glanced at the paper, knowing he was right.

"Hated? Because of one newspaper article?" exclaimed Emma.

"Mum, last year the press tore Harry apart. People who didn't know him thought he was either an attention seeking prat, or outright insane," Hermione said softly.

"Why do I even bother anymore? I've got enough money, I could move every one of us someplace new and we'd never have to work a day in our lives. I'd never have to read another newspaper article calling my sanity into question or scrutinizing my every action. What's so special about this world that makes it worth saving?" Harry asked softly.

The adults exchanged concerned looks, unsure how to answer the young man.

"Because the man I love wouldn't abandon this world without trying to save some part of it," Hermione replied sharply, unwilling to allow him his moment of self-pity.

He grinned slightly at her words and gripped one of her hands tightly. "Remind me of that when they're spitting in my face on Diagon Alley and burning me in effigy in Hogsmeade." When Hermione scowled at him, he quickly changed the subject. "So, when do we meet with Arthur?"

"Ginny's set up a meeting in the Leaky Cauldron for noon. She and her brothers are getting a private room and are planning on being there about an hour before their Dad shows up," Hermione replied.

Tonks and Remus both frowned. "Harry, I'm not so sure it's a good idea to be meeting with Arthur Weasley," Tonks said hesitantly.

"You're probably right, Tonks, but I'm going to go to it anyway. I may not owe much to the Weasleys, but I owe Ginny this," Harry said firmly, then he glanced up as Ginny walked into the kitchen.

"Owe me what?" she asked yawning.

"Meeting with your father."

Ginny smiled at him, knowing he wasn't happy about the meeting, but would do it anyway.

"Ginny, about last night, I apologize. I had no right to be so rude to you," Harry told the red head.

"It's all right, Harry. I understand," she said seriously. She sat down at the table and reached for a pitcher of juice. *Hermione was right*, she thought. *He really is a gentleman most of the time. If I didn't have Neville I'd tear her hair out to get my hands on him!*

Malfoy Manor...

Voldemort was angry, and when Voldemort was angry, everyone was afraid. Earlier that morning, a very foolish junior Death Eater gave the Master a copy of the Daily Prophet, where they reported the death of Wormtail.

It took nearly a dozen junior Death Eaters to clean up all the pieces of that foolhardy individual. Now Voldemort was handing out Cruciatus curses like prizes at a circus, as Lucius was the latest recipient.

“Lucius,” Voldemort spat, staring down at the man at his feet, his red eyes blazing, “send for that fool, LeStrange. I want Potter killed even if it takes every servant in that school!”

“Yes, my Lord,” the blond replied. Lucius stood up, shaky on his feet and watched the world spin around him as he tried to gain control. Once his balance returned, he left the room to find Rodolphus LeStrange.

---

The Leaky Cauldron...

Harry, Hermione and Ginny entered the Leaky Cauldron wearing their concealment cloaks. Harry had seen to it that everyone in his group had received one as a Christmas present.

Tonks and Remus were both upset about this meeting, but Harry had remained firm. He was sure that Tonks and Remus were somewhere nearby just in case, but he was also sure that they wouldn't be needed today.

Harry walked over to the counter to talk to Tom, the owner and manager of the Leaky Cauldron. “You have a private room reserved under the name of Weasley?” he asked, his face hidden by the hood of his cloak.

Tom peered into the opening of the hood and shuddered. The charm on the interior of the hood made him faintly nauseous. He hadn't dealt with these strange, cloaked people before the group that had removed Narcissa Malfoy from his care and he was convinced they were Aurors. He was sure they were somehow related to the Ministry.

Tom looked around the room carefully to see if anyone was watching them before replying. “Room number three, top of the stairs on the right,” he replied quietly. If they were Ministry, he didn't want to annoy them.

Harry tossed a galleon on the counter. “Much thanks, Innkeeper,” he said, trying not to laugh and motioned Ginny and Hermione to the stairs.

Entering the room, he saw that Bill and the twins had already arrived. They still had an hour before Arthur was due. He held the door open for Hermione and Ginny and ushered them in. Fred,

George and Bill stood up, grinning at the cloaked figures.

Closing the door, Harry pushed back his hood and sat at the long table provided by the Inn while Hermione explained about the cloaks and their purpose. The Weasleys, being who they were, thought the whole idea of the Brotherhood was one of the funniest pranks they'd ever heard and told Harry that he was probably the only person to succeed in pranking Dumbledore.

"Guys, I want you all to understand that, no matter what happens here, if you can maintain a relationship with your father, you should. It's possible that I may never speak to him again, but for your own sakes, don't shut him out of your lives," Harry said seriously.

"The problem is," began Bill, speaking for the others, "we believe that what they did was little better than stealing from one of us, Harry. Mind you, I won't hold Ron's actions against Dad. I think Ron's cheese has slipped off his cracker somewhere and he's not playing with a full chess set anymore. My brothers and I, well, we appreciate you giving Dad a chance to explain."

"Hey, what am I? Chipped beef?" protested Ginny

"Would you like to be?" asked Fred.

"I'm sure we can arrange it," added George.

"Don't we have a chipped beef candy yet?" asked Fred.

"No, it's still on the drawing board," replied George.

"Would you three like to experience my improved Bat Bogey hex?" asked the petite red head.

All three Weasley men cringed, while Hermione and Harry laughed.

"You guys know that Dad owes not only Harry, but Hermione an apology," Ginny told the others.

"I don't think..." started Hermione.

"No, Hermione. Ginny's spot on. What Ron tried to do to you was inexcusable under any circumstances. We," Bill said, pointing to all of them, "were deeply angered by his actions, and shamed that he'd do that to you. I know you have a family of your own, but we always thought of you as part of ours. What Ron did was abhorrent."

Hermione looked down at the table and bit her lip. She had worked hard to put that particular incident behind her, but with Bill and the others talking about it, it all came crashing down on her again. Her eyes filled with tears and she felt a pair of strong arms wrap around her. She looked up to see Harry holding her, Ginny and Bill each held one of her hands and even the twins looked at her with somber expressions on their faces.

Trying to regain her composure, she stammered out an apology, but the twins wouldn't hear of it. "Shut it, Hermione," said George.

“You have nothing to apologize for,” Fred added fiercely.

“And you don’t have a Bat Bogey hex to threaten us with,” George teased gently.

“Oh quite! A defenseless babe, she is,” Fred said, haughtily buffing his nails.

“Boys, Hermione probably knows more spells than all of us combined. Why, just the other day she was telling me about this circumcision spell she’d learned about that could be done from a distance,” Ginny said in wide eyed innocence.

Every male in the room cringed and swung his gaze to the bushy haired young witch. When she smiled sweetly at them, they all grimaced and looked away.

Harry was about to say something to Hermione when the door opened to admit Arthur Weasley. His clothing was rumpled and it was obvious he hadn’t slept well recently.

Harry stood and walked around to the back of Hermione’s chair, placing his hands on her shoulders. He looked at the elder Weasley coldly. Ginny popped out of her chair and went to her father. She grabbed him by a hand and tugged him forward.

Arthur took off his hat and held it in front of him like a shield. “Thank you for coming, Harry. I know I can’t expect your forgiveness, but I wanted to tell you how sorry I am and maybe give you a little understanding as to why I did what I did,” Arthur offered softly.

At Harry’s nod, he looked down for a moment to gather his thoughts before beginning. “When Dumbledore approached us the summer before your first year, we were in terrible shape financially. I only make three thousand galleons a year and we had Percy, the twins and Ron going to Hogwarts. It costs six hundred galleons a year to send a child to Hogwarts, and there was Dumbledore, offering us money to befriend a boy. I have to admit I felt uneasy about it, but the lure of the money was strong, Harry. We didn’t know you at all then, and my uneasiness grew as the years went by. By the end of your second year, we owed you a Life debt for saving Ginny. I wanted to stop the payments at that point, but Molly wouldn’t hear of it. She called Dumbledore to the Burrow and he sat down and explained that all of your money would go to your muggle relatives when you died.” Arthur paused, an expression of disgust and doubt on his face.

“He needs to know everything, Dad,” Ginny said firmly.

“Right. Well, as I said, Dumbledore said all of the money would be left to the Dursley’s when you died, as if rewarding them for their years of abuse. And he made it clear that you would die, Harry. He said there was no way a child could fight Voldemort and win.

“The summer before your forth year, Ron learned about the money and insisted that he be given some of it. By that point I knew we’d lost all honor. Between Ron and Molly, they wouldn’t allow us to back out. While I know my boys and Ginny thought of you as one of the family, Molly and Ron had ceased to do so.

“Harry, nothing I can say will earn your forgiveness, or Hermione’s. I just want you both to know I deeply regret what has happened...what has become of all of us,” Arthur concluded.

Harry stood silent for a moment, staring at the elder Weasley, his eyes hard and his magic burning behind them. “You’re right, Arthur. Forgiveness is not something you can simply expect to receive with a few words. However, I’m willing to give you a chance to earn it. I know of the letter you’ve sent to Amelia and I’ve told her to do nothing about it for now.”

Arthur looked up sharply. *He’s telling Amelia what to do? What is going on here?* Arthur wondered.

Hermione smiled as Harry slipped into what she called his ‘Teacher’ mode.

“Yes, Arthur. Amelia does listen to me in this matter. Now here’s what you’re going to do. We’re coming down to a major turning point in the war against Voldemort and because of the failure of our leaders we’re going to lose Britain. I, and a few friends, like your sons and daughter, are aware of what’s going to happen and we are working to preserve what we can. But make no mistake; the Wizarding world in Britain is about to come to an ugly end.

“You have two choices Arthur, and I am only offering them to you because of your family, who I happen to consider part of my family. You can either continue as you have been, miserable and alone, and soon the war will catch up with you. Or, you can help us and, in the process, maybe heal the breach between you and your children. I don’t know yet if it’s possible to heal the breach between you and I. And as for Hermione, that’s up to her.

“Having said that, here are my terms. You’ll join your sons in what I call Team Weasley. Bill is the team leader and you’ll take direction from him. When I give the signal, Team Weasley will begin some tasks that your sons know about. In the meantime, you’ll cease all contact with Dumbledore and his bird watching society, preferably resigning from them. Make no mistake here, Arthur, if I find out that you’ve talked to Dumbledore or any of his cronies, I’ll wipe your memories and have you tossed into Azkaban,” Harry said coldly.

Arthur nodded at the young man. Everyone in the room could feel the magic pouring off Harry as he spoke. Hermione was afraid he was going to blow up the building.

Arthur lowered his eyes and shuffled his feet. “I’ll do what you ask, Harry.”

Harry nodded slowly and stepped back behind Hermione. He put one hand on her shoulder as if reminding Arthur that there was still some unfinished business between them. Arthur nodded to Harry, then turned to look at the young witch and swallowed hard.

“Hermione,” Arthur stammered, “I don’t have the words to say to you. What my son did and tried to do to you was repugnant. He dishonored our family and our name, and in doing so, hurt you in ways I can’t even imagine.”

“I can, Dad,” murmured Ginny. “Ron’s actions make him undeserving of the name Weasley.”



“I know, Ginevra,” Arthur said quietly. “That’s why the divorce papers I filed also include a formal declaration disowning Ronald. He will take his mother’s name of Prewitt.”

The four Weasleys exchanged a shocked glance. This was unexpected. Ginny leaned against Fred, crying softly and he wrapped his arms around his sister, holding her. Even Hermione’s eyes filled with unshed tears. Harry bowed his head and closed his eyes. The Weasley’s had caused him considerable pain in the last year, but they’d always seemed so solid, so...family. And now that rock was breaking apart.

“I’m sorry,” Harry said in a whisper. It was barely audible. Arthur and the others turned to stare at him incredulously. “I’m beginning to think it must be a family curse,” Harry said quietly. “Everyone that...”

“Don’t you dare say it, Harry Potter!” Ginny retorted loudly. She walked over to him and, despite her small stature, seemed for a moment to loom over him with her hands on her hips, staring up at him and glaring. “You didn’t do this to my family. We did it to ourselves and I’ll hex you into next year if you think we’re going to let you accept any blame for this!”

She stuck a finger under his nose and shook it violently at him. When Harry backed up, many in the room began to snicker at the two of them. Harry looked at Hermione in an appeal for help but she was too busy laughing.

Ginny continued to yell at him so he decided it was time to take matters into his own hands. He cast a few illusion spells wandlessly and then cast a camouflage charm on himself. As Harry faded from sight, Ginny looked around in confusion.

When she turned back to the table, she saw Hermione sitting there, and four perfect copies of Harry Potter. Ginny’s eyes narrowed in anger. “That’s not fair, Harry!”

“Of course it isn’t, but it is funny, Ginny. Even you have to admit that.” The reply came from four different throats, and all four Harry’s looked at her earnestly, though their eyes danced merrily.

The twins, finally catching onto what Harry had pulled, fell out of their seats, laughing.

---

## **Grimmauld Place...**

Emma sat in front of the warm fire in the sitting room attached to their bedroom. She watched her husband pace back and forth muttering under his breath. Finally, she put down the dentistry journal she had been attempting to read.

“Dan, would you kindly sit down and tell me what is bothering you or should I call Remus and ask him to stun you? I swear you’re wearing a hole in the carpet,” Emma said in exasperation.

Dan whirled on her. “Aren’t you the least bit upset? Didn’t you hear her this morning?”

“Of course I heard her, Dan. My question is why, are you upset? You suspected she felt this way about him for months now.”

“Suspecting and knowing are two different things! She actually came out and said it, in front of witnesses!”

Emma placed the journal onto an end table and looked up at her husband, giving him her undivided attention. “Well? What’s your objection? That young man not only loves her, he’d give his life to make sure she’s safe and happy. He’s rich beyond belief and it hasn’t affected him. He’s downright humble. He’s generous to a fault and cares about people he’s never even met. He’s spending money to save people who don’t even know him! By Wizarding standards, he’s the strongest wizard the world has ever seen. And still he’s humble about it. It embarrasses him. He obviously loves her despite an upbringing that should have left him incapable of loving anyone. So I’ll ask again. What is your objection?”

“They’re too young!”

Emma smiled at him gently. “By our standards, yes, they are young. But are they really, Dan? Harry’s never had a real childhood. That poor boy went from infant to adult in a quarter of the time the rest of us take. And Hermione, well...she’s always tried to be more mature than her peers. But that’s all beside the point. In the Wizarding world, they have a life expectancy that’s double ours and they still marry young. Harry’s parents were married within weeks of their graduation from Hogwarts, and they had Harry only a few years later. They do things differently in this world. No abortions, divorce is only possible if the head of your family agrees to it. People get married earlier and stay that way, happily I might add.”

Dan looked at her curiously, “How do they manage that?”

“I talked to Tonks about it. Apparently a couple needs to have a compatibility spell run on them before they can get married. If the compatibility is less than seventy percent, the couple must attend yearly counseling sessions for the first twenty-five years of their marriage if they insist on going through with it. If they’re over seventy percent, they don’t need to attend the sessions. Tonks told me that Ginny ran a compatibility test on Harry and Hermione and it was off the scale. According to Tonks and Remus, Harry’s parents had a compatibility of one hundred and eighty percent. Harry and Hermione are over three hundred percent.

“If it’s any consolation, Dan, I know for a fact that your daughter’s virtue is still intact, although I suspect that won’t last long. Our daughter’s chosen herself a man who honors her by not pressuring her like someone else I remember,” she said sternly, though her eyes danced with amusement.

Dan’s expression colored in embarrassment and he looked down at the carpet, shuffling his feet in embarrassment.

“I think part of your problem, my beloved husband, is that you see Harry sniffing around our daughter and then you remember how you were at his age. You were a horny little devil in your

day my dear, and still are. But Harry isn't you. According to Hermione, she's had to walk him through things that any boy at his age should have known. In fact, I'd bet that she'll be leading him for a while until he manages to gain some confidence in himself."

"Alright, alright. I get the picture! You don't have to draw diagrams and illustrations. Harry's an angel."

Emma frowned and sighed deeply. "Shall I kill you here and now, or should I wait for Hermione to come home and let her do it? I swear some decisions are tough to make."

Dan glared at her angrily and Emma pretended to recoil in fear before laughing at him.

"Honestly Dan, what you need to understand is our daughter has fallen in love with a good man, an honorable man, a man who loves her as he loves nothing else in this world or any other. That's all you need to understand and accept it! She's happy with Harry. Be happy for her. She's even had a vision of my mother telling her that Harry was her chosen mate. She's a smart woman...yes woman, Daniel Granger! She's not just our baby girl anymore. She's a grown woman who's also a legal adult in this country. She's smart enough to make sure she doesn't make us grandparents too early."

Emma reached over and grabbed his hand, pulling him down onto the couch she was sitting on. She kissed him passionately, then looked deep into his eyes. "I'll tell you this only once, Daniel Granger. Do not interfere with Hermione. She's happy and the last thing you want is both of us angry with you."

"I wasn't planning on interfering, Emma. But if I can't at least complain to you, then who can I complain to? I'm her father, I'm supposed to hate any man she brings home. I always thought I'd find a lot to complain about with any guy she brought home. Instead, she manages to find the one guy in England who places more importance on her happiness than she does. Age is about the only thing left for me to complain about," Dan said, trying to disguise the whine in his voice. He shivered as Emma nibbled on his neck.

"Then find something else to do besides complaining about things you can't change," she murmured huskily against his neck.

Dan slid one hand down to rest on her hip and did exactly what his wife asked him to do. After all, wasn't that what a dutiful husband was supposed to do?

---

### **Grimmauld Place, that evening at dinner...**

Harry and Hermione had returned earlier that afternoon from their meeting with the Weasleys. Most of the their guests had already left, the sole exception being Luna, who had asked to stay over so she and Draco could celebrate the New Year together. Narcissa found the small blonde girl quite entertaining despite her apparent oddness and had invited Luna to share her bedroom with her.

No one really minded, with the guests gone the house felt empty again. Harry sat with everyone else at the kitchen table getting ready to enjoy a cozy evening meal. He glanced around the table noting the silly grin on Dan's face and Emma's smug look. He nudged Hermione and nodded in the direction of her parents. She looked for a moment, then looked away, her face flushed.

"I'll explain later," she whispered.

Harry nodded and tuned into the conversation going on between Remus and Tonks.

"It's all a matter of timing, Tonks," Remus said heatedly.

"I don't see how you can say that, Remy. We have so much to do that, even if we start now, we may never get it all done in time," Tonks retorted.

Harry jumped into the conversation. "I set the kick off date when I did because we don't know when the end will come. The problem is, if we set it too early, we risk tipping off our hand. The end will come with massive confusion, Tonks, and if we're careful we'll be able to slip by, hidden by the noise of all that confusion."

Tonks eyed Harry carefully. "Yes, I see that, Harry. But if we start earlier, we'd be able to save more people."

"I'm telling you we can't do it, Tonks. This won't be a case of saving everyone, this is a case of saving what we can," Harry snapped in reply. His hands trembled in frustration.

"I'm sorry Tonks," he said a moment later. "I didn't mean to snap at you. Look, I don't like the idea of only saving what we can either. I want to save them all, but I can't. It's just not possible, and everyone keeps telling me if I go after Voldemort right now, I'll lose. I truly want to save them all Tonks, even if they hate and fear me," Harry ended in a whisper.

Tonks stood quickly, knocking over her chair with a loud bang. She stepped over to embrace Harry. She could see that the conversation had caused him quite a lot of distress.

With most of the eyes at the table fixed on Harry and Tonks, no one noticed Hermione's eyes glazing over. She shuddered once, then again. Finally, she spoke in a voice unlike her own.

"...A STAR WILL BURN BRIGHT IN THE REALM...NIGHT WILL BECOME DAY AS DARKNESS DECENDS...AND THE SOUND WILL SHAKE THE FOUNDATIONS OF ALL BELIEF...WHEN ANCIENT STONES ARE TURNED TO ASH...A SCORE OF DAYS ARE ALL THAT IS LEFT...BEFORE THE FAITHFUL MUST FLEE...A STAR WILL BURN BRIGHT IN THE REALM..."

Harry jerked away from Tonks and looked at Hermione in alarm. Luna was already passing him a parchment with a copy of what she had said. Harry let her repeat the prophecy while he double checked it against the parchment one more time before touching her gently on the shoulder.

Hermione shuddered again and her eyes focused on Harry. She looked at him in confusion until he

handed her the parchment. She gasped and paled, trembling against him as she read.

He reached over and gently removed the parchment from her hand. Then he made several copies, which he passed around the table. Now others would be able to work on deciphering the newest prophecy.

Harry then focused on Hermione. Placing a finger under her chin, he forced her head up gently and met her eyes. "Hermione, don't worry about it tonight. In fact, I'm handing this over to Remus. He's as good a researcher as you are," he said softly.

Tonks pulled a small vial out of her pocket and handed it to Emma. "Put three drops of this her tea tonight. She'll sleep straight through," she whispered. Harry caught the dialog and nodded to Tonks.

"You're tired. Why don't you go with your mum, take a hot bath and I'll stop by later to see if you're still awake? Right now though, I'd like to talk to your dad. Guy stuff, you know," Harry said, his eyes calm and comforting.

She nodded uncertainly and let her mother lead her out of the kitchen. Harry watched her leave before leaning back in his chair and sighing in relief.

"You didn't really have something to say to me did you, Harry?" asked Dan.

"Actually I did, Mr. Granger," Harry replied, picking up one of the copies and tossing it in Dan's direction. "I'm no expert in prophecies, but something in this screams muggle world to me, not wizarding world. I'd like to ask you for a couple of favors. First off, we're going to need to find a way of monitoring what's going on in the muggle world. That suggests some sort of radio I think, but I'm not sure what kind. You still have that Gringotts card, so I'll need you to find out what kind of radio we need and pick it up for us.

Dan nodded thoughtfully. "Yes, I can see that. Maybe we should go with a scanner or some kind of short wave receiver. I'll work on it. What else do you need?"

"Alright, the next is going to be harder. Hermione loathes the fact that she's a seeress. To her, divination is hogwash, plain and simple. What I want to do is take her mind off this for a while. New Years is two days away. I was thinking that maybe I could take her out tomorrow, or even a holiday show on New Years Eve? I could take her into muggle London...someplace fancy maybe? But I haven't a clue where to take her."

"Depends on how much you're willing to spend for an evening out, Harry."

Harry looked thoughtful for a moment. "I have thirty five hundred pounds of muggle money in my dresser upstairs. Would I need more than that?"

Dan swallowed in surprise then shook his head. "No Harry, you won't need more than that. I do believe there's an excellent show at the Royal Opera House. But Hermione would need a formal

dress for that.”

“I’ll pick up the tickets for you, Harry, and take her out for a new dress tomorrow. You just have to worry about getting yourself dolled up,” Tonks offered.

“Excellent! I’ll let you use my card for her dress, Tonks. Between shopping, a show and dinner, she’ll be too busy to worry about that prophecy,” replied Harry.

---

Grimmauld Place, Breakfast, New Years Day...

Hermione woke up late. She slipped out of bed and threw on a robe and some slippers before padding softly down to the kitchen for breakfast. Her mind was a whirl recalling last night. Harry had arranged for Tonks to take her out the day before to purchase a formal evening dress, but no one had told her the reason for it. Tonks decided that if she was going to need a formal dress, she’d need a total makeover as well. With Emma tagging along, the three women had spent the day shopping.

Hermione didn’t know the reason for the dress and makeover until the 1935 Park Ward Rolls Royce Limo Harry had hired pulled up in front of number Eleven Grimmauld Place and dropped them off in front of the Royal Opera House. Hermione actually felt like a storybook princess for a few hours, which was exactly how Harry wanted her to feel. Afterwards, they’d dined in a little out of the way muggle restaurant recommended by their driver before returning to Grimmauld Place. She was still bubbling with excitement when she padded into the kitchen the next morning.

Hermione stopped short when she spotted Tonks tending what looked to be a massive black eye on Harry. His lip was split and bleeding as well.

“What happened to you?” she practically screamed at him.

“Diagon Alley, Hermione. That happened to me,” Harry replied heavily.

Remus pushed a copy of the Daily Prophet over towards her. Numbly she took a seat and began to read.

### *Attack on Diagon Alley by Unknown Hooligans!*

*New Years Eve celebrations on Diagon Alley were cut short last night when a group of masked hooligans began attacking people and destroying property. Ministry Spokesman Percy Weatherbee is quoted as saying, “We are sure the attackers were Death Eaters, supporters of You-Know-Who”. The Prophet, on the other hand, does not believe it at all. We have reason to believe these were really Hogwarts students under the command of either Harry Potter or Albus Dumbledore or both. Both of whom are suspected of teaching Dark Arts within the school.*

*Over forty people have been sent to St. Mungos as the result of the attack and another twenty are confirmed dead. In addition to the wounded and killed, with the exception of Ollivanders and*

*Gringotts, most of the shops in Diagon Alley were destroyed or heavily damaged.*

*The Daily Prophet calls upon the Ministry to stop lying to the public and to take steps to clean up the mess at Hogwarts. If Harry Potter has not turned dark, then we demand that he immediately be placed in protective custody and removed from the influence of that school and its shady Headmaster.*

*And if Harry Potter hasn't turned to the dark side, then why didn't he stop the attack? No. We at the Prophet believe it's time the Boy-Who-Lived owned up to the fame and responsibility he has to the Wizarding World. We have coddled that boy for far too long and this is the thanks we get for treating him so well? We think not!*

Hermione looked up from the article and her eyes narrowed speculatively. "Alright, I see there was problem on Diagon Alley last night, but how did you get injured, Harry?"

Harry sighed as Tonks handed him a potion for his black eye. He downed it in a fast gulp then he put the cup on the table before he replied. "I wanted to get more owl treats this morning and I thought it would be nice if I picked up some flowers for you. I didn't get more than ten feet into the Alley when I was mobbed. People were throwing rocks and cobblestones. I think I was called every name in the book this morning. Apparently the Prophet thinks I'm evil and the people are believing them again."

He shook his head, wincing as he did. "It's fifth year all over again," he murmured. "Only this time the Ministry isn't the one telling the Prophet to crucify me."

Harry stood and started to walk out of the kitchen, his stance and gait giving evidence to the pain he was in. It was obvious that he had been hit in more places than his face.

"Where are you going?" Tonks asked him, concerned.

"I think I'll go lay down for a while, then maybe take a hot soak," he replied.

Harry left the kitchen and Tonks bit her lip worriedly. She hadn't the heart to tell him that, since the attack at St. Mungos, his mail, which was still being screened by the Ministry, had increased by one thousand percent, over three hundred howlers a day! Once again the wizarding world was turning it's back on Harry Potter.

Hermione checked on Harry an hour later, only to find him sleeping fitfully. She knew he'd wake up soon so she grabbed a book and pulled a chair over to sit near him. She was determined to make sure he didn't allow public opinion of him sway him from his course.

---

## **#10 Downing Street...**

It was very late and the only people still awake in the mansion were either custodial staff or part of the security force. Four indistinct shapes moved through the mansion barely visible. The main

security room was one of the first stops. Several softly spoken ‘Stupefies’ later, the shapes moved up to the main bedroom. As they did, anyone they encountered was also stunned.

The bedroom contained the Prime Minister of the British Isles, one of the most powerful politicians in the western world. Tonight he slept alone, as his wife was staying with family in the country. Harry, Bill Weasley, Amelia Bones and Remus Lupin slipped into the room.

Harry cast multiple illusion spells over the muggle security system. He was the only one strong enough to maintain multiple illusions at the same time. Remus and Bill were along to take care of any people they met, and Amelia would do the talking for them. Amelia removed her invisibility cloak entirely before approaching the bed.

Amelia gently shook the shoulder of the man sleeping on the bed. The Prime Minister sat up with a start. A long time politician, he knew that wake up calls in the middle of the night were never good.

“Do not be alarmed, Minister. We are not here to harm you,” Amelia said softly.

“Who are you? Where is security?” asked the frightened Minister.

“Your security staff have not been harmed, Minister. We, ah... put them to sleep for a while so we could discuss a few things, then we will be on our way, leaving you safe and sound,” Amelia answered calmly.

The Prime Minister’s eyes narrowed and he tried to take command of this strange situation. “We? Madam, from what I can see, you and I are alone.”

At a gesture from Amelia, the rest of them dropped their invisibility cloaks. The Prime Minister looked surprised, then he nodded. “So, you’re from that other Ministry, are you? Very well then, tell me what you must.”

“Sir, first off we are not formal representatives of the Ministry of Magic, although I am the Director of Magical Law Enforcement. In all likelihood, the information you’ve been getting from the Ministry of Magic is tainted, so please listen carefully. We do not have a lot of time.

“To begin with, the wizarding world is at war and it’s about to spill over into your world in a bad way. There are multiple factions that are currently competing for control of our world. The Ministry of Magic is one, but it’s badly run and compromised by agents of the other factions. There is the Order of the Phoenix, another faction, and they claim to be only interested in helping the Ministry to defeat Lord Voldemort. Voldemort is the third faction and when he wins the results will be tragic for all England.”

“And what faction do you represent?”

Amelia smiled unhappily at the Prime Minister. “We represent a fourth faction, one that knows that Lord Voldemort will win this coming war and will take over England, wizarding and yours.



Our group has but one goal, Minister. To save what we can. That's why we're here tonight, to warn you that you have slightly over four months to prepare. We believe your military has been compromised and that key elements of the civil government have been as well. When the time comes, the legal, civil government of England will fall and there is nothing you can do to stop it."

The Prime Minister climbed out of his bed and threw on a robe, his expression grim. Although the wizarding world was a state secret, every Prime Minister knew of its existence. This wasn't the first time that a threat had come from the Wizarding world to affect muggle Britain. But, in the past, they'd always taken care of their own problems.

Now it seemed this was something beyond their control. He paced a few steps, and then he turned to face Amelia. "This information is accurate? Do you believe it?" he asked.

The Minister was surprised when Amelia glanced at Harry and he nodded in permission before she replied to him. "Minister, it's accurate enough that we are taking a number of highly illegal steps to preserve what we believe to be the best of both muggle and wizarding England. Certain cultural items of great importance to both our peoples are going to be relocated to the British Embassies in Washington D.C. and Ottawa, Canada. So please, make sure those embassies are alerted to expect deliveries from a group called "Case Green".

The Prime Minister scribbled some notes down on a bedside tablet as Amelia spoke. She gave him a way of contacting her using the muggle cell phone system, and then she offered to provide help relocating any personnel, but admitted that help would have to be extremely limited and kept secret.

Finally the Minister looked up as Amelia wound down. "Can't your group help the Ministry to put a stop to this? A lot of people are going to die, damn you! You should be helping, not running away!"

Amelia was about to say something when Harry made a noise. Everyone turned to look at him. His gaze was fixed on the Minister and there were tears streaming down his face. "We can't help. As much as we want to, we can't. Some things are destined to be, Mr. Prime Minister. Please, heed our warning and take steps to save what you can," the young man choked out.

Remus walked to Harry and put a hand on his shoulder. Harry glanced at the older man gratefully while the Prime Minister considered his options. Finally he nodded in defeat.

"Thank you for your warning. We will take steps," the Prime Minister replied heavily.

As the four donned their invisibility cloaks, the Prime Minister of the British Isles was already waking up the government. The last thing Harry heard was the Prime Minister on the phone telling the operator to connect him to Buckingham Palace and that he needed to speak with the Queen.

“Hurry up, you two!” shouted Tonks from the main foyer.

A moment later, Harry and Hermione came down the stairs. Draco had gone to spend two days with Luna and would meet them at platform 9  $\frac{3}{4}$ . They opted to return to school using the Express just to avoid any questions if they used another method.

From Grimmauld Place they took a Ministry supplied car to the station. As the car pulled away, everyone donned their concealment cloaks. Harry’s experience in Diagon Alley had made him reluctant to go out without some sort of disguise. It was an attitude which worried Hermione incessantly. She knew there was a valid reason for it, but in a way it was forcing Harry into a self imposed prison, similar to what Sirius experienced in the last years of his life. She found the parallel and its effect on Harry disturbing.

The shift in attitude of the public had been swift and it had been brutal. In the span of a few days following the attack on Diagon Alley, the amount of hate mail Harry had been receiving skyrocketed. He was averaging some three to four hundred howlers daily, and the number of cursed mail had also risen sharply. In the past five days, Aurors had arrested twenty-four people for sending lethally cursed objects to Harry in the mail.

Harry’s stoicism in the face of this abrupt turnaround bothered Hermione the most. She knew he was deeply hurt by the situation, but he was burying his emotions and even she hadn’t been able to break through his shell. She hung back, watching him interact with the others, knowing he was faking most of his emotions at the moment. She knew he was faking because she had been unable to draw him out, even for a serious snog session!

They didn’t have to wait long until they saw Arthur and another group of figures dressed in concealment cloaks approaching. It was Ginny and the Weasley brothers.

Arthur looked around at all the figures in cloaks nervously. No one had bothered to explain to him why his own sons and daughter were wearing them. Ginny and Hermione pushed their hoods back and hugged each other while they waited for the rest of the Outcasts to show up.

One by one they entered the platform through the portal, each of them wearing a cloak Harry had provided as Christmas presents. As the kids arrived, they pushed back their hoods and greeted each other. The adults and Harry were the only ones who left their hoods up, concealing their features. Arthur hovered uncomfortably around the edge of the group, but Bill stood close to him. He paled slightly when he saw Molly and Ronald approaching.

Molly’s face clouded in anger and she started to step forward when Tonks stepped into her path. Tonks had assumed the form of that gaunt, old Brotherhood member before arriving at the train station. It was a form Molly was familiar with.

“Do not put your nose into our business, Molly Prewitt. We warned you once before, we will not warn you again,” said the metamorph in a cold tone.

“B-B-But that’s my husband!” Molly screeched.

“Ex-husband, and now under our protection, Molly Prewitt,” came the cold reply.

Molly skidded to a halt and considered her options. There really wasn't much she could do. Arthur's divorce and disowning of Ronald had come as a shock to her, but there was no appeal. He had allotted her one third of his income and the Burrow as alimony. If she pushed too hard Arthur had the option, as the Head of the Weasley family, to further reduce that amount.

Trying to ignore the impending fight between Molly and Arthur, Hermione led the Outcasts onto the train. Harry followed, his hood still up and concealing his identity. Ron broke free from Molly's grasp and sprinted up the same stairwell as the Outcasts. Arthur, seeing Ron and Ginny board the train, apparated back to his office at the Ministry. A public fight with an ex-wife was the last thing he wanted.

Onboard the Express, Ron had caught up to the Outcasts who were filing up the car looking for an empty compartment to occupy. Ron shoved the hooded figure in front of him. The figure went sprawling to the ground and skidded a foot. Every one of the Outcasts turned and pulled their wands.

“Big fucking deal, this Brotherhood of yours. So Ginny, you've joined the rest of these whores then, have you? Do you spread your legs for all of them? Is Hermione teaching you to be a good whore?” Ron sneered.

Harry climbed slowly to his feet and turned to face Ron. His cloak started to billow and flap wildly as if in a heavy wind and he pushed the hood off his head.

“Ron, you have an inferiority complex and it's fully justified. Run away, little boy, before you get hurt,” Harry said in a voice cold enough to freeze steel. Ron backed away from the group and he would have gotten away free, but before he could turn he was hit with a Bat Bogey hex from his sister.

As Ron grabbed his nose in a vain attempt to contain the bogies, Luna muttered softly under her breath and a purple light shot from her wand. When it hit Ron, he shouted and reached for his head. As the Outcasts watched, a twisted, crumpled looking horn grew out six inches from the center of his forehead.

“Crumple horned Snorkack?” Draco asked her clinically.

“Mmm,” Luna confirmed dreamily. “It would look better with the Snorkack's feathered legs and scaled rump, though.”

Draco and Hermione eyed each other for a moment. Then Draco pointed to Ron, then to himself and mouthed the word, “Feathers.” Hermione nodded and they both turned back to the screeching Ron. As one, they pointed their wands at the redhead and muttered softly. As the two spells hit him, he stopped his caterwauling and stared at them in shock, before looking down at his feathered legs and scaly arse.

“Much better,” Luna said approvingly.

Neville cocked his head and stared at Ginny’s brother. Ron, shocked beyond the ability to speak, stood in the aisle of the Hogwarts Express with wide spread, feathered legs, his bum covered in large, green scales and exuding over-large bogies that attacked him soon after they emerged. But something was missing.

Stepping forward, Neville mumbled under his breath, but not quietly enough. Ginny began to laugh before the spell ever hit her brother. Once it had, the others joined in. Ron’s chest began to swell and, when it was finally done, he sported a fine set of DD breasts.

The aisle of the train car had filled rapidly when Ron had begun to yell, and it was now filled with laughing, howling students as they stared at him. Ron’s eyes began to narrow, but he soon found that too painful, as it pulled on the skin around his horn. “You’ll pay for this,” he told the Outcasts. “I’ll make sure of it!”

“Run away, Ron,” Harry said, softly. “Unless, of course, you’d like a nice pair of hooves to go with your horn?”

“Or maybe a pair of wings,” Ginny said dangerously.

“A winged Crumple Horned Snorkack? How intriguing,” Luna said, excitedly.

Ron stared at them in impotent fury. There was nothing he could do at the moment and he knew it. He turned abruptly, or tried to. Instead he found himself jammed between the walls. “What is this?” he said in a shrill voice.

“You know, I never noticed how large Ron’s arse really is.” Ginny said conversationally as she eyed her brother.

“I may have added something to the spell,” Hermione admitted, her lips twitching. “Perhaps I shouldn’t have.”

“No, I think it’s an improvement,” Ginny said, cocking her head and examining Ron. “In any event, it should be amusing to see how he gets himself off the train. What do you think, Harry?”

Harry turned to Ginny and smiled, though it didn’t reach his eyes.

Hermione watched him, her eyes narrowed, and vowed that she was going to pin him down and get him talking.

Most of the trip back to Hogwarts was uneventful. Few people wanted to interact with Harry or his friends. But Hermione could see that with each furtive look a student gave them, the wall Harry was building around himself grew taller and thicker. She scowled and planned her own form of intervention to bring him back to her and his friends.

---

Luna and Draco...

After the welcoming dinner, the Outcasts split up to go to their respective houses. Draco escorted Luna part way back to Ravenclaw when he made a decision that had been plaguing him all day.

He abruptly turned and pulled Luna by the hand into an unused classroom. It was enough of a surprise that Luna broke from her dreamy state.

“Dray? What are you doing?” asked Luna breathlessly.

Draco pushed her into a chair and then he started to pace in front of the bewildered Ravenclaw. Finally, he stopped and turned to face her for a moment. “You puzzle me, Luna. I still don’t understand you. I once thought that I knew all about women. My father used to let me play with the women he brought home to entertain him and, believe me, I don’t mean we played exploding snap or gob-stones. I find myself confused and I don’t know what to do about it. I have no wish to treat you the way my father treated his doxies, or the way he wanted me to treat them. You make me feel things I’ve not felt before and I don’t understand it all.”

Luna smiled gently at him and he shivered at the wash of intense emotions as they wreaked havoc with his nerves. Then she assumed her normal, vague look. “You know, Draco, you’re more like Harry than I thought. You see love staring you in the face and fail to recognize it for what it is,” she said dreamily. “But don’t worry, I’ll be here waiting for you to make up your mind.”

Draco stared at her for a moment in surprise, then decided to show her exactly what it had taken him all day to decide. He offered her a hand and she took it as she stood up, then she gasped as Draco swept her into his arms. He kissed her more gently than she’d ever imagined he could. It was like snowflakes brushing her lips. Then he buried his head in her shoulder and held her tightly to him. He trembled with a desire that he held firmly in check, while Luna smiled up at the ceiling, her own arms around him.

“There’s hope for you after all, Dray,” she said, sighing happily.

---

Headmaster’s Office, After the Welcoming Feast...

Albus pinched the bridge of his nose and tried to stave off a headache. He had no time to go to the infirmary for pain-relieving potion. He’d received an owl from Moody with some disturbing news and he needed to inform Severus. It was something he wasn’t looking forward to.

Once Peter Pettigrew’s death had been confirmed, the Ministry had moved quickly to clear Sirius Black’s name. As the man was dead, it made little difference to Dumbledore whether his name was cleared or not. But Severus was another matter.

The man simply could not accept that Black was no longer officially thought of as a vicious killer, but rather a man who had served twelve years in hell for a crime he didn’t commit. That wasn’t to say that everyone believed the Ministry in its pronouncement of Black’s innocence. But then

again, the story had been buried in the Daily Prophet and the Ministry wasn't exactly standing up and flaunting their mistake.

And all that business in the Prophet about Hogwarts teaching its students dark magic had caused him nothing but trouble. The howlers he'd received from angry parents who believed the newspaper article had swamped him. It had finally taken a statement by the entire Board of Governors to calm the situation and to say that the Board was less than pleased with him would be an understatement. First there had been the business with Ron Weasley and now this. Oh no, they were not pleased at all!

He grimaced in some pain when his office door slammed open. "Good evening, Severus."

Snape nodded. "Albus. I don't know why you insisted on calling me up here. You already know how I feel about Pettigrew's death, not to mention Black," he sneered. "Can you believe they cleared the bastard? I'm not saying that Peter didn't need killing. Merlin knows he did. But what is the Ministry thinking in proclaiming Black innocent? I'm telling you, Headmaster, no good will come from this. That Potter brat will..."

Dumbledore closed his eyes tiredly as the Potion Master paced the office, ranting. Severus' unreasonable hatred for Harry was getting more out of hand every day. There was some justification for his feelings about Sirius, but Black was dead and Snape's continuing tirades about the man were becoming tiresome.

"Enough, Severus!" Albus cut in finally. "I did not ask you here to discuss Sirius Black. We've worn the topic through. The Ministry cleared his name and made the announcement before I knew it was happening. There is nothing I can do to change it.

I asked you here because I received an owl from Alastor Moody. He was at King's Cross Station today, keeping an eye on things as the students boarded the train. He tells me that Arthur Weasley appeared, surrounded by Brotherhood members. A lot of them."

Snape scowled. "Weasley's changed sides? What of Molly and Ron?"

Molly tried to approach Arthur, but was warned away by one of the Brotherhood. The interesting thing is that, according to Moody, she was addressed as 'Molly Prewett', rather than Weasley," Albus said, carefully scanning Alastor's note.

"Does this mean Arthur's left the Order?" Snape asked.

"I've not heard from him yet, but I would assume so," Dumbledore replied. "I do know that he's left the Burrow and his wife." Glancing up, he noticed Severus' shocked look and knew just how the man felt. "Surprising, isn't it?" he asked.

"Surprising? It's impossible. It can't be true, Albus. Arthur has always done as Molly's told him. There's no way he'd leave her unless..." he trailed off.

“Unless he’s under the influence of the Brotherhood? Yes, I had thought of that myself,” Albus replied. “But what could they possibly gain by subverting Arthur Weasley?”

“A way into the Ministry?” Snape asked.

“Perhaps, but I had assumed Miss Tonks had fulfilled that roll.”

“Tonks?”

“She quit the Order and has become Harry’s guardian, Severus. It would make sense.”

“Maybe, but Tonks has no real power at the Ministry. Arthur, at least, is a department head,” Snape replied.

“It is puzzling.”

“Puzzling? Are you mad? This is disastrous, Albus. The Brotherhood is subverting Order members every time we turn around. Lupin, Tonks, now Arthur? Who’s next? Minerva? She’s been acting strange, lately.” Snape’s eyes narrowed in thought.

“True, but until we know for sure, there isn’t much to be done about it. I will keep an eye on the situation and let you know if anything changes, Severus. I only wanted you to be aware of what had happened,” the Headmaster said, clearly dismissing the Professor.

“What?” Snape said, refocusing his attention on Albus. “Oh yes, well, goodnight then, Headmaster.” Turning swiftly, he exited the room still thinking of Minerva’s odd behavior of late.

When the door closed, Albus removed his glasses and pinched the bridge of his nose again. The headache he was hoping to avoid had struck during Severus’ rant. There was no help for it, he would need a pain-relieving potion if he wished to get anything done tonight.

---

Slytherin Head of House Private Quarters...

Severus growled and cursed at the thought of Dumbledore letting the Potter brat walk all over them. He paced the living room of his quarters and considered his options. Dumbledore was a fool to think that Potter would not react badly to their attempt to keep him in the castle. And he knew exactly what needed to be done to get that arrogant bastard out of their hair. If Dumbledore didn’t have the stones to do it, then he’d take matters into his own hands.

The real question, at least according to Snape, was dare he defy Dumbledore in taking this action? It was true that Dumbledore wouldn’t know for sure that he had a hand in this matter, but then again, no one could call the Headmaster stupid, not in most things, at least. However, his skill in Occlumency would keep Dumbledore from pulling the information out of his mind. Besides, his involvement would be minimal, just writing and sending a simple letter.

Snape stopped pacing and whirled, his cloak billowing out behind him as he walked over to his desk and pulled out a piece of parchment. *Yes*, he thought. *An anonymous letter should do the trick nicely.*

Scribbling quickly, he penned a letter, keeping the information to the barest minimum. Rolling up the parchment, he addressed it, and then swept out of his quarters heading for the school Owlery. As he walked, a cold smile twisted his lips. It was enough to give a group of fourth years nightmares as they passed him on the way back to their house from the library.

---

Gryffindor Head Boy's room...

Harry breathed a sigh of relief when he finally entered his own room. The last few days had left him feeling exhausted and depressed. He kept trying to tell himself that he was use to the wizarding public turning against him, but this most recent turn had been swift and savage.

He stripped off his outer clothes and debated changing into pajamas or just sleeping in his boxers. He intended to try some more Tai Chi before he went to bed. His preferences for bed clothes was changing and he wasn't sure why. Lately he had split between boxers and pajama bottoms. The tops he had discarded a long time ago. Shrugging and deciding to go with boxers, he stepped into the center of the room and began his breathing exercises as a prelude to the first set of meditative moves.

Unlike most muggles who practiced Tai Chi, Harry really did slip into a trance as he began his meditative moves. It was during these sessions that he reorganized his thoughts and worked on his mental shields. And so, unaware, he never noticed when the door opened slowly and a figure entered the room.

The figure pulled a wand and a familiar voice said, "*Incarcerous* !" A stream of rope erupted from the tip of the wand, striking him and wrapping him tightly in a cocoon from his feet to his shoulders. He broke from his trance too late and teetered in the center of the room. He glared at the figure still in the shadows by the door.

"Wingardium leviosa," Hermione said and Harry was lifted off his feet. She then floated him over to land gently on the bed. Then she conjured a chair next to the bed and sat down, ignoring his glare.

He opened his mouth to say something and she gestured with her wand. "*Silencio* ," she murmured. Harry's eyes flared in anger.

"Settle down, Harry. Don't force me to cast a cheering charm on you as well. Now, if you're going to behave, nod your head," she told him sternly, pulling her best McGonagall impression.

Sullenly, Harry nodded.

Hermione leaned back, smiling, and put her feet up on his bed. "Wonderful, now we can talk. You



see, I have this problem and it's really starting to hurt me and I'm just not sure what to do about it. My best friend, the man I love, is hurting and, instead of letting me help, he's shut me out. He's also shut out all his friends. I know he's hurting and I know he's pretending to be happy when he isn't.

"Now, through no fault of his own, my best friend was raised to believe his problems weren't worthy of the attention of others. He's wrong, of course, but he doesn't think so. He's also got this whole nobility and silent suffering thing down so pat it makes my hair hurt! I suppose I could let him go off and sulk by himself, but I don't think it would be good for him and I know it wouldn't be good for us.

"So, as I see it, my best friend has two choices. He can either continue on the path he's on and risk losing his friends and his girlfriend, or he can stop being a prat and actually start talking to me."

Hermione had been so involved in her planned speech that she never noticed that Harry had dispelled the ropes and her silencing charm. He now lay on his side, one hand propping up his head as he watched her with a smile. She gasped and looked at him in shock.

He reached out with one hand and took hers in his. "I hope, with all my heart, that my best friend is always around to kick my noble and silently suffering arse when necessary," he said softly.

"Oh! You... you... prat! You dispelled my hex and I was just getting to the best part of my speech too. It's so not fair that you're able to do things wandlessly, soundlessly and without any gestures!"

He chuckled. "Would you like me to rebind myself so you can continue with your speech? It was quite good, really. You'll always be the smartest witch I know and I'll always need your help and advice. I can't help it if I have a few advantages now days."

Hermione smiled a little at the flattery, but she knew deep down some of the changes his Matura brought about in him had placed him on an equal, if not smarter level than she was. Still trying to maintain a light tone she asked, "So, are you ready to talk to me or am I going to have to get really mad at you?"

"I'm sorry about the way I've been treating you. Things just got so intense I started shutting down," he replied seriously. His expression became pained. "It's hard to explain what it feels like to know that most people either hate you, or fear you, or both. There are people in our world who don't know me at all, but they hate me just the same."

Hermione sniffed in disdain. "Those people aren't worth worrying about. Harry, I love you dearly, but you're going to have to learn that you can't solve anything by holding all these emotions inside. Part of my job is to help you, just like you're supposed to help me. Where would we have been if I held in all my emotions after Ron attacked me?"

Harry nodded in agreement. "I see your point. How about this? Let's say we set aside an hour before bedtime each night to just talk? I'm not used to sharing my feelings with people,

Hermione, even with you. Maybe that would make it easier?”

Hermione smiled. “That’s a brilliant idea! We’ll do exactly that,” she said, then she yawned. Gathering herself up, she stood and kissed him lightly before heading for the door.

Just before she stepped from the room, he called out to her. “You know, one of these days I’m going to surprise you by inviting you to stay the night.”

She turned and smiled impishly at him. “And one of these days I’m going to stay the night, invite or no. Good night, Harry.”

Harry chuckled as she left the room. As usual, she’d managed to get the last word in, and Merlin did he love her for it.

---

Malfoy Manor, the Next Morning...

Lucius awoke to a tapping sound. Startled, he stumbled out of bed and looked around wildly before he noticed a brown, non-descript owl at his window. The owl looked a lot like the standard owls used at Hogwarts.

“Maybe my son’s finally come to his senses,” he said to himself as he opened the window and let the owl in. It flew to the dresser and dropped a rolled parchment before it turned around and flew back out the window.

Unrolling the parchment, Lucius read quickly. His initial reaction was to grit his teeth and snarl at the writer, but as he read on, his began to smile. This was something he needed to show the Master immediately.

Dressing quickly, he grabbed the letter again and descended the stairs to the Master’s chambers. This was too important to delay.

Voldemort looked up in surprise when Lucius entered his chamber without being summoned. Rarely did one of his servants come unbidden into his presence and when they did, it usually was for the most interesting of reasons.

“Lucius, what news do you bring?” asked Voldemort, trying to appear indifferent.

“My Lord, this morning I received a most unusual communication from a former servant of yours. It is, I believe, worthy of your attention.”

Voldemort would have cocked an eyebrow, if he had an eyebrow, but the evil wizard lacked any hair at all. “So tell me, what does our dear former Potions Master have to say to me?”

Lucius bowed low before Voldemort and offered the parchment to him. Voldemort grasped the parchment in one bony hand and started to read it. A few moments later he was cackling evilly.

Voldemort reached out and handed the parchment back to Lucius. “Excellent idea! Give this to Nott and tell him to take half a Death Squad to take care of this. If this works out, we may owe Severus a quick and painless death. Yes, that sounds about right.”

---

The Great Hall, the Next Morning...

Harry stumbled down to breakfast, his mind cloudy and foggy with sleep. Hermione had left the suite earlier, laughing at his inability to get up. He sighed inwardly. He knew that tonight, in one of their ‘talk’ sessions, he’d have to admit to the new nightmares that were plaguing his sleep.

Taking a seat next to Hermione, he looked over the choices for breakfast and opted to go straight for the coffee. Hermione frowned when she saw him pour a cup and didn’t bother putting anything on his plate.

Harry leaned back, sipping from his cup and waiting for the caffeine to kick in. As he did, his robe opened, revealing a t-shirt.

Ginny had fallen in love with the t-shirts Harry had been wearing and had started her own shirts of late. She leaned across the table. “Alright Harry, let’s see it,” she ordered.

He chuckled and opened his robe to reveal a shirt that read, “Voldemort: An inspiration for birth control.”

Ginny turned an interesting shade of pink, while Hermione nearly spewed her orange juice all over Draco. Harry grinned at her then poured himself another cup of coffee.

“Harry,” began Hermione worriedly.

She was cut off with the arrival of Errol, who crash-landed on the table, knocking several platters and their contents all over the place. Harry raised an eyebrow when Errol stumbled over to him and dropped a smoking red letter. Harry cringed.

The Howler levitated an inch off the table and opened itself.

HARRY POTTER!

HOW DARE YOU HELP IN THE BREAK UP OF MY FAMILY! THIS IS YOUR FAULT ENTIRELY YOU EVIL BOY! YOUR PARENTS WOULD BE ASHAMED TO SEE WHAT YOU’VE BECOME, HANGING OUT WITH THAT MUDBLOOD WHORE!

YOU WILL RUE THE DAY YOU CROSSED ME HARRY POTTER. I DON’T CARE IF YOU ARE WORKING TO BECOME THE NEXT DARK LORD OR NOT. I WILL MAKE YOU REGRET WHAT YOU’VE DONE TO MY FAMILY!

OH, AND GINNY DEAR, PLEASE WRITE TO ME. WE HAVE MUCH THAT NEEDS TO BE

DISCUSSED.

As soon as it was done, the letter exploded, sending confetti showering down upon him. A hush fell upon the Great Hall as the students watched Harry for a reaction. His eyes flashed with magic and he conjured a parchment and a quill.

He wrote a short reply, then spent five minutes casting something no one could see upon it, before he rolled it up and gave it to Errol to deliver. The poor bird eyed him reproachfully as it picked up the scroll and unsteadily rose into the air.

Ginny watched Errol as the owl nearly flew into a group of students at the Ravenclaw table before he managed to make it safely out of the hall. She then turned to Harry. “Alright Potter, what did you send to my mother?”

Harry looked at her for a moment before shrugging. “I just sent her a note thanking her for her kind letter and expressing my profound desire that she not send me any more.”

“And the spells you cast on the note?”

“Oh that,” he replied looking sheepish.

“Yes, that!”

“Well, I thought that if your mum had enough energy to send me a howler, she might be able to apply that to another orifice. She’ll have a wonderful and quite uncontrollable case of flatulence when she reads my note. Should last all day too,” Harry replied with a shrug.

Ginny stared at Harry for a long time before reacting. The real surprise was Neville, quiet, shy Neville. He started laughing a deep, booming laugh that he couldn’t seem to control. Ginny joined him a minute later.

Hermione watched the two, and then frowned again at Harry. Over his protests, she filled his plate with food, daring him to defy her and not eat. Sighing, Harry started in on the meal, knowing full well what tonight’s ‘talk session’ would be about.

---

Amesbury England...

Norma Brown looked up as a non-descript post owl landed at her window. She walked over from her breakfast to let the small owl into her kitchen. The owl landed on the back of one her kitchen chairs and waited with a leg outstretched. Norma carefully removed the slip of parchment from the owl’s leg. The bird then sprang aloft and flew back out the window.

Unrolling the parchment, she was pleasantly surprised to see the letter was from her friend, Molly. She felt sad that Molly had fallen on hard times. Her husband divorced her for another woman, his son disowned because his father had become irrational. Shaking her head in pity for her friend’s

plight, she started reading.

*Norma,*

*I hope this letter finds you and your family well. I've not heard from Arthur since the divorce decree, but I suspect he's still sniffing around, maybe even hoping I'll take him back. I heard that the witch he left me for has lost all interest in him. Ron is taking all these changes in stride, but he's becoming a very angry young man and I worry about him all the time. Ron finally admitted that most of his troubles at school stem from the fact that he leads the kids who oppose Harry Potter and his group of dark students.*

*Well, I sent that little snot nosed prick a howler. It's funny, really. Over the holiday when the truth about Harry Potter was coming out, you couldn't send him any mail. Now that he's back in Hogwarts, however, you can send him anything you want.*

*Well dear, this is just a short note. I simply must run today, but you take care and tell Lavender to stay close to Ron and his friends. They'll protect her from people like Potter.*

*All my best,  
Molly*

Molly knew full well that by sending a post to Norma she would be tapping into the parental grapevine of Hogwarts. Norma was nearly as big a gossip as Lavender, but she was better organized than her daughter. By noon, most of the parents had learned that the post owls could reach Harry Potter and he really was teaching dark arts. Molly's letter had served its purpose.

---

Chelsea District, London...

It was a newer office building, only a few years old. It was small enough however, that the lobby was unattended as with so many small office buildings scattered around the city, and no one was there when seven hooded figures entered. The directory in the lobby gave the men the information they needed. With a small amount of confusion over muggle technology and a bit of muttered swearing, they were soon in the lift and moving towards the third floor.

The group quickly made their way to Suite 307, ignoring the sign that read, 'Granger Pediatric Dentistry'. One man pulled out a wand and blasted the door to pieces. It was lunchtime and the Granger's and their staff were the only people in the office, the only people on that floor, in fact. Within two minutes everyone was herded into the waiting room.

The Granger's themselves were pulled out of the lineup of five people. With shouts of "Avada Kedavra," the Granger's lost their staff of three. Two more spells were cast and the office fell eerily silent as the black-cloaked men portkeyed away, leaving a demolished door, and three dead muggles.

---

The Great Hall, Dinner time...

Harry sat with his friends at dinner and Hermione watched to make sure he ate properly, which he did. He was really of mixed mind about her watchfulness. In one way it felt very good to know someone cared, and in another it really was quite annoying. If he were asked, he thought he'd come down on the side of being annoyed, more often than not.

He was half heartedly listening to Terry relate an amusing tale from his summer holiday about being stuck out on a sailboat that had broken its keel-board, when a large, old crow flew into the hall and directly to Harry. Crows were almost never used as delivery birds because of their unreliability and the general belief that crows were dark creatures. Taking the parchment from the bird, it took wing with a loud squawk. A hush fell on the Gryffindor table as Harry read the note. Crows were traditionally harbingers of evil news and more than a few of the Outcasts shuddered in fear over what the message might bring.

Without warning or a word of apology he stood and walked up to the Head table. Dumbledore glanced at him, but since Harry seemed to be approaching his Head of House, he figured it mustn't be important. Dumbledore had been talking to Professor Sprout and hadn't noticed the arrival of the black bird.

McGonagall looked up in concern as Harry approached. He was clearly angry about something, his eyes were alight with magic and she could feel his presence battering at her senses. His robes billowed out eerily behind him.

He leaned over the Head table and spoke to her in an urgent whisper. "I need to see you in the Head suite right away. We have big trouble."

She nodded and then turned to Dumbledore. "Excuse me, Headmaster, a minor House matter to attend to."

Dumbledore waved her off and returned to his conversation. McGonagall walked around the table and followed Harry towards the exit. As he passed his friends, he spoke softly. "Hermione, come with me now," he commanded, never slowing down.

Startled, Hermione fell into line with McGonagall and followed Harry from the hall.

Harry moved quickly and, once in the suite, he passed the letter to McGonagall. "Read this. I'll be in my room changing my clothes. I won't be but a moment."

McGonagall read the letter, while Hermione stood on her toes and read over her shoulder.

*Potter,*

*We have the parents of your precious mudblood whore. If you want to see them alive again, you'll do exactly as you're told. We'll exchange them for you at precisely nine A.M. tomorrow in the Hogsmeade Train station. Come alone or the muggles will die.*

*My master is looking forward to having a long talk with you before he kills you, you half-blood bastard.*

*Theodore Nott Sr.*

Hermione gasped, her face paled and her lower lip began to tremble. McGonagall put a hand on the young woman's shoulder in empathy.

A moment later Harry emerged from his room. He'd discarded his school robe and muggle clothes in favor of a set of new robes he'd recently bought. The robes were not special in any way except for the cut, which gave a greater degree of freedom and an excessive amount of pockets. Over the robe he wore horntail scale vest that Tonks and Remus had given him for Christmas. The horntail vest was the wizarding version of Kevlar body armor and it would reduce the damage done by most spells.

Hermione took one look at him and collapsed in a chair. "No! Harry, you can't!"

"Watch me," he growled in reply. Then he turned to McGonagall. "She needs to go home, Professor. She'll be gone at least for tonight, possibly for the next couple days."

Harry didn't give McGonagall a chance to respond as he picked up a piece of parchment and created a portkey. "Here, Hermione," he said, handing it to her. "Tap your wand against it to activate it. Tell Tonks to get a hold of Danni. We're probably going to need her tonight."

"Mr. Potter, I can't let you leave the castle unescorted," McGonagall said quietly.

"Well, you can't escort both of us since we're going in different directions. Go with Hermione, Professor. She needs you more," he replied, reaching for his invisibility cloak.

Hermione leapt from her chair and grabbed him. Burrowing into his chest, her small frame was wracked by her sobs. He wrapped his arms around her tightly and closed his eyes, resting his head a top hers.

After a few moments she pulled partially out of his embrace. "You come back to me, Harry Potter! No stupid heroics! Do you hear me?" she demanded of him.

"I won't promise that, Hermione. They might not be my parents, but I love them almost as much as you do. I'll bring them home or die trying. That I can promise."

McGonagall stepped next to him and placed a hand on his shoulder. Harry could see that his professor was torn between pride and fear for what this night would bring. He nodded to her and gently passed Hermione into her waiting arms.

"How will you find them, Harry?" asked McGonagall still not believing what was unfolding before her eyes.

"Hermione can explain that, Professor. Believe me, if they're alive, I can find them. Alright you

two, get moving,” he said. “I’ll meet you at Grimmauld as quickly as I can.”

Harry turned away from the two of them, picked up his invisibility cloak and wrapped it around himself. Then he closed his eyes and concentrated on Emma, preparing for a person-to-person apparate.

Behind him, McGonagall reached over and picked up the portkey Harry had made and looked at Hermione grimly. Hermione grabbed hold of the parchment and McGonagall tapped it with her wand. With a tug behind their navels they were gone from the Gryffindor suite.

---

Grimmauld Place...

Arriving in the foyer of Grimmauld Place, Hermione called out loudly for Remus and Tonks.

Remus came rushing out from the kitchen area, surprised, his wand drawn.

Hermione grabbed hold of him and started to babble at him, which only added to the confusion. Dobby appeared and handed Remus a calming draught that he somehow managed to get the distraught witch to drink. As Hermione calmed, McGonagall handed Remus the ransom note.

Remus paled and his hands shook with anger. “Where’s Harry?” he asked carefully.

“He’s gone to rescue mum and dad,” whispered Hermione.

“But how? Does he know where they are?” demanded Remus.

“No, but Harry can do something he calls personal apparation. He’s able to apparate to a person, rather than a place or a coordinate. He said to get Danni here and that he’d meet us here with my parents.”

Remus ran to the fireplace and made several calls. Slowly people started to trickle into the house. Danni arrived with a full medical kit a few moments before Tonks and Amelia stepped out of the floo.

Remus quickly recapped the situation. Once the initial shock wore off, everyone took a seat in the main living room while Dobby and Winky served tea. A grim silence descended on Grimmauld Place as they waited. It was all any of them could do now. Next to the wall, a large, old-fashioned Grandfather clock ticked loudly. To Hermione, it seemed as though every tick grew louder and she bit her lip attempting to hold back the sob that threatened to break free.

---

**Authors Note:**

OH-MY-GAWD!!!



This is a cliffie alert. You have been alerted.

A note on the rating of this story. This story is going to get darker, more violent, the language more vulgar and more graphic. And YES, eventually there will be sex. If any of that bothers you, don't read this story.

Bob stopped reading HBP because Bob felt that JKR dropped the ball entirely on Harry's reactions to the loss of his Godfather etc... and that's the last I'm going to say about HBP. (Alyx here: That may be, that it doesn't mean I'm going to stop bugging you about it!) (Shaddup you!)

Excuse me? Skipping over the Harry/Hermione scenes means you're literally skipping over 90 percent of this story. Why would anyone want to do that?

Harry's leg is so bad because even magical medicine can't fix everything. Besides, we wanted it that way. Do we really need to remind everyone out there that, as the authors, we could have REMOVED his leg had we wanted to? Nah, we didn't think so!

Just a note about our updates. Yes this is being written as you read this. We try for a faster update, but we'll be happy if we can get out at least one chapter per week at this rate. There is a lot of stuff going on, and a lot of detail to keep track of. Also, as summer comes to an end, our garden is bursting and we have to harvest and process our veggies. So please bear with us on the updates.

In regard to our Yahoo group, we love getting reviews, but if you really want a question answered, and it's not a spoiler, ask your question over there, rather than in the reviews.

### **Pet Peeve of the week:**

The authors that use review space trying to justify why they do the stuff I hate. Let's be a little realistic here. Most of my Pet Peeves aren't personal attacks against particular authors. If anything they're common sense writing methods that you'd probably get dinged for in a creative writing class if you didn't follow.

## **Sunset Over Britain**

### **A Message for Voldemort**

**Standard Disclaimer:**

**Scene II, Act III.:**

Harry, and Ron sit in desks on the stage. Alyx walks up to the center stage and reads from an index card.

“We acknowledge the almighty and august majesty of JK Rowling and offer up the following sacrifice in her honor! These Characters belong to her! NOT US!”

Luna steps out from behind the curtain wearing a g-string bikini and walks up to Ron. “You’ve been picked Ron, come with me.”

Ron follows Luna to a white metal column where she ties him to the column, then she playfully squeezes his crotch once. Ron’s eyes glaze over in lust.

Harry presses a button on his desk and there’s a loud roaring noise as the metal column that Ron is tied to slowly begins to rise. Ron looks around in panic as his feet leave the ground.

Hermione dances across the stage wearing tassels and a pair of daisy duke shorts, as she dances she sings to Ron. “Fly me to the moon...”

Harry snickers as the rocket clears the launch pad, then he beckons Hermione over to check out her boosters.

---

Sunset over Britain  
**Chapter 15**

---

Buckingham Palace...

“The Prime Minister, Your Majesty.”

Queen Elizabeth turned from the window as the Prime Minister entered the library. The room, not

normally used for official business, was comfortable, but not opulent. Not many knew, but the Queen preferred to do business in a relaxed atmosphere, rather than the normal formality tradition sometimes called for.

“Your Majesty,” the Prime Minister said, bobbing his head politely to his queen.

“Mr. Blair,” the Queen acknowledged warmly, as the door closed behind him. “I had not expected to see you again so soon. May I assume you bring good news?”

“I believe so, Ma’am. As you know, the Royal Family evacuating the country could very well cause a panic. However, a grand tour to showcase the Crown Jewels may do very well as a cover story.”

“A grand tour,” Elizabeth mused. “It is an interesting notion, but with the recent turmoil, won’t our departure seem rather suspicious?”

“Perhaps. But with no official word to say otherwise, all the public can do is guess. And quite frankly, Ma’am, I’d rather have the Royal Family safe, regardless of what message it may send to the people.”

“They are my subjects, Mr. Blair. I cannot just leave them to face the dangers to come,” she said with some asperity.

“The government will do all that it can to safeguard the lives of the people, Ma’am,” the Prime Minister said with a note of desperation in his voice.

“I’m sure that’s true, but if the Royal Family could remain in England during World War II, I see no reason why some of us cannot stay during this crisis. A crisis, I might add, that we are not even sure exists.”

“I have it on very good authority, Ma’am. I believe the danger to be very real, and that they have already begun,” he told her.

“The business in Bristol and Liverpool?” Elizabeth asked. At his nod, she tapped a finger against her lower lip in thought. “It fits with what you have told me thus far, but I still think it a bad idea for the entire Royal Family to flee. I’ve discussed the situation with His Royal Highness and we are both in agreement. The Family will leave, but the Duke and I will remain behind. This way, the line of succession is protected, and the Royal Family is not seen in a bad light.”

“Are you sure about this, Ma’am?” the Prime Minister asked, concerned. “Perhaps one of the younger...”

Elizabeth laughed. “No, I don’t think so. I have been on the throne for nearly fifty years, sir. When my time comes, I will die on the throne, in England, not fleeing from the danger that now threatens my country.”

She turned away from him then and looked out the window, watching the groundskeepers

sweeping snow from the walks in the deepening gloom. The grandfather clock in the corner struck the hour and a door down the hall closed loudly.

The Prime Minister watched the Queen and thought quickly, desperate to find a way of evacuating her with her family. He knew she could be stubborn if she felt her course was the correct one to take, but he could not accept that she would place herself in harms way simply on principle.

“Ma’am,” he began.

“How long until the plans for the grand tour are in place?” she asked him quietly, not looking away from the window.

“A month, Ma’am, perhaps a bit more.”

“Very well, sir. Make the arrangements for the grand tour. The entire Royal Family, except the Duke and I, will leave the country as you suggest,” she said, firmly.

“It will be as you say, Ma’am. But if I may suggest, when the tour begins, perhaps you and his Royal Highness should retire to Balmoral Castle,” he said, closing his eyes in defeat. In his mind, he was already thinking about the possibilities of rescuing them from Balmoral. *Perhaps a job for the SAS, if they haven’t already been compromised*, he mused.

“We will consider it, sir,” the Queen said, slipping back into the persona of the distant, cool monarch the public saw so often. “In the meantime, know we are not displeased with you. You have served our people faithfully and well.”

---

Sending a Message...

Harry felt Hermione and McGonagall leave the room via the portkey he’d made. Then he focused his attention on finding Emma Granger. Even from this distance, he could feel her fear and pain. Harry had to fight the urge to make the leap right away. If need be, he could apparate right next to Emma. But he needed to try apparating to a location nearby rather than nearly on top of her.

His intent was a stealthy entrance. The ideal move would be to just grab the Grangers and apparate away. But if there was an anti-apparation ward in place where they were being held, he’d have to collapse the ward first and that would take time. Sure, he could apparate out of most anti-apparation wards, but tandem apparating? Not something he wanted to test tonight if he could help it.

Reaching out with his senses, he did his best to ignore the pain the Granger’s were feeling as he tried to learn more about their location. *There are seven others with the Grangers, in a small room about sixty miles south of here*, he thought.

Suddenly there was a flare of pain from one of the Grangers. Harry realized his options had dropped from several to one as one of the Grangers was undergoing a Cruciatus curse. He check

his invisibility cloak one more time, then closed his eyes, his magic flared heavily and he vanished.

He appeared in a small bare room. Dan lay panting on the floor, his eyes glazed with pain and his arms and legs bound. Standing over him, a Death Eater had just finished casting the Cruciatus curse and was preparing to cast it again. Before the Death Eater could get his curse off, his head exploded in a shower of blood and gore from a soundless *Reducto* r curse from Harry. He was pissed and not taking chances tonight.

Harry moved behind another Death Eater and fired another *Reducto* r to the base of the man's head, causing it to explode outward, and spraying the Grangers with blood and gore. In a panic, the remaining Death Eaters hurled several curses in Harry's general direction. Most missed, but a *Reducto* r that had hit the wall behind him peppered his back, legs and buttocks with wood splinters. His horntail vest saved him from all of the lethal fragments, but several very large splinters hit him in the lower back and legs. A few splinters were embedded in his buttocks and legs, but stood out enough from his flesh to give away his position under the cloak.

"It's got to be Potter under an invisibility cloak," snarled Nott. "ACCIO CLOAK!"

The damage was done. Harry didn't lose his grip on the cloak, but it did shift enough to reveal more of him, so he quickly cast a full body shield. The shield was good for most spells, but would not stop an Unforgivable.

He moved to another spot and killed two more Death Eaters, blowing through their shield and hitting them with *Reducto* r curses. Then he dropped his invisibility cloak and moved to place himself between the Death Eaters and the Grangers.

Nott turned to Dan Granger, who was still on the floor, and pointed his wand. "*Avada Kedavra* ," he shouted.

Without thinking, Harry conjured a metal shield, strapped to his forearm, as he dove in front of Dan. The curse hit the shield and shattered against it. Harry bit back a groan as the impact of the Killing Curse against his shield broke his arm in several places. He screamed as he continued his roll, crushing his broken arm between his body and the floor. The shield broke in the roll and fell away.

With his good arm Harry hit Nott low in the belly with a cutting hex, neatly eviscerating him.

Nott screamed as ropy lengths of intestine and bowel exploded out of his belly, and then he collapsed, sitting atop his own entrails. In a daze, he tried weakly to scoop them back into his body. Harry quickly banished Nott's wand before turned to the two remaining Death Eaters.

One of the two remaining Death Eaters dropped his wand in fear. Harry immediately turned to the other. He rolled again to avoid another killing curse and returned fire with a bludgeoning hex. It hit the man's body, lifting off his feet and tossing him backwards like a rag doll. The Death Eater crashed through a wall and slammed into a support beam, bending his spine with such force that it

shattered. Bone fragments shot through his body at a tremendous speed, shredding his lungs and piercing his heart. He was dead before he hit the ground.

Harry slowly climbed to his feet and swayed slightly as he looked at the remaining Death Eater. He was in no mood for niceties. His arm, back and legs were throbbing in pain.

“Legilimens,” Harry said, shoving the man’s shields aside and forcing his way into his mind.

“You will take a message to your Master,” he told the Death Eater as he implanted the commands and poured power into the man through the link. The man collapsed to his knees, drooling and convulsing as Harry mercilessly continued his mental assault.

Two minutes later, Harry released Voldemort’s servant from his mental grip and the man slowly climbed to his feet and shuffled from the room. The Death Eater was a walking dead man. Harry had destroyed his center of consciousness, turning the man into a walking magical bomb.

The magic he had just performed had seriously weakened him and it would be a day or so before his magic was up to full strength again. He was drawing deeply on his reserves just to stay on his feet. He watched the retreating back of his walking bomb for a moment longer. A groan from behind him drew his attention back to the Grangers. Harry glanced at Nott, who lay nearby whimpering weakly, and decided he was no danger.

Harry turned and checked on Dan and Emma. Both seemed to be heavily dazed. Thankfully, most of the damage seemed to be solely from multiple Cruciatus curses, rough handling and their bindings, things that were easy to fix.

Harry stood in front of Emma and gasped in pain as he tried to kneel in front of the woman. He banished the ropes that bit cruelly into her wrists and ankles, tying her to the chair. Her clothing was mused, but she seemed to have escaped any sexual torture and Harry breathed a sigh of relief.

“Mum? Come on Mum, you have to focus. I need your help,” he urged Emma.

Emma shook her head painfully and her eyes slowly swam into focus. “Harry?” she asked wearily. Shock, both mental and physical, was beginning to affect all of them.

“Yes Mum, come on. I need your help. I can get us out of here, but I need you to help Dad. I’m going to take you home...to Hermione. Healer McNeil will be waiting for us.”

“Hermione? Is Hermione alright, Harry?”

“Yes Mum, she’s at home. Please listen to me. We need to leave before others come. Help me with Dad, please,” He urged her. She was still groggy from the ordeal and he needed her help to get them out.

“Dan’s hurt?” she asked, then she cried out as she saw Dan lying on the floor, his breath shallow and uneven. She slowly slid off the chair to kneel at his side. Harry banished the ropes on Dan,

then he cast the strongest pain relieving charm he could think of on the both of them. Harry couldn't afford to cast one on himself. He was low on energy and he needed to have his mind clear for a tandem apparate.

Harry knelt next to Emma. "We need to leave here now, Mum. I'll take his hand, you grab...my shoulder, Mum."

Emma stared at him for a moment, confused. He had two hands, so she wasn't sure why she was supposed to grab his shoulder.

Harry reached out and grabbed Dan's hand in his. Emma, without really thinking about it, grabbed Harry by the other hand. He moaned and broke out in a cold sweat. Spots danced before his eyes and he quickly closed them. Fighting to stay awake, he apparated with the two of them. There was an enormous snapping sound as they vanished and the walls of the room burst outwards.

Nott died as the roof of the building collapsed.

---

Grimmauld Place...

It had been Harry's original intent to take the Grangers directly to their bedroom. But when Emma grabbed his broken arm, all thought fled in the wave of pain and the onset of shock. In such a case the body operated on instinct alone. Harry, Dan and Emma appeared in his bedroom at Grimmauld Place. Emma passed out on top of her husband and in doing so she released Harry's hand. He swayed on his knees in relief and managed to get to his feet.

"Dobby," Harry whispered hoarsely.

There was a popping noise and then a gasping sound, then another popping sound. Harry couldn't turn fast enough to see Dobby before the elf vanished again. He stood there confused, wondering where Dobby had gone.

Down in the living room on the first floor, Hermione had taken to pacing in front of the fireplace. Remus and Tonks sat nervously on one of the couches, while Amelia, Danni and Professor McGonagall sat on another couch. They had been waiting for Harry to show up for nearly an hour.

They all jumped when a popping sound startled them. Dobby appeared in front of Hermione, his ears drooping low and his hands twisting in his tea cozy. One huge tear fell from his huge eyes.

"Miss Hermione! Yous must come quicks. Master Harry and yous parents is hurts awful bad in Master Harry's room."

Before Dobby had even finished talking, Hermione was sprinting up the stairs with Remus and Tonks hot on her heels. Hermione burst into Harry's sitting room and continued on at a full run to the bedroom where she skidded to a halt.

Her parents were laying on the floor covered in blood. Harry stood facing away from her, his back was also covered in blood. Hermione put a hand to her mouth and froze, unsure whom to approach first. Remus and Tonks pushed by her and went to check her parents. That broke Hermione from her stasis and she went to her parents as well.

Danni entered the room next and gave Harry a quick glance. The fact that he was still standing reassured her, while the amount of blood on the Grangers was worrying. She dealt with them first. Harry's back was bloody, but not to the extent of the Grangers. What they hadn't realized was that the Grangers were covered in the blood of Death Eaters.

Danni ran a fast diagnostic spell on the Grangers then rocked back on her heels. "This isn't their blood. Other than exhaustion, damage from being place under the Cruciatus curse and being bound, they're fine," she said in disbelief, then she glanced sharply up at Harry. Remus cast a quick cleansing charm to clean away the blood from the two muggles.

Harry still hadn't acknowledged their presence. Unbeknownst to the others, he was struggling to maintain consciousness and losing. His swaying had become more pronounced. Tonks stood, walked over to him and grabbed him by the arm. He made a moaning sound and slowly collapsed. Danni rushed to his side and started running diagnostics on him, while Tonks held him up by the shoulders.

"He's got a severely broken arm and the blood on his back and legs is his. We need to get him onto the bed and undressed. Remus," she continued, snapping orders, "conjure two more beds for the Grangers and get them into bed. Then administer two doses of anti-Cruciatus potion, along with some pepper-up. Hermione, help Remus. The potions are in my bag. Get them. Nymph help me get Harry into bed."

In a short amount of time, Danni had brought order to the chaos. Dan and Emma were resting comfortably in the beds Remus had conjured, while Danni worked on removing over a hundred wooden splinters from Harry's back. She had forced a bone mending potion and some blood-replenishing potion into him, and was trying to keep him asleep while she worked on him. McGonagall had charmed the room and blankets so the air had a touch of a chill and the blankets were warmed. Then she conjured a table and chairs so everyone could sit and wait for the injured to awaken.

Hermione sat between her parents, her gaze torn between them and Harry, who was on the bed at the far side of the room. It was less than an hour later when Emma woke up.

"Mum?" Hermione asked timidly. She had heard the story about Neville's parents and was terrified her parents would suffer the same fate.

"Hi sweetie," Emma said looking up at her daughter.

Hermione grabbed her mother's hand and wept with relief.

"Shh, Hermione, I'm fine. How's your father?"



Professor McGonagall stepped up behind Hermione and placed a hand on her shoulder. “Healer McNeil says your husband’s fine, Mrs. Granger. He’s sleeping right now and should wake up in a short while. You’ll feel sore and uncomfortable for a few days, but the feeling will pass.”

Emma laid her head back on the pillow and relaxed for a moment, and then her eyes sprang open. “HARRY! Where is he?” she asked, trying to sit up.

Hermione placed her hands against her mother’s shoulders and pushed her down on the bed gently. “He’s going to be alright, Mum. He was hurt worse than either of you, but by tomorrow most of his injuries will be healed.” She then glanced over at Danni who was still removing huge splinters from Harry’s back.

“Thank God! I thought I’d die when he jumped in front of that green spell they shot at your father. You should have seen him, sweetie. I’ve never seen anything like it.”

Hermione gasped and whipped her head back to look at her mother. “Harry took another killing curse?” she asked horrified.

“No, I don’t think so. A metal shield appeared, strapped to his arm. Harry jumped in front of the curse and the shield appeared just in time. It hit the shield and it sounded like a bell exploding. His shield shattered when the curse hit it,” Emma said, then it hit her and she started to tremble in the bed. “That was a killing curse? He jumped in front of that curse aimed at your father? I could have lost Dan?”

Hermione sobbed and looked over at the prone form of Harry on the other bed. Danni bent over him and removed another splinter from his back. Emma, alerted by the sound of crying, watched her daughter intently. She could see Hermione was torn between staying with her parents and going to Harry. She reached up to caress her daughter’s cheek to let her know she understood. Hermione turned back to her mum and managed a watery smile.

“Mrs. Granger, your husband is alive, you are alive and Harry is alive. Concentrate on that for now,” Amelia said softly. “You’re all very lucky to be here.”

Emma closed her eyes tightly, trying to hold back the tears. Before she could speak however, another voice broke in.

“Aye, if Mr. Potter conjured a shield to stop a killing curse, he performed a feat most wizards are not capable of performing.” McGonagall looked over at the young man Danni was working on. “One hundred points to Gryffindor for conjuring, Mr. Potter. And another fifty points for Gryffindor bravery, although I’m tempted to subtract points for that instead,” she murmured shaking her head in amazement.

Remus and Tonks snorted in amusement and even Hermione smiled.

“Concentrate on what? Oh man, did anyone get the number of that lorry? My head is killing me,” announced a groggy Dan Granger.

Hermione squeaked and hurled herself at her father. He automatically wrapped his arms around her.

“Ouch, easy...Whoa...Calm down, Pumpkin. We’re fine now,” he murmured into her hair. Dan looked up at Emma, who smiled back at her husband.

Still holding Hermione, Dan looked around the room in confusion. “Alright, can someone explain to me how I got here? Last I remember, I was on the floor in a strange place.”

“It appears, Mr. Granger, that earlier today you and your wife were abducted from your office. I’m sorry to say that three of your employees were killed. Later, a note was sent to Harry Potter. In it, the kidnappers offered to free you both if Harry surrendered to them,” Amelia offered quietly. “It seemed that Mister Potter had other ideas, however. After sending your daughter here to Grimmauld Place, he went off looking for you.”

Dan looked at Emma and Hermione, the worry written on his face. Both nodded to him, confirming what Amelia was telling him. Leaning back against his pillows, he closed his eyes against the headache. “Thank God everyone’s alright,” he breathed.

Danni looked up from removing the last of the splinters from Harry’s back. With all of them removed, she quickly sealed the remaining wounds and cleaned the blood off of him with a few spells. Then she walked over to her other two patients to check them out. After running a few tests she straightened up, smiling.

“By tomorrow afternoon this will be little more than a painful memory for both of you. The potions are working just fine,” Danni said. Hermione smiled wanly at the healer, but the relief was evident in her eyes.

“What about Harry?” asked Tonks softly.

Danni frowned slightly and looked over at the bed where Harry lay sleeping. “His injuries were far more severe, but he’s responding very well. He broke his arm in four places, how I’m not sure. But that’s healing nicely and should be completely healed within the hour. I’ve removed the splinters in his back; there were quite a lot of them. When he wakes he’ll need more blood-replenishing potion. His magical reserves are depleted, but are returning at an astounding rate. I think he’ll be as good as new by noon tomorrow. I’m just curious how he managed to wrack up so much damage so quickly.”

“He was protecting us,” Emma whispered, then she turned to Hermione and chewed on her lip slightly. “I remember two Death Eaters exploding, then suddenly Harry was there, between us and the remaining five. One of them cast that Ava kedra...Advra krava...that green curse, and Harry dove in front of Dan, who was on the floor. He continued fighting from the floor until there were no more to fight. I think I was in shock and he... he... he called me Mum,” she said in a wondering tone. Hermione looked surprised for a moment, then she smiled gently at her mother.

A low moan was heard from Harry and everyone’s attention turned to him. Hermione looked at

her parents, then over to Harry, then back to her parents, not knowing what she should do. Emma made the choice for her. “Go to him, sweetie. We’re fine now, thanks to him,” she said softly.

Hermione looked at her father, who nodded in agreement. She then jumped to her feet and quickly joined Tonks and Remus next to Harry’s bed. Remus helped Harry roll over onto his back and sit up. Tonks was about to conjure some pillows for him to lean against when Hermione solved the problem by sitting behind him and letting him lean against her. Danni gave him more blood-replenishing potion. With a weak smile, he looked up at Danni and nodded gratefully.

Looking around, he noted Amelia’s presence. “Pensieve anyone?” he asked in a tired whisper. It was time to face the music.

Tonks produced a standard Auror’s witness Pensieve and helped Harry extract the memories. Then she handed the Pensieve to Amelia. Amelia looked ready to pocket the small Pensieve when she paused and looked around at everyone.

“Harry would you mind if I run this through, here, for everyone to see?” she asked him.

“It’s easier if they see it than having me repeating the same story over and over again,” he said softly. Hermione shifted slightly behind him, making him acutely aware of her presence. She ran one hand through his hair, which had a calming effect on him.

Then he tried to bend his arm up to caress her, but he winced and stopped.

“Don’t move that arm much tonight, Harry. It’s going to be very sore until the bones are finished knitting. The muscles and tendons will also need a bit of time. You’ve stretched them in ways they weren’t meant to move,” Danni told him as she helped him straighten it out again.

Amelia placed the Pensieve on the table McGonagall conjured, then she invoked the memories in presentation mode. The air above the Pensieve shimmered and a three foot high Harry Potter appeared just in time to watch a similar sized Hermione and Professor McGonagall portkey from the head suite at Hogwarts.

Harry turned his head from the images and looked elsewhere.

*Tonight I became a murderer, he thought. Peter was different. Killing him was simple justice. But I didn’t know those men. I knew nothing about them. I just killed them.* His shoulders hitched a few times and Hermione’s arms tightened their grip on him. *Doesn’t she understand? I’m a fucking monster! I didn’t even flinch when I killed them.*

He closed his eyes tightly and tried hard not to weep. He’d left one man alive, but that man was as good as dead anyway. He’d killed seven men tonight, seven men with parents who loved them. Some were probably husbands, fathers, uncles, and brothers. Harry listened to the sound of the fight from the Pensieve and he shuddered in dismay.

He opened his eyes when he heard a soft voice calling his name. He looked up at Amelia’s smiling

face.

“Harry, having reviewed your memory, I can’t find any fault with what you did. You went up against seven to one odds and had two muggles to protect at the same time. I know this doesn’t make you feel any better about the actions you took, but a trained Auror couldn’t have done better than you did tonight. In fact, I don’t know an Auror who could have done what you did tonight,” Amelia told him.

Harry nodded mutely. As he watched her pocket the Pensieve, his eyes began to droop. He was finding it hard to stay awake with Hermione running her hands through his hair.

“I’d better get a team out to pickup up the pieces. Fortunately the pensieve will allow us to figure out where to apparate to. Professor, let me give you a note explaining the students’ absence from school. This way they won’t get into any trouble,” the Director said, moving towards the door.

McGonagall nodded gratefully. A note from Amelia would go a long way in making sure none of them invoked Dumbledore’s ire. Amelia left the room with McGonagall close behind her.

Danni dosed Hermione’s parents with a sleeping draught. She turned to do the same with Harry, but he had already fallen asleep in Hermione’s arms. Smiling at the pair, she helped Hermione stretch out next to him and, within moments, both were asleep.

---

Headmaster’s Office, Hogwarts, That Same Evening...

Upon her return to the school from Grimmauld Place, Minerva went directly to the Headmaster’s office. Stepping past the Gargoyle guardian and onto the slowly moving staircase, she tapped the letter she held against her leg and frowned. It had been a long night of waiting and she’d felt useless through most of it. Once Harry and the Granger’s had returned to the house, injured, but safe, she’d been able to relax for the first time in several hours.

After speaking with Danni, Amelia had quickly written a letter, excusing both Harry and Hermione from Hogwarts for several days. While Minerva agreed with the Director in the need for their absence, she knew that Albus would cause problems for Harry over it.

Finding herself outside the office door, she straightened her shoulders and took a deep breath. There was no help for it.

Knocking, she entered the Headmaster’s office when bidden. Albus welcomed her, his eyes twinkling. After offering her a chair, he sat back and waited.

“No offer of a lemon drop, Albus?” Minerva asked tiredly.

Dumbledore’s eyes lit up. “Would you like one? Most people turn them down,” he said, almost sadly.

“No, I don’t want one. But it never seems quite like a proper visit to your office without the offered lemon drop.”

“Ah, I see.” He steepled his hands beneath his chin and regarded her across his desk. “What has happened, Minerva? Where did you go this evening?” he asked quietly.

“I bring a letter from Amelia Bones, Albus,” she replied, placing the letter on his desk. “In it, you will find that she has excused Hermione Granger and Harry Potter from Hogwarts for a few days.”

He sat up quickly. “What?” Taking the letter, he read it quickly. Looking up, his blue eyes bore into McGonagall’s. “Explain this,” he ordered.

“A family emergency, Headmaster,” she said firmly.

“Family emergency? I could understand that for Miss Granger. But Harry Potter *has* no family, Professor. Would you care to explain his absence?” he all but demanded of her.

“I’m sorry, Sir, but the reason for their absence is none of my business. As Deputy Headmistress, it is my duty to see that those students who miss school have reason to do so. A family emergency, confirmed by Amelia Bones in her capacity as a Board member, fulfills that requirement.”

“I repeat, Harry Potter has no family. Why is he not in school as he should be?”

“You’ll have to discuss that with Amelia, Albus. She did not think it necessary to explain her reasoning to me,” Minerva said calmly. Technically, it wasn’t a lie. Amelia hadn’t explained her reasons behind the letter, mainly due to the fact that Minerva was already aware of them.

Dumbledore continued to stare at her, as if waiting for something. When Minerva refused to say more, he rubbed his eyes tiredly. “Very well, Professor. I think that will be all for tonight.”

“Of course, Headmaster. Good night,” she replied, standing.

As she closed the office door behind her and stepped onto the revolving staircase once more, she sighed deeply. The meeting had gone better than she had expected, though she did not envy Harry. She’d bet her tartan bathrobe that the Headmaster called Potter into his office soon after the young man’s return.

---

Malfoy Manor, Early Morning...

The sole surviving Death Eater from the Granger kidnapping plot shuffled into Malfoy Manor, heading straight for the Master’s chambers in the basement. Lucius followed, but not to close. Something about the man’s manner had set off warning bells in Lucius’ mind.

A hush descended as the man entered Voldemort's chamber. He shuffled to a stop a few feet from the Dark Lord, who looked up from his chair in surprise. The man began to shake and convulse and, as he did, he pulsed with a bright white light. Suddenly the Death Eater screeched once, his back arched and those in the chamber could clearly hear bones in his back snapping. Then he straightened up to stare Voldemort in the eye.

"I will give you this warning only once, Tom. Do. Not. Fuck. With. Me. Or. My. Family. Again." The man's lips moved, but it was Harry Potter's voice that was heard throughout the chamber.

Voldemort stood, enraged. Several of his servants moved to grab the possessed man. As they did, they burst into flame and Voldemort himself started to smoke, despite the fact he had not touched the Death Eater. As he writhed, he screeched in pain. "What manner of magic is this?!? POTTER!" Voldemort wailed.

"I won't warn you again, Tom. Stay out of my way or I'll hurt you worse than you can possibly imagine," the youth's voice intoned.

The possessed Death Eater lifted one hand and a blast of blue light erupted from his palm, striking Voldemort in the forehead. The Dark Lord collapsed.

When the light faded, the possessed man was dead on the floor.

Voldemort moaned and painfully climbed back into his chair and shivered in fear. Potter had sent him a vision and it terrified him worse than the pain from the burns Potter had inflicted on him.

It was a vision of himself, immortal but powerless. Hunted, on the run and alone, respected and feared by no one. To the Dark Lord, it was the worst sort of hell.

"Lucius!" Voldemort snapped as he watched men removed his dead servants.

Lucius rushed forward. "Master?"

"We must find out how Potter has become so powerful. Instruct our spies in Hogwarts and elsewhere to redouble their efforts. Potter is a threat to everything we plan to do!"

"It will be as you command, Master," Lucius said, bowing low, his limbs shaking. He turned away, intent on making his escape, but was stopped.

"One moment, Lucius. I have another task for you. Send something in way of thanks to our former Potions Master. No deed should go un-rewarded," he snarled.

---

Grimmauld Place...

Harry awoke to the murmur of voices. The bed had a warm spot next to where he lay. He rolled a little and could smell the fragrance he had come to associate with Hermione. A small smile

danced on his face. It wasn't a dream! He was sure he'd come out of a deep sleep last night to find himself cuddled up with Hermione. He vaguely remembered snuggling closer before drifting off again.

Deciding he'd never be able to go back to sleep, he blinked his eyes a few times and waited for the world to swim into focus. He sat up and every muscle in his body complained. He stifled a groan and winced. Then he noticed Hermione standing next to his bed.

"Come on, Harry," she said softly, taking his hand. "What you need right now is a hot soak with those salts of yours, then some breakfast. After that, Danni wants to check you out again."

He nodded and stood unsteadily. He noted that the Grangers were sitting around a table in his bedroom with Remus and Tonks. The beds the Grangers had used last night had been banished already. Everyone was watching him, making him nervous for some reason. He tried to straighten up as best as he could and smiled as he padded his way to the bathroom.

"I'll have Dobby bring you some clothes, Harry. Go soak. We'll make sure breakfast is ready when you come out," Hermione called after him as she closed the bathroom door.

An hour later Harry returned from his bath feeling much better. He walked over to the table where Hermione sat with her parents and the others and took a seat next to her. Dobby and Winky appeared and set platters of food on the table. Feeling very hungry this morning, he loaded his plate up with more food than he normally at breakfast.

He was about half way through his small mountain of food when he noticed everyone staring at him. Then it struck him why Hermione's parents were staring at him. He swallowed nervously. "Um... I'm sorry. I don't know how Hermione ended up in my bed. But we didn't do anything, honest," he blurted.

Dan and Emma looked at each other before bursting into laughter. Hermione looked up at Harry, mortified, as she realized what he had just said.

Emma reached over and grabbed Harry's hand in her own. "We're not upset about that. Good gracious, no. First off, Hermione wouldn't let you do anything she didn't want you to do and you're too much of a gentlemen to force yourself on her. Secondly, you were in no condition to do anything but sleep last night. And finally, when Hermione makes that sort of decision, we trust her to make sure she picks well. From what I can see, she has," Emma said seriously. She began to laugh again when she noticed Hermione blushing to her roots and staring down at the table.

Dan coughed once and looked embarrassed. "Harry, I... We... owe you our lives. This morning, while you slept, several of us talked about what we saw in the Pensieve. Quite a handy tool, that is. We saw you jump in front of that killing curse and, had your shield not worked... well, it did, thank heaven. I'm not really up on all this life debt and wizard debt stuff but..."

"Mr. Granger, it's alright, really. I couldn't let anything happen to either of you. I promised Hermione I'd bring you home safe," Harry said, interrupting him. Hermione smiled at Harry, her

heart in her eyes.

“We won’t press you about it, but it’s not just alright. You saved our lives,” Emma said fervently. “Last night I witnessed the best and the worst that the Wizarding world has to offer. Believe me, Harry, you are the best. I’d once thought that you were very lucky because Hermione had fallen in love with you. Now, however, I wonder if she isn’t the lucky one.”

Harry looked at the faces around him and his vision blurred as tears began to well up. “You shouldn’t say that, Mrs. Granger. I killed more than seven men last night. I didn’t even think about offering them mercy or asking if they wanted to surrender. I should be locked up in Azkaban for what I’ve done,” he finished in a whisper, staring at his plate.

Hermione grabbed Harry’s head and force him to look at her. “Don’t you dare say that, Harry Potter,” she raged, truly angry. “Are you telling me you’re ashamed of saving my family? Besides, we saw you let that last Death Eater go last night, the one that dropped his wand.”

Harry’s eyes dropped to the table again. “I didn’t let him go, Hermione. I sent him back to Voldemort to die. I killed his mind and gave him a mission to perform before his body stopped working. And if he performed his mission correctly, he probably killed a few more Death Eaters in the process.”

Hermione gasped and Tonks leaned forward over the table. “What was his mission, Harry?” his guardian asked quietly.

“To tell Voldemort not to mess with me and my family...and that includes the Grangers. My Death Eater then gave Voldemort a vision of his worst nightmare, immortality without any power or status, being hunted, alone and shunned,” Harry whispered. “Right about now, Voldemort’s learning the meaning of the words fear and pain as he experience the power of a magic he doesn’t know.”

Dan snorted. “Well if so, then it’s about time. He’s been living off of the fear he creates for years, from what I heard. If someone can make him afraid, it will be a novel experience for him.”

“Harry, I couldn’t have done what you did, and I’m trained for it,” Tonks said, staring him in the eye. “COR! You jumped blind, into an unknown situation, took down the bad guys and saved the hostages. And while you should probably skip the part where you injure yourself next time, you still have a lot to be proud of. Even the muggle hostage rescue teams do it by killing the bad guys. Sometimes it can’t be helped.”

Harry looked down at the table, still unable to meet anyone’s eyes for any length of time.

“Harry, I know it’s little consolation, but those men killed our staff,” Emma said, then she choked back a sob. “They probably would have killed us too if you hadn’t helped.”

Harry looked up. All three Grangers had tears in their eyes. “They killed your staff? How many people?” he asked intently. Hermione was at a loss for words, all she could do was grip Harry’s



hand in her own.

It was Dan who spoke for them. “Three, Harry. Two assistants, Kathy and Jean and our receptionist, Morgan,” he said softly.

“The MLE has stepped in to assist the Muggle police, but two of the women had families,” added Tonks. “The families will be told that the terrorists that committed this crime were killed in a shoot-out with the police so they’ll have a little bit of closure.”

Harry closed his eyes in pain. “Remus?” he asked quietly.

Remus looked up from his tea. The scene at the table had become increasingly personal and uncomfortable to the older wizard. It was like sitting in on a private family conversation.

“Remus, please, get together with Mr. Granger and see that those families are taken care of.”

Remus nodded. Even though Harry had inherited all of Sirius’ estate and Remus was only the executor for the will, Harry decided to retain Remus to help him manage the combined Potter and Black estates. Harry understood how Remus was hampered by the strict anti-werewolf laws which kept him from earning a decent salary. Harry’s hiring of him solved that problem, but more important to Harry and Remus both, it kept the two of them close together. Both were effectively alone, except for the other. Remus thus became surrogate uncle, mentor and financial advisor to Harry.

“What time can we return to Hogwarts, Hermione?” Harry asked, trying to change the subject.

“Professor McGonagall left here last night after you fell asleep, but Danni told her you wouldn’t be allowed to move around much until this afternoon at the earliest. She said she’d be here to check you out today before you could go back.”

Harry nodded and got up from the table. As he passed Emma, she reached out and took his hand and pulled him into an embrace.

“I know you feel bad about what you were forced to do last night, Harry, but I want you to know that to us, you did the right thing. And as far as I’m concerned, you *are* a part of this family.”

Harry’s eyes filled with tears and he sniffed a few times. “Thank you, Mrs. Granger,” he whispered. Emma’s hugs were similar to Molly’s, back when he trusted her, but they were different in one interesting way. Molly’s hugs seemed to be designed to stifle and smother, while Emma’s hugs were light, almost as if she were trying to express her joy in being close, while still allowing freedom. It was something he’d have to think about. Clearly motherly hugs came in different flavors.

Dan looked over at the two of them and smiled. “Harry, last night you called me Dad and Emma Mum. If you’re not comfortable with that, then call us Dan and Emma. I think we’ve gone well beyond the Mr. and Mrs. stage,” he said, and then glanced at his daughter.

Hermione looked down at her feet and blushed prettily. *Are my parents deliberately trying to embarrass me today?* She wondered. *First there was the gentle teasing when I first woke up in Harry's bed and now this.*

She glanced up to see Harry sitting on his bed with Danni checking him over. She relaxed in her chair when Danni straightened up and smiled at him. Apparently he was recovering nicely from last night's activity. And while she knew better, she secretly hoped some of that recovery was due to the fact they had spent the night in each others arms.

---

Hogwarts, Dinner Time...

They made it back to Hogwarts just before dinner. Harry stayed close to Hermione, who was still a bit shocked by the events of the previous night. At dinner, however, he received a message from the Headmaster. Scanning it quickly, he tried not to scowl when he discovered that Dumbledore wanted him to come to his office.

Sighing, Harry passed the note to Hermione. McGonagall had supposedly been given a note from Amelia in regard to their absence. Now it was time to find out if that had been sufficient or not.

Harry left the Great Hall and walked up the stairs towards the Headmaster's office. This would be his first face-to-face meeting with Dumbledore since returning from holiday, and he really wasn't looking forward it. Danni had performed admirably, but the pepper up potion he took before leaving Grimmauld was quickly wearing off. His back and leg were sore and he wanted nothing more than to stretch out on his bed and sleep.

He paused in front of the guardian and pulled out his cane to use. Then he adjusted the aura around the Gargoyle and murmured, "Stinky Socks," effectively resetting the password to the stairway. He was tired of being summoned to the Headmaster's office and no one telling him the password. Let the Headmaster be the one to guess next time. He climbed the stairs tiredly and entered the office without bothering to knock.

Dumbledore looked up as Harry entered and frowned. He had to remind himself that Harry had exhibited tremendous power during their last encounter and did not want to provoke him again. "Ah, Harry. Do come in and have a seat. Would you care for a lemon drop?" he asked mildly.

Professor Snape leaned against the wall behind and to the side of the Headmaster. He scowled at the youth as he entered.

"No, thank you, Headmaster," Harry replied in a polite tone.

"Now Harry, the reason I asked to see you this evening is that I'd like to find out exactly where you've been for the last day and a half. While Miss Granger could conceivably have a family emergency, you have no family."

"I do have a guardian, Headmaster, and she is legally considered family. It would help if you

would stop forgetting that fact. I'm sure Amelia's note explained the situation, and even if it hadn't, Professor McGonagall probably gave you enough of an explanation."

"Amelia and Professor McGonagall both merely said it was a family emergency involving both you and Miss Granger. I am glad to see you both back in one piece and from that I'll assume the emergency is over?"

"Oh, it's over for now, Headmaster. I can't promise there won't be a repeat. But if there is, it won't be deliberate on our part, that I can assure you."

Dumbledore frowned. Harry clearly had no intention of telling him what it was all about.

"Very well then, Harry. In the future, when such emergencies come up, please let me know about them before you leave school grounds. As Headmaster, both you and Miss Granger are my responsibility."

Harry didn't comment, but sat staring at the old man calmly, waiting.

"Now, on to the other reason I asked to see you tonight. I'd like you to begin taking 'remedial defense classes' under Professor Snape. That will be the cover story, of course. What he'll actually be teaching you is..."

"No," Harry said quietly.

"I beg your pardon?" Dumbledore said, surprised.

"What part of 'no' was unclear, Headmaster?" Harry asked politely, his expression guileless.

"I am Headmaster here, Mr. Potter. When it comes to class schedules, you, as a student, will do as *I* say," Dumbledore said, his face red with anger.

Bolting from his chair in anger, Harry leaned over Dumbledore's desk heavily. "You've got to be out of your sodding mind! That greasy git couldn't teach me a thing about Defense. I'm earning an outstanding right now in Defense, according to Professor Blackthorne."

At their incredulous looks, Harry's lips twisted into a sneer worthy of the greasy git in question. "What? Wasn't being stuck to the ceiling enough of a lesson for you two? What do I have to do next?"

"Mr. Potter! Professor Snape will be teaching you advanced dueling techniques. Techniques that, I might add, are not taught to even seventh year NEWT level students. You need this level of instruction, otherwise you will not be able to face Voldemort," Dumbledore said hotly.

"I've already had instruction far in advance of anything *he* can provide," Harry said sneering in Snape's direction. "As for Voldemort? Well Albus, it occurs to me that you've already killed one Dark Lord, so I've decided to let you kill this one as well. Think of the fame and glory you'll get for it," Harry replied with a broad smile.

Snape bristled and started to move away from the wall. Dumbledore stopped him with a wave of his hand. “No Severus, if the child refuses to take advantage of the opportunity we’ve provided for him, there is little we can do to persuade him. You are dismissed, Harry” Dumbledore said coldly, waving a hand at him.

Both men watched as Harry left the office, then Dumbledore leaned back in his chair and sighed heavily. “See Severus, as I predicted, he would not accept the offer of training. His involvement with the Brotherhood has become too deep. And it’s spreading. Besides Miss Granger, others here at Hogwarts are wearing Brotherhood uniforms. I don’t know what this ‘family emergency’ business was all about, but it was probably something related to the Brotherhood. More disturbing is the fact that Amelia wrote that note and McGonagall delivered it.”

“I think Minerva bears watching, Headmaster. She has, of late, shown an increasing tendency towards divided loyalties,” murmured a relieved Snape. He really didn’t want to risk teaching Potter dueling, but the offer had to be made.

Dumbledore looked lost in thought for a moment before looking up. “Her loyalties may be confused, but Minerva is loyal to Hogwarts first and foremost, Severus. However, you may be right. I’ll keep an eye on her. In the meantime, thank you for your help. I’m sure you have homework to grade.”

Snape, recognizing the dismissal, nodded and left the office.

Dumbledore sat at his desk reviewing his conversation with Harry. The longer he sat, the more worried he became. Harry had said he would not fight Voldemort! In the heat of the argument it had been ignored, but now it was glaring him in the face! Harry must fight Voldemort. It was his destiny!

---

Gryffindor Head Suite...

Hermione curled up on the couch with her potions text. She was already dressed for bed in pajamas and a robe. She was waiting up for Harry, a little concerned because he had been called to the Headmaster’s office after dinner.

She looked up from the couch in their little common room when the door opened and he limped in. Around this time last night he was preparing to enter a battle to save her parents lives. Tonight he looked like he hadn’t slept in days.

“Hey, you alright?” she asked in concern.

“Yeah, I guess so. When I left Dumbledore’s office all I wanted was a hot soak. Now I’m not so sure. Bed sounds a lot more inviting,” he said tiredly.

She nodded in understanding as he disappeared into his bedroom and she went back to reading her book. After another hour of reading, her own eyelids felt heavy enough for her to retire. She

carefully marked her place in the book and stood up. She was about to head for her own room when, on impulse, she opened the door to Harry's room.

An ever-lasting candle burned in one corner of the room and in the soft, low light, she could see Harry twisting and turning in his bed, caught in the grip of yet another nightmare. She walked over to his bed and watched him for a long moment. He turned his face towards her in his sleep and she could see him tremble. Making her decision, she tossed her robe on a nearby chair and slipped under his blankets.

She lightly touched his cheek with one hand and his tremors slowed. His breathing began to even out and eventually the tremors stopped altogether as she lay there, not quite touching him, except for her hand on his cheek.

He rolled to one side and threw an arm around her, pulling her closer. His eyes opened for the briefest of moments and then closed again as a soft smile appeared on his face.

Her smile matched his as she wormed her way closer to him, stealing some of his warmth. Her eyes drifted shut as her body relaxed against his. As they slept, neither noticed Crookshanks take up position at the bottom of the bed. After all, cats always take the choicest bed positions.

---

Hogwarts Great Hall, Breakfast...

For Harry, getting out of bed the next morning was an exercise in will power. He awoke to find himself spooning with Hermione in his bed. At first he was confused and surprised that he wasn't alone. He was sure he had gone to bed that way.

Having Hermione in his bed however presented him with several embarrassing problems. The first was that, sometime during the night, his hand had come to rest on her breast and he now found himself cupping it softly. Another problem was the fact that he awoke to find himself grinding his erection against her bum. Sure, she was wearing pajamas, but still! And it certainly didn't help that she was occasionally grinding back against him. If he could have died of embarrassment at that moment, he would have.

Slipping quietly out of bed, he never noticed Hermione's smile as he grabbed some clothes and padded quickly into the bathroom.

His morning shower was necessarily chilly and brief. He was surprised when he returned to his bedroom and found the bed empty. He was also grateful, in a way, because it meant he didn't have to deal with that issue so early in the morning. Dressing hurriedly, he debated on whether he should wait for Hermione or head down to breakfast on his own. Ultimately, his Gryffindor courage failed him and he snuck from the Head Suite while Hermione was still in the shower.

Harry took his customary seat among his friends and mumbled his greetings. Then he began to fill his plate, refusing to look anyone in the eye. A few minutes later, Hermione joined them, sitting down and greeting everyone as if nothing had happened. Harry blushed and stared down at his

plate, pushing his food around on it.

“Harry, are you alright mate?” Neville asked in concern.

“Yeah Harry, you look flushed today. Maybe you have a fever,” Ginny said worriedly.

Harry glanced around the table. Hermione was giving him an amused, hungry look that made his stomach feel woozy. “I’m fine, just fine,” he mumbled, and then nearly jumped out of his seat when Hermione put a hand on his thigh under the table.

“He’s alright, he just had a hard time getting up... out of bed this morning,” Hermione said with a barely concealed snicker.

Harry winced mentally and he looked at the others, the appeal clearly written on his face. Ginny took one look at him and suppressed a laugh. She then shot a look at Hermione that clearly said she’d want more information later. Neville, Draco and Terry looked totally confused by Hermione’s comment, while the rest of the girls smiled warmly in his direction.

All in all, it made Harry even more nervous. He was about to say something when the appearance of the morning post saved his hide as everyone turned his or her attention to the owls.

He rarely got mail so he turned back to his breakfast. At the far end of the Gryffindor table, and again at the Slytherin table, several eagle owls delivered their messages before taking flight.

After letting the Outcasts have enough time to read their mail, Harry brought up a topic he’d meant to talk to them about ages ago. “Guys, listen up for a second. I have a question I’d like you all to think about in regard to Professor Blackthorne. I’m wondering if we can trust her enough to bring her into our plan or not. Don’t give me your idea right now if you’re not sure about her. Think on it. I’m trying to decide if we should set up a meeting with her or not,” he said seriously.

Ginny looked up from her breakfast and shrugged. “I like her, Harry. If you think she can help, then let’s bring her in,” she said bluntly.

Hermione and several others nodded agreeably. Luna however looked uncertain.

“Luna? Do you have a problem with Professor Blackthorne?” Harry asked worriedly, then he looked around. “I’ll be blunt here. This is something we all agree to, or it doesn’t happen. You guys have been looking for me to lead this and, to a large extent, I may be. But I can’t do this all alone. I need your help.”

Luna’s eyes were unfocused as she turned to towards Harry. “I don’t know. I like her and I trust her. But something about her makes me think that we still haven’t broken the DADA Professor record at Hogwarts.”

Harry felt a chill crawl down his spine. Shaking it off, he looked thoughtful for a few moments. “Alright, Luna. If you’re not sure, then we’ll hold off doing anything for now.”

---

The Gryffindor Head Suite Common Room (a few days later)...

Hermione sat in the common room with Susan, Luna and Ginny. The boys were out breaking in the new brooms Harry had purchased for them all. Harry and Draco were decent flyers, but Terry and Neville needed some work. With the guys away, it was time for one of those most mysterious of activities: Girl talk.

Ginny bounced on the couch and faced Hermione. They had just finished talking about Susan and Terry and now Ginny wanted the real dirt from Hermione.

“Alright, Hermione. It’s time to confess. Since the attack on your parents, Harry’s been acting like he’s crushing on you. You’ve got him so tongue twisted he has trouble talking. He’s become clumsy and I... no we...want to know what’s going on,” the redhead demanded, grinning at her friend.

Hermione looked around at the three other girls and their eager faces. She sighed for a moment, then, uncharacteristically, she giggled. “It started on the night my parents were attacked...when I accidentally fell asleep in Harry’s bed. He was too exhausted and hurt to do anything more than sleep and that’s what we did. Since then, I’ve joined in him in his bed every night. I’ve tried sleeping in my own bed, but the nightmares... well, they don’t seem to happen when I’m with him. His nightmares seem to fade away too, when I’m with him.

“The problem is mostly Harry’s. I suppose I really should talk to him about it, but he’s been so busy being an absolute gentleman that I have been more interested in seeing what lengths he’ll go to, to be a gentleman.”

She giggled again before continuing. “In the last two nights he’s been going to bed fully clothed. I thought he’d just get used to it, but that hasn’t happened.”

Luna looked at Hermione for a brief moment and Hermione shuddered as she felt a wave of curiosity and concern pass through her. Then Luna’s expression became unfocused again. “That’s mean, Hermione. You really should talk to him. You’ve forgotten that Harry needs your guidance. He doesn’t need you teasing him,” Luna said gently.

Hermione blinked in surprise, looking at the Ravenclaw.

Luna put one hand to her forehead. “What? Don’t you think I can’t see what Harry’s really like? Just because I don’t say things out loud doesn’t mean I can’t see them.”

Hermione flushed at the younger girl’s comments. “I’m sorry, Luna. I guess I never...”

“I know, Hermione. You aren’t the only one to think that. But I can see Harry quite well. In many ways he and Draco are similar. Both have no idea how to really deal with women. Draco’s father exposed him to the very worst kind of women, and while that left him very experienced in the mechanics, it also left him woefully unable to deal with a woman on an emotional level. Harry’s the same way, though for different reasons, and he lacks the experience on top of that.

“You know he cares too much about you to make any kind of move without you telling him it’s alright. Climbing into bed and teasing him is only confusing him. He clearly loves you very deeply. I think a lot deeper than is normal for someone his age. Do yourself and him a favor and tell him what you want and need from him.”

Hermione leaned back on the couch thinking about what Luna had said. It made sense to her. Harry had become more assertive with her when he knew where the limits were. But when she introduced the bed into the mix, he’d backed off, uncertain how to proceed. She’d have to talk with him.

“You’re right, Luna. I’ll have to talk to him about it...” she said, then stopped as the door to the common room opened and the guys entered. Neville was pale as a ghost and supported between Harry and Draco. The rest of them had silly grins on their faces.

Ginny looked up in concern. “Neville?” she asked worriedly.

“He’ll be alright, Ginny. He just got a little carried away and followed Harry into a corkscrewing power dive. He never hit the ground, but I think he shocked himself silly,” replied Terry as Draco and Harry sat Neville down next to her on the couch.

“A corkscrewing power dive?” Ginny said flatly. “From what height?”

Harry and Draco looked at each other. “About five hundred feet, would you say?” Draco asked mildly.

“Closer to six hundred, I think. It’s hard to tell at that height,” Harry replied. Then he shrugged and grinned. “He did bloody marvelous, Ginny! He pulled out just in the nick of time, still following me. It was only afterward that he got all wobbly like this.”

Hermione looked at both Draco and Terry. “I take it you two also followed Harry into that dive?” she asked sweetly. None of them had as yet realized they were in trouble.

Draco and Terry exchanged a look, then nodded, grinning goofily. Hermione expression grew firm and she looked at the other girls, who were mirroring the expression.

Ginny turned to Hermione, her eyes flashing dangerously. “Do you want to take care of yours while I deal with mine?”

Ginny grabbed Neville by the arm and lead the unsteady boy back down to the Gryffindor Common Room. The other two girls led their own boyfriends from the room as well.

Harry looked at Hermione and winced at her glare.

“I’m in trouble, aren’t I?”

“Sit,” she said, pointing to the spot on the couch next to her.



Harry sat heavily on the couch and waited for the verbal lashing he knew was coming.

“Do you remember that time in your bathroom over the holiday?” she asked him gently.

Harry blushed and looked away from her.

“Look at me,” she said softly. When his eyes met hers, she continued. “I’ve been coming to your bed at night because I’ve tried sleeping alone and the nightmares are unbearable. How you manage to sleep at all with your nightmares is beyond me. But don’t be embarrassed by sharing the bed with me, Harry. I’m hoping that someday we’ll share a lot more than that.”

“I hope so too, Hermione, but it’s been hard...”

“It certainly has,” she said, interrupting him with a giggle.

Harry blushed again and she moved into his lap.

“Oh don’t worry about it, Harry. It’s a form of flattery that a girl can learn to really appreciate. In the meantime, however, I expect you to start wearing your pajamas again or just your boxers. No more of this being fully clothed in bed, Mister,” she said playfully.

“And here I thought you were going to yell at me about Neville,” he murmured, while playfully nibbling on her ear.

Hermione laughed and squirmed away from him, his breath tickling her ear. “No, if Neville is barmy enough to follow you into a corkscrew power dive, then I’ll let Ginny yell at him. You fly like you were meant to have wings.”

---

Hogwarts, Late That Same Night...

Muffled moans and heavy breathing competed with the rustle and sigh of clothing as it was moved aside. The absolute darkness added an eerie intimacy to the tiny space, though the couple was too occupied to notice.

They stroked and teased each other to a fever pitch. They backed away for a moment and the young man muttered the contraceptive charm. As they reached for each other once more, the door to the little broom closet was thrown open and they frozen as light washed over them.

“Well, look what we have here,” a rough voice said slyly. “Two students out of bed and half out of their clothes. Oh my, what trouble we have!”

Hannah Abbott and Justin Finch-Fletchley gaped at Argus Filch in shock. They’d always found it amusing when couples told horror stories of being caught by Filch while snogging in a broom closet or an unused classroom, but had never believed it would happen to them. They’d chosen this particular broom closet to make sure it wouldn’t. It was located on the main floor, a short

distance from the front doors of the school, and a little too close to Filch's office to be convenient. He never checked this closet! Well, almost never...

"Come on then," Filch said, smiling evilly. "Professor Dumbledore will have something to say about this, I expect."

Fixing their clothing in a rush, both teenagers left the closet, blushing and stammering out their excuses.

"Save it for the Headmaster," Filch said in obvious enjoyment.

Leading the two hooligans through the Entrance Hall and to the stairs, he glanced back once to make sure they were following. Walking quickly, he snickered to himself. The best part of working at Hogwarts was finding the little buggers out after curfew and marching them off to a teacher or the Headmaster for punishment. Watching their bright, shining faces blanch and fall in dismay made his entire day. He went out of his way to give them enough time to be caught in compromising positions. Not only was their punishment worse for it, but their embarrassment at being caught groping and slobbering all over each other made it that much more fun for him. Oh yes, he enjoyed his job immensely.

Reaching the top of the sixth floor staircase, he turned towards the last set of stairs leading to the seventh floor and the Gargoyle guardian. He glanced up when he heard a throat being cleared.

"What's this?" a silky voice asked from the top of the stairs.

"Professor Snape," Filch said, his eyes lighting up. Dumbledore was often lenient on his students, but Snape could be downright vicious! "I found these two slobbering all over each other in the boom closet on the main floor. I'm surprised they were wearing any clothes at all when I opened the door."

"Indeed?" Snape asked coolly, examining the two embarrassed Hufflepuffs. He was amused by Argus' obvious disappointment in finding the two students clothed. "I'm sure the Headmaster will deal with it."

"But, Sir!" Filch protested, rushing up the stairs towards Snape. "We shouldn't bother him with something so trivial. Not when you're..."

Whatever the man was going to say was cut off. Half way up the stairs, Filch's foot passed through a step, and he fell forward...and kept falling. The two students grabbed each other, shocked, and Snape's jaw dropped as the caretaker disappeared. A loud, piercing scream echoed off the walls, as did the heavy, sickening thud of a body striking stone several floors below them.

Snape jerked his eyes away from the stairs and glared at the two students still staring at the steps where the caretaker had vanished. "You two!" he snapped loudly. "Back to your common room. NOW!"

Justin and Hannah didn't need to be told twice. Turning quickly then ran down the stairs, only slowing when they reached the main floor. There, they passed the still form of Argus Filch sprawled out on the stone floor. Hannah shuddered when she saw the pool of blood forming near Filch's head. Justin grabbed her hand and began to run for the stairs leading down to their common room.

Once the students were gone, Snape placed a barrier at the bottom of the staircase to prevent anyone from following Filch's path to the main floor of the castle. He then spun around and rushed back to the Headmaster's office and explained what happened.

Several minutes later, Dumbledore and Snape approached the staircase and examined it closely.

"You say the stairs disappeared?" Albus asked.

"No, they didn't," replied Snape, frowning in thought. "His foot just seemed to pass through the step. Perhaps an illusion?"

"Hmmm...perhaps," the Headmaster agreed. Drawing his wand, he cast several detection charms. "Interesting," he said as he and the Potion Master scanned the results. "The middle set of stairs have been banished and an illusion cast over the hole."

"And a tripping charm on the step just before the hole," Snape said, sickened at what he was seeing.

"This was obviously meant to kill someone, Severus, but who?"

"Me," Snape said sharply.

"My dear boy," Dumbledore began.

"Oh save it, Albus. Isn't it obvious to you? That bastard Potter exposed me as a spy. Voldemort knows and it's now worth my life to leave Hogwarts."

"Yes, but how..."

"Don't you see? This trap wasn't here when I came up these stairs tonight! Someone followed me this far and, once I'd gone into your office, set the trap."

"You may be correct, Severus," Dumbledore said, watching the younger man closely and listening to the sound of footfalls as someone climbed the stairs. "However, I do not think we should inform the other teachers about this." With a few flicks of his wand, he repaired the stairs and removed Snape's barrier.

"As you wish," Severus said, somewhat distantly.

"Albus, Severus!" Professor Sprout called as she rounded the landing and looked up the stairs. "I just had the most astonishing visit from Hannah Abbott and Justin Finch-Fletchley. They told me

that Argus had fallen *through* the stairs. I found him on the main floor...he's dead, Headmaster," she finished softly, her eyes welling up with tears. "I sent for Poppy, of course, but he's dead."

"We know, Pomona," Dumbledore said quietly. "However, Argus didn't fall through the stairs, he tripped and fell over the banister."

"Tripped?" Sprout asked in surprised. "Are you sure? The students said..."

"Those poor children," the Headmaster said sorrowfully. "I'm sure it's the shock, Pomona. Please, bring them to my office and I will speak to them about it."

"Of course, Albus," the small woman said.

When she bustled back down the stairs, Dumbledore turned to Snape. "A memory charm, I think," he murmured quietly. "In the meantime, I want you to return to your quarters, Severus. I will tend to the students and Argus."

"As you wish," the Potion Master replied. As he started down the stairs, he paused and placed his feet carefully when he came to the steps where Filch had fallen. Finding them solid, he shuddered once, and then continued on his way.

---

## Snape's Private Quarters...

The trip down to his private rooms in the dungeon had been a nervous affair for Snape. To make things worse, an ungodly yowling had begun when he'd reached the third floor landing. When he reached the main floor, he had discovered its source. Mrs. Norris had discovered her master's body and was mourning his passing in the only way she could. That her cries set his teeth on edge was of little concern to the feline, he was sure, and he had to resist the urge to kick the cat to shut her up.

Beginning his decent into the dungeons, he mind raced. The idea that someone would attempt to kill him inside the castle had not occurred to him, though it should have. He knew that the Dark Lord had a few servants among the student body, mostly from his house. He had been so distracted with the Headmaster's problems with Potter lately that he had not paid enough attention to his own.

Entering his private quarters, he checked his wards twice. Finding everything in order, he poured himself a stiff drink and began to pace.

Someone must have been following him. There was no other explanation for not encountering the trap on his way to the Headmaster's office. For the first time, he found himself feeling grateful towards Argus Filch. If the man hadn't discovered the trap when he had, the school would have found itself short one Potion Master, rather than one squib caretaker. And while he wasn't delusional enough to think many would have mourned his passing, he was human enough to fall into the 'better him than me' mentality of man who'd just seen his life pass before his eyes.

Finding his glass empty, he refilled it, and continued to do so until the bottle of Fire Whiskey was empty. He debated opening another, but knew it wouldn't help. He was as numb as he was going to get and his thinking had become muddled some time ago. Sighing, he made his way into the bedroom and fell into bed. Within moments, he was snoring loudly, a widening wet spot forming on his pillow as he drooled away what remained of the night.

The bright morning light woke him, sending stabbing pain through his head. With a groan, he rolled over. His entire body ached, not just his head. He was sure he hadn't moved at all as he slept. He made it to the bathroom, relived himself and quickly washed the rotten taste out of his mouth. Blurry eyed, he left the bathroom and hunted around until he found a pain-relieving potion. Downing it, he fell into a chair and held his head.

Several minutes later, he looked up in surprise as his fireplace flared to life and the head of Albus Dumbledore appeared in the fire.

"Ah, Severus. I'm glad to find you awake. May I come through?" the Headmaster asked.

"If you wish," Snape said, scowling. He felt better for the potion, but wasn't up to company. One didn't refuse the Headmaster, however.

"Rough night?" Albus asked as he shook ash off his robes.

"One could say that," Severus said, his lip curling in obvious distaste. "Was there something you wanted?"

"Yes, actually," Dumbledore said, his eyes serious. "First, you should know that we buried Argus last night."

"So quickly?" Snape asked, surprised.

"He had no living relatives, so there was no reason to wait. Just before the burial, I cast memory charms on both of the students who witnessed his 'fall'. They've been altered just enough to match what I told Pomona about the incident."

"I'm sure it's for the best," Snape mumbled, wishing the old man would get to the point.

"This morning I received notification from the Board of Governors that there's to be a review of the incident. You'll be expected to participate."

"What? Why me?"

"Because you were a witness, Severus," Dumbledore said seriously. "I managed to pull a few strings to get the students excused from the review, but they insisted you had to be there, as the only adult who saw what happened."

"Wonderful," Severus snapped. "I suppose you're here to go over the story then? We can't have my account differing from that you told Pomona, can we?"

“I’m glad you understand,” the Headmaster said firmly, sitting down across from the younger man. “Shall we begin?”

Snape buried his head in his hands and accepted that he wasn’t getting out of this. “Whenever you’re ready,” he muttered.

---

Breakfast, Great Hall...

Hermione was a little out of sorts with her boyfriend. Despite their talk the night before, Harry seemed to be suffering from an embarrassment block. She had thought that once she’d talked to him about his embarrassment, he’d get over it. But that didn’t seem to be the case. The funny thing was that, the more he tried to be the gentleman, the more she wanted him. It was almost as though they were having a complex, sexual, non-verbal fight.

She wasn’t sure what she was going to do about it, but she knew she had to do something.

She sat next him, among their friends, and considered her options. Dumbledore standing up to make an announcement from the head table interrupted her musings, however. She looked up in surprise. Morning announcements were rare and Dumbledore almost never made them. He preferred to use the Prefects for passing them to the students.

A hush fell over the Great Hall as the students noticed the Headmaster standing and waiting for their attention.

He peered over his half moon glasses looking at the now silent student body for a moment before he began to speak. “Students, last night Hogwarts suffered a terrible loss. Argus Filch, our caretaker, was accidentally killed in a fall from the upper levels of the castle. Because he had no family, other than Mrs. Norris, he was laid to rest in the castle cemetery last night. Unfortunately, Mrs. Norris is proving somewhat uncooperative and is still loose in the castle. I’d urge you all not to torment the poor animal. Steps are being taken to see that she is taken care of properly.

“Teachers, Prefects, extra night time patrols will be set up to compensate for Mr. Filch’s loss. He walked the halls of this school out of the goodness of his heart, watching over the student body and keeping them safe. Miss Chang, as Head Girl, I expect you to update the Prefect patrol schedule accordingly. Please see Professor McGonagall this morning to find out what time slots need to be filled.”

Dumbledore sat down to the muted murmuring of the student body. Filch might have been appreciated by the faculty, but as far as the students were concerned, he was an unnecessary evil inflicted upon them.

Hermione turned back to the table and both she and Harry smiled at each other. Sneaking around to broom closets was something they never had to worry about. The both looked up as the morning

post began to arrive.

Harry paled when it became apparent that the bulk of the owls were carrying howlers and heading straight for him. One by one the owls dropped the smoking envelopes in front of him at the table. He flinched as each was delivered. Even his friends backed away in a combination of fear and awe. No one had ever received so many howlers at one time before.

It was Hermione who came to his rescue. Whipping out her wand, she cast a silencing charm on the table, then a shield between the howlers and everyone else. The silencing charm triggered the explosive portion of the howler hex and the letters exploded. More than a few owls that were dropping more howlers were caught in the blast and had their feathers knocked out of place, causing them to crash land on tables, benches, students and the floor.

Harry frowned and his eyes burst into a blazing brilliance for a moment before returning to normal. The owls that still had howlers to deliver suddenly appeared confused. In some cases, they flew back out of the Great Hall. In others, they delivered their burdens to another person entirely. Harry watched impassively as he saw family owls deliver howlers meant for him to the students from those families.

“What did you do, Harry? Those owls were going to deliver to you,” asked Susan over the noise. She eyed the other tables and the howlers screaming from them so loudly that few could make out the words.

“I changed my magical signature, Susan. It made the owls think I wasn’t here,” Harry replied loudly. “I can’t hold it for long, but I think I can hold it long enough to put a masking charm in place.” He then reached over and gripped Hermione’s hand tightly in his own. He smiled his thanks for her response to the howlers.

Harry and the Outcasts watched the turmoil caused by the numerous howlers in the Great Hall and couldn’t help but laugh at the expressions on the faces of some of the other students as the howlers were misdirected. After a few minutes the noise died down and things began to return to normal. Harry packed away the homework he had been reviewing and started to close his book bag when another owl flew into the Great Hall heading straight for the Slytherin table.

There was a moment of silence as everyone cringed, seeing another bird enter. When it became obvious that it didn’t carry a howler, most turned away in relief, only to jump again as a scream echoed off the walls. It came from the Slytherin table.

“Potter! You bastard! I’ll kill you, you fucker,” yelled Theodore Nott Jr.

Harry looked up to see Nott standing by his table, his face flushed with rage. Professor Snape hurriedly left his place at the Head table and went to the distraught boy. Nott moved to avoid Snape and headed directly for the Gryffindor table.

Nott stopped a few feet from Harry and stood, his hands clenched into fists. A hush fell on the Great Hall as Harry stood and calmly eyed Nott with disdain.

“You killed my father, Potter.”

“Your father was a Death Eater, engaged in a criminal act that had already resulted in the death of three people. I didn’t kill him, I executed him for his crimes,” Harry said indifferently.

“I’ll get you for this, Potter. I swear it on my father’s grave!”

“Oh, grow up, Nott. Your father was nothing more than a rabid dog that needed to be put down. So I did it, and I took six other Death Eaters out with him. I’ll give you a piece of advice, free of charge. You and the other members of Voldemort’s Boys Club aren’t worth my time, so stay out of my way,” Harry warned coldly.

Nott reached for his wand. Harry’s eyes flared with power and, before Nott could draw it, there came a snapping sound that echoed throughout the hall. Nott pulled out his wand and gasped as he discovered his wand had been broken cleanly in two. Several other Slytherins stood in outrage as they too discovered their wands broken.

“It seems this is your lucky day, Nott. You’re unarmed,” Harry said with a slight smile. Then he reached down and picked up his book bag. He offered a hand to Hermione and they both walked from the Great Hall with the rest of the Outcasts in tow.

At the Head table, Dumbledore frowned. Harry had snapped the wands of ten students. Sighing, he turned and told McGonagall to schedule a field trip to Ollivanders to pick up new wands for those students.

---

## The Leaky Cauldron...

It was a lonely life, but he was adjusting to it. Most of his family wouldn’t talk to him anymore. Finishing his lunch, he tossed a few coins on the table and waved at Tom on the way out.

The tall redhead exited the Leaky Cauldron and peered up at the sky. It was a nice day, brisk, but the sun warmed the winter day nicely. He checked the time and decided he’d walk back to the Ministry. The walk would do him good. Too much sitting had begun to develop a noticeable paunch.

He was just walking past a darkened alleyway when he stiffened as he felt a wand tip press up the back of his neck.

“Into the alley, nice and slow.” said an unknown voice.

Trembling, he walked into the gloom of the narrow alley. He managed to get a foot or two ahead of his assailant when he heard, “IMPERIO!”

A gentle calm washed over him and he smiled serenely. He turned around to look at the man who had forced him into the alley.



“Well, Weasley, it seems we have a problem and you’ve been picked to help us solve it. With the corruption in your family, this won’t come as a surprise to anyone.”

There was a flash of light and darkness engulfed him. A few minutes later he reconnected to the world and shook his head. He frowned slightly as he noticed that his shoe was loose. He shrugged then, figuring he’d fix it back at the office. Without so much as a backwards glance, he stepped from the alleyway and continued on his journey back to work.

---

### **Authors Notes:**

Yes, once again we come to the dreaded author’s notes.

A couple points we’d really like to make. If you have a question that you really and truly want answered, post it to our yahoo group, which you can find in Bob’s profile. We are going to try to address those questions better in the yahoo group than we will in future author notes.

We’re not going to apologize for the cliffy from last chapter because, in a way, we’ve left you with another one. There has been a lot of intrigue and drama going on in the past chapters of this story and things are definitely speeding up. The avalanche has begun and it’s coming down on every one.

Yes, that was a mistake on our part. Ron got the money the summer of his fourth year. Our goof. Sorry ‘bout that.

And yes, Hermione did see Harry naked before he had recovered from his Matura. So she got to see a bony, emaciated and sick Harry. Not the healthy buff Harry he’s become. Besides, she was more interested in his health than his...well, never mind that.

Could Harry sue the Prophet for slander? What makes anyone think the Wizarding world runs like ours does? After all, Sirius got sent to prison for 12 years without a trial. That doesn’t happen all too often in our world. As to the Prophet, we have plans for it. Hang tight.

MidnightPhoenix – If you want your question answered, try our forum in our user group. Author’s notes should not really be used to answer questions. Heck I shouldn’t even be answering this. BAD BOB! BAD BAD BAD! (Alyx slides into the A/N and uncoils a bullwhip. “Cool...punishment! Come here, honey...”)

### **Pet Peeves:**

Bizarre plot twists. Here I was, reading this story of an angry Harry. A veritable cornucopia of Ron/Hermione bashing and the author pulls stupid idea #567 out of his/her butt and decides that Ron is going to be pissed off with Draco for making friends with Harry. Then Ron says, the only way you can prove you’re not a death eater is if you swim the lake. EXCUSE ME? HELLO? I swear I must be the only person reading that story that found that particular chapter to be borderline moronic. The reviews thought it was the greatest thing since sliced French bread.

PLOT TWISTS!!!! If you make Harry do X, then there are several logic results coming from said action. If you can't think of them, then don't write. The butt hole is a poor source of inspiration.

Oh and Shame on all you authors out there that have abandoned your stories because it's now AU with the release of HBP.

## Sunset Over Britain Of Death and Dismissal

### Standard Disclaimer:

The spotlight opens up center ice and Ron Weasley skates out to stop in the center of the spotlight. He lifts a microphone and announces, "I give you AUTHORS ON ICE!"

A moment later Abraxan, Old-Crow, Kinsfire, Bob and Alyx come skating out.

Ron hands the microphone to Abraxan who says, "We thank Bob and Alyx for letting us visit their story. It's an honor!"

Abraxan hands the microphone to Old-Crow. "They'd like us to remind you all that they do not own anything pertaining to Harry Potter. It's all part of what JK Rowling owns. And we also want to thank Bob and Alyx for letting us promote our stories in theirs! Read our stories!"

Old Crow passes the microphone to Kinsfire who says, "As an author of more adult oriented Harry Potter fictions I have to warn you that if you are reading the version of this chapter with the explicit sex scene in it and you're underage, SHAME ON YOU! And if you are one of those strange adults that still believe sex is evil and kids come from cabbage patches, we think you should find another story to read."

Bob takes the microphone from Kinsfire then says, "HI!" before passing the microphone to Alyx.

Alyx: "Hi! Thanks for reading our story. We don't own anything."

All of the authors then take a bow and skate off the ice. Leaving Ron standing there bewildered. Another spotlight lights up showing the stands around the ice rink are empty except for Harry Potter who is giving all of the departed Authors a standing ovation.

From the rink comes a rumbling sound and a scream as Ron is run down by the Zamboni driven by Hermione Granger. Hermione waves to her adoring audience

Grimmauld Place, Remus' study...

Remus Lupin looked up from the stack of papers on his desk as Dan Granger opened the door to his study.

"Good morning, Remus. Are you busy?" asked Dan.

"No, come on in, Dan. Any interruption from this pile is a welcome one," Remus replied, pointing to a stack of muggle papers at least six inches high. He then waved Dan to a nearby seat.

"Oh? What are you working on now?"

"Well, you know Harry's relocated his Wizarding wealth to Stonewall Lane in Ireland. That leaves me to try to make sense out of his muggle investments so he can do the same. The money was the easy part, but understanding the companies his family has invested in is what's bogging me down. Some of these companies I just don't understand at all," Remus replied in frustration.

"Maybe I can help explain that sort of thing. Give me an example, and let me see what I can tell you."

Remus rooted through a pile and pulled out a fancily colored annual report from one company and handed it to Dan. "Here. I have no clue what this outfit does, but it seems to make a decent return on the investment."

Dan leafed through the report for a few minutes before handing it back to Remus with a smile. "I don't think you have to worry about this company, Remus. They're based in Germany with only a small sales and servicing outlet here in the UK."

Remus looked at him in exasperation. "I figured that out already, but I don't understand what they do," he said in frustration.

Dan grinned. "It's nice to be on the giving end for once. All right then, that company is a German based Bio-tech company. Their principle product line is surgical instruments and, according to that report, they've recently opened up a sub-division that's doing research on gene suppression for cancer patients."

At Remus' blank look Dan started laughing. "All right, let's try it this way then. You know what an appendix is correct?"

Remus nodded, everyone knew what an appendix was!

"I imagine in the Wizarding world, when you need to have your appendix removed, you just take a potion that dissolves it or something. But that isn't the way it works in the muggle world. Muggle surgery involves cutting open the body and removing the bad part, or fixing it, then closing up the hole and healing the patient. That company of yours makes the tools to do that."

Remus shuddered at the thought of such a gruesome procedure, but then he always knew muggles

were strange anyway. “Dan, it would be a help if you could look through some of these and tell me about them. Right now I’m just looking for companies that we need to sell out on because they are strictly UK based, but I keep getting sidetracked by trying figure out what these companies do.”

“I’d be happy to help you. With our surgery shutdown, we really have nothing to do at this point,” Dan replied.

Remus blinked in surprise. He hadn’t thought about that before. Dan and Emma were effectively out of work at the moment. Even if they wanted to work, the police still weren’t done with their office and probably wouldn’t be done until the official inquest was held.

“How’s Emma doing?”

Dan looked thoughtful for a moment. “She’s holding up, I guess. Right now she’s having tea with Narcissa. We’re not used to being entirely idle like we are now, and the attempt on our lives shook us both badly. I mean, we both have bad moments. I never thought I’d be so thankful to have such a strong woman I could turn to at times like this. When I think of what could have happened, or for that matter, what Harry went through…”

Remus nodded in agreement. “It’s never easy. And you’re right. You are lucky to have Emma to turn to. When James and Lily were killed, and Sirius sent to prison for Peter’s murder, I sunk so low I’m amazed I ever recovered. Harry was an infant at the time and had been taken beyond my reach. There was no one left to me but a bottle of Ogdens.”

“War is never pleasant, Remus, for the participants or the survivors. The one I’m really worried about is Hermione…Harry too, I suppose.” At Remus’ curious look, he elaborated. “Hermione would follow Harry anywhere at this point. And Harry is going to be on the front line of this war.”

“I don’t think you need worry too much about Hermione, Dan. Harry would protect her with his life, if it came down to it. I just hope that Hermione can manage to keep him anchored to his humanity. That’s the biggest risk we face, keeping him firmly grounded to his humanity. He has more power than any human has ever had. The only reason he got hurt rescuing you two is because he’s inexperienced and he hasn’t realized the scope of his abilities yet.”

“Hermione can do it. She’s as strong and as smart as her mother. And she’s fiercely protective in her own way.”

Remus nodded. “I know, and I’m thankful for it,” he replied as he slid a stack of company reports towards the other man. “I suppose we should get started.”

---

Ministry of Magic, Minister’s Office...

Arthur Weasley sat in a chair in the outer office. Being that this was the outer office for the Minister of Magic, the chairs were much more comfortable and plush. Arthur closed his eyes and waited nervously. He didn’t know why he had been summoned to the Minister’s office, but he

wouldn't have been the first mid level manager to get called on the carpet because they were deadheading in their office due to family problems.

Cornelius Fudge was having a wonderful day for once. Even though the Ministry was cooperating with Harry Potter, he was secretly pleased to discover the Prophet attacking both Dumbledore and the boy. And this time it hadn't taken any prodding on his part! The flare up of Death Eater attacks seemed to have calmed down some. That was, if he ignored the attacks on St. Mungos and Diagon Alley in recent weeks.

Right now he was reading a letter from the French Minister of Magic turning down a request for an alliance that had been made by the Wizengamot without his approval. If it hadn't been so undignified, he would have giggled with glee in reading the Minister's dismissal of the Wizengamot's offer.

Putting the paperwork in a file folder, he placed it to one side and checked his schedule, and then he pressed a button on his desk summoning an aide. A moment later, a woman opened the door to his office.

"Ah Nancy, would you please file this?" he asked, offering up the reply from the French Minister. "Then, would you ask Weatherbee to come in here? I'd like to talk to him about something."

"Of course, Minister."

A moment later the door opened again and Percy Weasley entered the office and moved to stand in front of the desk. Fudge glanced up when Percy didn't appear with his usually efficient notepad in hand. His mouth dropped open as he spotted the wand pointed straight at him.

*"Avada Kedavra ,"* Percy shouted.

The green beam lanced from the tip of his wand and spanned the few feet between the wand and the Minister in milliseconds. Cornelius Fudge had no time to realize that Percy was trying to kill him before the beam of light struck his chest and he died.

The shout drew the attention of the staff in the outer office and several alarms began screaming throughout the building. Percy ignored the commotion he had caused. He dropped his wand and stood staring at the Minister as if he was trying to understand just how this had come to pass. The partially open office door burst fully open and several stunners hit Percy in the back, dropping him where he stood.

Arthur stood in front of his chair, his hands clenching and unclenching spasmodically. Despite his proximity to the attack, it had caught him unawares, still dozing lightly in the comfortable waiting area. Something was seriously wrong, but he wasn't sure of what. The alarms were still sounding in the building when three Aurors dragged Percy past him. His son looked shocked and dazed.

As with so many other government agencies, there were procedures to follow in times like this. Within moments of the discovery of the assassination of the Minister of Magic, the Ministry went

into total lockdown. Aurors were summoned to patrol the halls, while others started the investigation into what had happened. Percy was searched, then dragged to a Ministry holding cell. Amelia sent Aurors out to collect members of the Wizengamot for an emergency session. Despite the news blackout, word would quickly leak out to the Wizarding public. The Minister of Magic was dead.

While those in the Ministry were shocked by the events, many were also thinking the same thing: *Leave it to Cornelius Fudge to inconvenience as many people as possible when he died. The man could do nothing right...*

---

Grimmauld Place, Remus' study...

Remus was actually enjoying going through the company information now that Dan was helping him. They'd been at it for several hours and had located several companies that needed to be divested. Remus decided he was going to try to bring Dan and Emma into setting up the sanctuary. He was convinced their muggle background could actually help them all.

Both men looked up, surprise, when the door opened and Narcissa and Emma entered. Both of the women had serious expressions on their faces, but Narcissa seemed to be shocked by something.

"What's wrong?" asked Remus, standing in alarm.

"The Wizard Wireless is reporting a rumor that the Minister of Magic has been assassinated!" Narcissa exclaimed.

"Well, from what I've heard, he was a very ineffective and vindictive leader," commented Dan. "But what's the process for replacing him?"

"First they must hold a conclave of the Wizengamot. That means all members must attend, except those excused due to health reasons. Once the Wizengamot has gathered, they'll select a temporary Minister until the general election, which isn't for another two years. Replacements are nominated and voted on by the Wizengamot and the winner needs a two-thirds majority in order to be declared Minister Pro Tem. Amelia Bones, as the Director of the MLE, will be the presiding officer of elections. Selecting an acceptable candidate could take weeks or even months. In the meantime, the government is powerless, no laws can be made, no decisions to hire or fire. Nothing," explained Narcissa.

Dan leaned back, looking thoughtful. "So you're basically stating that the government has just become ineffective at a time when it's most needed?" he asked incredulously.

Narcissa and Remus both nodded.

"Did the network say anything about the assassin?" asked Remus.

"No, not a word as yet. But I think you'd better owl Harry and alert him that things may have to be

kicked off earlier than we thought,” replied Narcissa grimly. She, like Remus, had been helping set up the sanctuary, so she was fully cognizant of Harry’s plans.

“I’ll do that right now,” Remus replied, reaching for a parchment.

---

Ministry of Magic, Department of Magical Law Enforcement Holding Cell...

Percy sat on a stone bench, weeping. One moment he was returning from lunch, the next moment he was being dragged down to this dank holding cell and told he had killed the Minister!

Percy stood and started to pace the small room. It had no windows; there was a water spigot in one corner, and a hole in the other, presumably his toilet. The stone bench was rough and cold. Physical comforts, it seemed, were something he no longer deserved. He turned when he heard a noise as the door opened.

A tall black man stepped into the room. Percy had seen him numerous times around the Ministry building. He knew him as an Auror of significant rank and seniority. The man gestured for Percy to sit on the bench.

“Mr. Weasley, I’m sure you know who I am, so let’s press on, shall we? I’m here to ask you a few questions.”

“Thank Merlin! Maybe we can get this awful mess straightened out then!”

“Let’s start by reviewing the events starting just before lunch and going up until you ended up here,” said the tall Auror.

For the next hour Percy talked while the Auror took notes and sipped from a pocket flask. Occasionally, he would offer Percy a drink from the small container.

“So you’re saying you remember absolutely nothing until you were being dragged down to this holding cell? It sounds to me like you’ve been under the *Imperio* us Curse, Mr. Weasley,” said the Auror, putting his notes away. “I’ll see that one of the public defenders comes down to see about your rights and arranging for proper representation. In the meantime, I expect dinner will be along shortly. Thank you for cooperating,” the Auror said, standing. He walked to the door, which opened for him as he approached, then slammed shut again upon his exit.

A few minutes later, a small slot at the bottom of the door opened and a tray was unceremoniously shoved through the hole. Percy grabbed the tray and started to eat. When he was done, he placed the tray in front of the slot and laid down on the stone bench. His eyes closed and he fell asleep. Within minutes, his breathing stopped. Percy Weasley was dead.

---

Ministry of Magic, Department of Magical Law Enforcement...



“I want a list of everyone who entered his cell today and I want it twenty minutes ago. And have the body examined for toxins,” Amelia said in a voice that cut through three offices of noise, then she turned to another aide. “Tell the Wizengamot to retire for the evening. We’ll meet tomorrow, mid-morning. Hopefully by then we’ll have more information and the rest of our membership will see fit to present themselves.”

“Director?”

“Yes?” she asked of the aide who’d poked her head in through the open door.

“Arthur Weasley is here as you requested.”

Amelia slumped back in her chair. The day had been fine until the return from lunch. Then everything had gone to hell in a hand basket. Now she had to tell a father that his dead son was the prime suspect in the murder of the Minister of Magic. Could anything else go wrong today?

With a sigh, she leaned forward and nodded to her aide. “Please send him.”

---

Grimmauld Place, Dinner...

It was a quiet in the kitchen when Dan, Emma, Remus and Narcissa sat down at the table. Tonks still hadn’t shown up for dinner and no one was sure if she would. The earlier reports from the Wizarding Wireless had stopped, but they were now confirming that some sort of emergency existed within the Ministry, as they had imposed a total news blackout and lockdown.

Remus had just reached for a platter of mutton when the door swung open and a clearly exhausted Tonks stepped into the room. Remus bolted from his seat and helped her to a chair, then started loading food onto her plate. She looked up at him gratefully.

It wasn’t until she had nearly finished with dinner that she started talking about the events of the day. Everyone was dismayed to learn that Percy Weasley was implicated in the murder of Fudge, and even more surprised when it was learned that Percy had been killed later in the day by as yet unknown means.

“I know you’re exhausted, Nymph, but do you think we should talk with the Weasleys?” asked Remus.

“They must know by now, Remy. Arthur was informed only an hour or two ago, and he has reconciled with the twins, Bill and Ginny,” came the tired reply.

“Then the only one who doesn’t know is Ginny. I’ll floo Minerva and ask her to break the news to her. I don’t want her finding out from the Daily Prophet,” he said, getting up and walking to the fireplace. He threw a handful of floo powder into the fireplace and stuck his head in.

---

## Gryffindor Head Suite...

Harry was up to his eyebrows in a transfiguration essay in the common room and Hermione was taking a shower, when Professor McGonagall came through the door.

“Mr. Potter, I am wondering if you know the whereabouts of Mr. Longbottom and Miss Weasley?” asked McGonagall.

Harry thought for a moment. “Not really, Professor. After dinner we all went to the Room of Requirement. I did my therapy and then everyone went swimming for a bit. Neville and Ginny left before Hermione and I though.”

Professor McGonagall eyed him speculatively for a moment. “Mr. Potter, I am not unaware that you have a way of finding people in this castle, or avoiding them. Now, I won’t accuse you of having contraband magic, but if you do have a way of finding them, I would appreciate you doing so. I have important news for Miss Weasley and I’m afraid it won’t wait.”

Harry looked up at his stern Head of House and winced. She was clearly alluding to the Marauders Map, but rather than using the map and confirming his possession of it to his Professor, he thought about apparating directly to Ginny and Neville. “If you like, I can go get them and tell them to come here,” he offered, unthinkingly.

“Hmmm, well yes, that would be alright, Mr. Potter.”

Putting his homework to one side, he marked his place in his book and closed his eyes. Finding Ginny and Neville in the school for his apparate wasn’t hard at all. And unlike the last time, he didn’t mind apparating close to them. A second later, he was gone from the common room.

Harry apparated into sheer pandemonium. Several items hit him upon his arrival and he stumbled into a shelf, knocking its contents off. Between the items bouncing off his head and the screaming, he had no clue what was going on. All he knew was that it was dark and he was under attack. Something had attacked his foot and something wet was clinging to his head. He started coughing, and he could hear others coughing in the room as well. He heard a familiar voice say, “*Lumos* ,” and two people appeared in the darkness.

Neville and Ginny both stared at him in shock. He stared back at the two naked people, his expression mirroring theirs. Harry flushed and immediately apparated back to the head suite.

McGonagall blinked in surprise when Harry vanished without a sound, and she tried to stifle a bark of laughter when he reappeared with a mop clinging to his head, a bucket attached to his foot and partially covered in some sort of powdered cleaner. His arms windmilled wildly and he crashed backwards as the bucketed foot caused him to lose his balance.

Hermione had appeared in the doorway to her bedroom just as Harry had vanished. She was surprised to see him apparate away, and even more surprised to see her Head of House in their common room. She was extremely thankful she was wearing her heavy terry cloth robe. Somehow

she didn't think her Head of House would appreciate her sleepwear tonight.

When Harry appeared again and fell to the floor Hermione doubled over in laughter. McGonagall's lips twitched several times before her composure finally broke and she began to laugh.

Harry sat up and removed the bucket from his foot. Hermione was still snickering as she helped Harry to his feet.

"I take it you found them, Mr. Potter?" McGonagall asked. She'd gained control of her laughter, but she still grinned.

Harry winced. "You could say that, Professor. I daresay they'll be here any minute to find out why I interrupted them."

"And just what were they doing when you found them?"

"I think it was a form of mutual entertainment, Professor," Harry replied evasively.

McGonagall cocked an eyebrow at him and gave him her sternest looks. Harry sighed and glanced at Hermione in embarrassment. "Professor, you were a student here once, and I've seen your yearbook photos. You were one of the prettiest witches of your year. Even you must know what goes on in the utility closets of this castle after hours," he offered cautiously.

McGonagall blushed for a moment, then frowned and poked Harry in the chest. "I didn't take that kind of flattery from your father and I'm not going to take it from you. Go get yourself cleaned up before that powder eats through your clothes. Be off with you," she said, making a shooing motion with her hands.

Harry nodded and swiftly retreated into his own room to shower and change. As he did, both McGonagall and Hermione watched his retreating back with a fond smile. When he was gone, she turned to Hermione. "His father was a flatterer, but he lacked the sincerity that Harry has when he compliments someone. It's a good thing he's uncomfortable using flattery or he'd have half the women in this castle wrapped around his finger."

Hermione nodded and was about to reply when Ginny and Neville came storming up the stairway looking for blood. Both of them skidded to a halt upon seeing Professor McGonagall in the common room.

"Ah, finally. Miss Weasley, Mr. Longbottom. I have been looking for you both. Sit down please."

Both Ginny and Neville's expressions grew panicked as they sat. McGonagall looked at the two. "Before you get angry with Mr. Potter, I asked him to find you. Miss Weasley... Ginevra, there has been an incident at the Ministry today. I don't know an easy way to tell you this, so I'll just say it. It appears that your brother, Percy, assassinated Minister Fudge. He then died in his holding cell later that day," she said softly.

Ginny's expression grew pained and her hands trembled slightly. "Percy's dead? Percy killed Minister Fudge?" she asked in a very small voice. Neville placed his arm about her shoulders and she shot him a grateful glance.

"Yes my dear, I'm afraid it's true. If you'd like to come down to my quarters, you can floo your family to find out what arrangements are being made. I daresay you will be leaving the castle for a few days at least. In times like these, family members need to lean on each other."

Ginny leaned into Neville, her eyes closed and tears beginning to stream down her cheeks. She nodded to McGonagall and both of them helped her to her feet and down the stairs.

Hermione watched them leave silently. The owl from Remus about Fudge's assassination had come earlier, but none of them had any clue it would strike so close to home. This only confirmed her plans for the evening. Things were getting too dangerous and too hectic. She didn't want to wait any longer.

---

Ministry of Magic, Department of Magical Law Enforcement...

Amelia was exhausted. It was nearly midnight and she still couldn't go home and sleep. They were still alerting Wizengamot members. They would probably not be up to voting strength for another day or two. Some of them, like Dumbledore, wanted time to plan their strategy before entering the building, so they were employing delaying tactics, which were stymieing her efforts to assemble the Wizengamot.

"The Medical Examiner's reports, Director."

Amelia started awake and looked up in surprise at the Auror holding out the reports. She thanked him and turned to the report on Fudge. It was no real surprise. Cornelius had been killed by a killing curse fired at close range. Time of death corresponded to the report of the witnesses in the outer office. The wand had Weasley's signature on it, and a casting of Priori Incantato had shown the last spell cast to be the killing curse. The report merely confirmed exactly what they already knew.

Turning to the report from the examination of Weasley's body, she immediately noted two interesting facts. Weasley had worn the Dark Mark, indicating he was a Death Eater, but he had worn it in a very unusual place - his heel. She made a note to check if any other Death Eaters ever had such a concealed Mark.

The second interesting fact was that Weasley had died from a binary poison. Binary poisoning required two chemicals, which became a poison only when combined, like in the stomach of a person, or within the blood stream. It meant that Weasley ingested two different chemicals, which, when combined, killed him.

Amelia scowled. In either case, it suggested that she might have a mole in her department who'd slipped the poison to Weasley. Whether the poisoning was done as an act of mercy or as a means

of getting him out of the way before he could talk, they'd probably never know. But it was another avenue she'd assign her Aurors to look into.

She rubbed her face tiredly and looked up as an aide brought in another report for her attention. It was going to be a long night.

---

Gryffindor Head Suite...

Hermione waited until Harry had been in bed for nearly hour before she slipped into his room. She smiled gently at the sight of him sleeping. The two of them had been playing this elaborate game in the past week and a half. At first she had joined him at night to help with her nightmares...and his. But very quickly she'd discovered that she wanted more...and Harry was afraid of giving it to her.

Walking to his bed, she cast a silencing charm on the room, and then she locked the door with another spell. Finally she cast a warming charm on the bed before she pulled the covers back from his body. She had to suppress a laugh when she banished his boxers and then peeled off her own robe, revealing a lacy sheer chemise. Quietly she climbed onto the bed and straddled him.

Harry woke slowly. He had a not-unpleasant feeling of weight on his body. Blinking his eyes, he looked about in the gloom cast by his ever-lasting candle he burned at night. His eyes locked on the reason for the feeling of weight on him and he froze. Hermione was practically naked...and sitting on him!

She was running her hands lightly over his chest and, when she noticed that he was awake, she leaned down over his body. He felt his own body responding and she smiled a little, shifting her position slightly. The sensation of her soft body against his was intoxicating. She kissed him gently, then sat up again.

“Hermione?”

“I’m sorry, Harry, but I want you. Now. I don’t want to wait any longer. This damn war is getting closer and I want to experience all you can give me now, before something happens that makes it impossible. I want you Harry, I want to feel you inside me, I want to make love to you and have you make love to me,” she said very softly, but her eyes burned with an intensity he had never seen before.

“But Hermione...”

Harry stopped at the look on her face.

“Don’t you find me attractive, Harry? Don’t you want to make love to me?” she asked in a very small voice. His single statement had done more damage to her self-image than a dozen Slytherins calling her a mudblood could ever do. Harry’s heart ached to see her doubt herself and their relationship so much.

Harry reached out and touched Hermione's cheek gently. "You know I do, Hermione. This past week has been difficult. You've been so close and I've wanted you so much it hurt. But I wasn't sure you wanted this. I think I've spent more time in the shower in this past week than I have in a month. And most of that wasn't spent washing," he said, a bit sheepishly.

Hermione's eyes widened and she laughed when she realized what he was really saying. He reached up and pulled her flat against him again, kissing the top of her head. She closed her eyes, reveling in the sensations that coursed through her.

"I want to spend the rest of my life loving you, Hermione," he whispered to her huskily. She shivered in his arms and let him gently remove the chemise over her head as she sat up. Harry's eyes filled with tears, shocking Hermione.

"Harry, what's wrong?"

"Nothing Hermione... you're so beautiful," he said softly and she blushed. Harry reached down to find her knickers, but then he looked up at her in shock.

Hermione arched an eyebrow at his reaction and laughed gently. "I'm not wearing any knickers tonight, Harry."

Hermione shifted again and she could feel his erection throbbing against her. She lifted herself up so she could reach down and stroke him gently. He moaned and pulled her prone against him, kissing her passionately and rolling gently until he was atop her.

Bending a little, Harry took one of her nipples in his mouth, gently teasing it. She gasped and wrapped her arms around his neck, cradling his head to her breast.

Working partly on instinct and mostly on overheard conversations in the boy's dorms, Harry slowly slid his body lower, his breath and his kisses tracing a trail a liquid fire down her belly. Hermione's hands became more insistent, pushing him lower still.

He slid down between her legs and she spread them wider to give him access. At first he was unsure what he should do, but since kissing seemed to make her happy, he decided to keep doing that. He wasn't surprised to discover that she was nearly as bushy below as above and he buried his face into her mons pubis. He knew that some where in this area there was supposed to be spot that would drive her crazy.

She was swollen with desire and she shuddered when his tongue first pushed between those lips. Her hands pressed against his head and she moaned loud enough to be heard even with her legs covering his ears. He lapped his tongue, questing for that special spot. When he finally found it, her back arched and she pulled him tight to her. He suckled against that nubbin and she writhed under his attention. Her cries reached a fever pitch and he started to pull away to look at her, but she held him fast against her.

Finally it seemed as though every muscle in her body tensed and he could feel her gently pulling

his head away from her, up to eye level again.

Hermione's eyes were half closed, her breathing rapid and her face flushed. Harry crawled up her body again, stopping to kiss and lick at her breasts before kissing her neck. He then rolled to his side and she turned to face him. He kissed her forehead and caressed her with his hands.

She pushed him flat on his back and she reached down with her hand to gently grip his erection. She marveled at the contradiction she found. He was rock hard, but the skin was soft as silk against her palm. She tightened her grip slightly and slowly pumped him a few times with her hand. Harry moaned and tried to pull her close enough to kiss her again, but she smiled wickedly.

"Ginny showed me a spell that makes it so the first time won't hurt me," she whispered just before she straddled him. She grabbed his erection in her hand and, after a few moments of fumbling, gently guided him to her. With a simple downward motion of her body, he was inside her and she inhaled sharply.

Harry gasped, his eyes widening as the warmth from her body engulfed the head of his cock. When she moaned, his eyes caught hers and he nearly lost control seeing the desire in her heavy lidded gaze.

With a growl, he grabbed her hips and pulled her down upon him. Buried to the hilt within her welcoming body, he groaned. She moaned again when he thrust into her. Her head fell back, her hips ground against him and she cried out in pleasure.

His control snapped.

Tightening his grip on her hips, he thrust into her again and again. There was no rhythm, no grace to their movements, only need. His orgasm blazed through him and, with a harsh cry, he spilled himself within her.

Hermione's eyes widened when she felt him come, the warmth of it surprising her. She smiled as his grip loosened and, leaning down, kissed him gently. When he opened his eyes, she was surprised by his horrified expression.

"Hermione, I don't..."

"Shhh... It's ok, Harry. Your first time is quick, but you'll recover quick too," she whispered, understandingly.

He tightened his grip on her once more. He was still inside her and his erection hadn't diminished by much. Slowly they started rocking against each other and, a few moments later, he hardened again.

Hermione seemed determined to bring him to another release as her pace soon increased. But Harry found that, now that the initial pressure had been relieved, he had better control. With a wicked smile, he sat up, wrapped his arms around her waist and rolled over. She gasped,

momentarily surprised at finding herself flat on her back. She quickly adjusted to the new position and found that she liked it.

Hermione lay back and her expression became one of intense pleasure, bordering on pain, and then she came again, while Harry continued to thrust into her. She was still riding the wave of her last orgasm when Harry came again, pushed her over the edge for the third time.

Harry gasped and buried his face into the nape of her neck as he shuddered from the pleasure. He held himself above her body high enough that they lightly brushed against each other.

They lay together quietly for several minutes and then Harry began to nibble on her neck. Hermione, who had been drifting in a comfortable state, gasped in shock as Harry began making love to her again. He made slow, long strokes and she moaned with each one. Her fingernails raked his back as his pace increased. Their final orgasm was a mutual affair that left the both of them laying side by side as Harry finally slid from her. He pulled her into the crook of his arm and whispered, "I love you," before falling asleep.

Hermione looked at Harry, his strong arms cradling her. She snuggled closer and soon followed him into sleep.

Hermione awoke to a pleasant sensation. It took her a moment to realize that both she and Harry were still naked, and what Harry's hands were doing were driving her to distraction. She stretched and made a purring sound in the back of her throat as she leaned back into him.

---

The Great Hall, Breakfast, the Next Morning...

The Outcasts looked up in surprise when Harry and Hermione entered the Great Hall. They were late and breakfast would be over in less than twenty minutes. Luna and Susan looked at Hermione and both girls broke out into huge smiles at Hermione's satisfied look. Harry wore an expression that seemed to be mixed between shock, wonder and a fervent prayer that last night and this morning hadn't been a dream.

Hermione looked at Harry curiously as she spotted him pinching his arm a few times. She leaned closer to him. "What are you doing?" she whispered.

"Trying to make sure I'm really awake," he replied with a disarming smile. Both would have continued to gaze at each other had they not been interrupted.

Professor McGonagall, Bill Weasley, Ginny and Neville approached the table.

"Miss Weasley will be leaving the school today and will be gone for a few days while her family prepares to hold services for Percy, which will be in two days. Anyone wishing to attend those services may do so, so long as you have permission from your parent or guardian," Professor McGonagall said.



Harry looked at Ginny. Her face was tear streaked and she looked like she hadn't slept. He reached out and took her hand. "Ginny, this time is for you and your family. If you want us at the service, I'm sure we'll all attend. But I'm worried your mother and Ron might cause problems if we do," he said softly.

Hermione gasped as his words hit home. He was right, Molly and Ron would object to Harry's presence at the service, and might object to hers as well.

Harry's eyes were filled with unshed tears as he looked at Ginny. He wanted to be there for her, but he wasn't sure it was the right thing to do.

Ginny broke from her own grief long enough to recognize the pain the rift in her family was causing not just herself, but her friends. She smiled weakly at Harry and ruffled his hair fondly.

"Harry," Bill broke in, "I don't like it, but I think you're correct in as much as what my 'brother's' reaction would be, as well as our mother. I... we would like you there, but it's probably for the best that you don't come."

Hermione watched Harry carefully. She could see what this was costing him. He made a lot of noise about family, but this sort of incident drove home just how isolated he really was. Harry turned back to the table as McGonagall and the others moved away.

She reached over and put a hand on his arm. "Are you alright?"

Not trusting himself to speak, he nodded and smiled wanly back at her. Then he put an arm around her shoulder and leaned into her as she read the article in the Daily Prophet, announcing the death of Minister Fudge.

---

St. Mathews Church, Ottery St. Catchpole...

Ginny sat alone. Her mother and Ron sat across the aisle from her. Arthur and the other Weasley boys carried the coffin into the small church. Remus, Tonks and the Grangers sat in the back of the chapel. Harry had, through Remus, donated a banner for the coffin that had both the Gryffindor and Weasley family crests on it.

The press was out in force, but Alastor Moody, Kingsley Shacklebolt and several other Aurors had kept them from entering the small chapel. There was considerable public opinion to deny Percy any sort of official service in retribution for his killing the Minister of Magic, but Amelia had stepped in and prevented that from happening.

Ginny smiled gratefully when her brothers finally laid the coffin in front of the altar and took seats around her. She leaned against Bill and he placed his arm around her. While it was true that Percy had alienated himself from the rest of the family, they had all hoped that the breach could have been mended. Now that hope was gone forever.

Neville Longbottom sat with his Gran, next to Remus and Tonks. Ginny wanted nothing more than to curl up in his strong arms and have a good long cry.

She tried to pay attention to the Wizarding Vicar as he gave his sermon, but the tension surrounding the Weasley clan was immense. Molly sat stone faced, staring vacantly ahead as if she was trying to deny what was happening to her and her family. Ron seemed once again ready to explode in anger.

Ginny shivered and looked around uncomfortably. No one was ever easy at a memorial service, but this one seemed to be simmering just below the boiling point, ready to explode.

At the close of the service, the mourners followed the coffin as it was brought out to the small church graveyard and placed in a plot that had been prepared for it. Afterwards, Molly stood hesitantly, watching with a touch of longing as her husband, her sons and her daughter clustered around each other for comfort. Neville had joined them, holding Ginny in his arms protectively.

Arthur glanced over at Molly and sighed heavily. He walked towards her slowly, surprised to see Molly turn and tell Ron to stay there, before meeting him half way.

“Hello, Molly. How are you holding up?” Arthur asked her gently.

She looked at him, her expression mixed with hope and more than a little fear. They had been married for nearly thirty years and in all that time, Arthur had never asserted himself in their relationship. He had been content to allow her to lead, until recently that was. Gone was the mild meek man she had led around by the nose for so long. This was a new Arthur

“I miss my husband and family,” she whispered timidly. The loss of Percy and the gulf that existed between her and the rest of her family drove home the magnitude of her loss.

Arthur’s expression hardened. “I’m afraid there’s little you can do to change that now, Molly, unless you’re willing to offer some apologies.”

A look of anger flashed across Molly’s face for a brief moment. “Apologies? To whom?” she asked.

Arthur controlled his own anger. “To whom? Do you really need to ask that Molly Prewett? To your sons, your daughter, and most importantly, to an orphan boy who offered you his heart. Harry Potter loved you like he would have loved his real mother. Hermione Granger as well. Both of whom you’ve badly hurt. It’s not easy apologizing, I know, I’ve done it. But if you want to rebuild any sort of relationship with your family, your sons and daughter will demand nothing less than an apology to Harry and Hermione,” he said coldly, drawing up to his full height.

“Apologize to Potter and that slut? I won’t do it! I refuse to do it. Arthur, please be reasonable. That boy is a menace who should be locked up in Azkaban like his murdering godfather! Don’t you read what they say about him in the paper?”

Arthur's scowled. "Then you leave me no choice. As Head of the Weasley family, I'll have to disinherit and disown you and Ronald. Time is quickly running out for you, Molly. Don't make the mistake of standing by Ronald when you still have family."

With that, Arthur turned and walked back to his children. Ginny and the rest of the Weasley boys had clustered around Remus and Tonks. Ginny was wrapped in Neville's arms, crying softly.

Ron, seeing his mother upset, started forward, but Molly grabbed him, shaking her head. Together they slowly walked from the graveyard.

---

## Gryffindor Head Suite Common Room...

It had been nearly a week since the funeral for Minister Fudge and as yet there had been no progress towards finding an interim Minister. According to news reports, the Wizengamot was evenly split between Amos Diggory, backed by Dumbledore and an Archibald Richfield, backed by the Daily Prophet among others. For the Outcasts the political infighting seemed to be insignificant to the fighting at school.

There had been several attempted attacks on the Outcasts, which were fortunately easily thwarted. But their sense of isolation only increased as more than one of them at times could finally understand what Harry had been feeling all along. For Harry, the one bright spot through it all could be answered in a single word: Hermione. And, strangely enough, she could say exactly the same thing.

Harry had gotten over his embarrassment with Hermione joining him in his bed. It was hard to be embarrassed that you're naked when you are dying to see your partner in the same state. Even on the nights when they didn't make love, he still held her as if she were the most important thing in his universe. It was an unusual feeling for Hermione. In a way, she realized, they were both addressing deep-rooted needs in the other.

Hermione smiled as she watched her man talk to the Outcasts. Inwardly she acknowledged a proprietary feeling towards Harry. It was something she never suspected she'd ever have. It still caught her by surprise from time to time. She'd catch a glimpse of him looking at her or watch him doing his homework, and she'd smile, knowing the depths of passion she could invoke in him. There was a muggle saying that she thought was very appropriate when it came to him...Still waters run deep.

He was handing out assignments for what would be an all day excursion to the Chamber of Secrets. They were going to transform the Chamber into a sort of Headquarters.

Ginny nudged Hermione. "Pay attention," she hissed.

Hermione looked around wildly. Noticing that everyone was staring at her, she blushed. "What?" she stammered, embarrassed.

Harry looked a little uncomfortable. “I asked if you had that first shipment from the twins?”

“Oh, yes! Right here,” she said, searching her pockets for the shrunken crate. Harry tried not to smile, though the others were snickering.

“See Draco, that’s what being in love is like. You’ll do something similar someday, I imagine,” Luna said, making Hermione’s blush deepen.

Harry smiled and put his arm around Hermione possessively. “Snickers all you want, you slugs, but we’re happy and that’s what matters. Now, let’s get to work. Everyone remember, the lighting spell is *Lumos Flotima*.”

Harry shot a warning glance at Neville who nodded and stepped closer to Ginny. Harry then led the Outcasts into Hermione’s bedroom, where he opened the passageway. Casting the same orange scouring charm as last time, he entered the narrow passage. From behind him came multiple voices incanting, “*Lumos Flotima*.” The light from the orbs flooded the passageway.

After thirty minutes of walking downhill, they came to the metal grate marking the end of the passage. Harry turned around and motioned to everyone. “Everyone, cast the Bubblehead Charm. Ginny, stay close to either Neville or myself. We’ll give you a bit to get used to the idea before we start cleaning the place up.”

After casting the charm on himself, Harry lifted the grate and slid through the narrow opening. Still holding the grate up so the others could enter, he commanded the lights to come on with a quick command muttered in Parseltongue.

Harry chuckled as he released the grate. Everyone was through now and they were clustered close together, watching him tensely. He smiled reassuringly at his friends and led them out into the central aisle between the two columns of snake statues.

Ginny gasped and swayed, clutching at Neville’s arm when she spotted the sixty foot long rotting Basilisk corpse. Her breathing quickened and her eyes showed the panic building within her. Harry signaled to Hermione and she led Draco and Luna to the body to collect the potion ingredients.

Harry put his hands on Ginny’s shoulders turning her to face him. “It’s dead,” he told her gently, but firmly. “It’s been dead since the end of your first year at school, and so is the incarnation of Riddle’s memory. Don’t you remember? I killed him.”

She nodded, but still wasn’t calming. Hermione returned from helping Draco and Luna. “Ginny, we wouldn’t bring you here if there was a danger. Harry killed the snake to save your life,” she said gently.

“I-I-I remember... that monster bit you, Harry! And Riddle... he...”

“I killed him, Ginny. I stabbed the diary with the fang from the Basilisk remember? He died when I destroyed his diary.”

Neville tightened his embrace and she slowly calmed while her friends watched her worriedly. Finally she was able to control herself enough to look around. Draco and Luna were filling a large crate with the hide and other parts from the Basilisk. It looked like they had already harvested the teeth. Both wore thick dragon hide gloves and carried charmed knives that could withstand the corrosive nature of the basilisk flesh.

Harry sent Ginny and Neville to start cleaning up the far end of the Chamber, near the entrance. Hermione, Susan and Terry went to join them. As soon as Draco and Luna had finished with the Basilisk corpse he'd get rid of the remains and start scouring this end of the Chamber.

While Harry waited, he glanced up and started the incantation to cast the echoing charm on the ceiling, similar to the one that existed for the Great Hall. He was just finishing with the charm when Draco passed him, carrying a small box. He'd shrunk the crate of ingredients to something pocket sized. Draco nodded to Harry and he turned to follow Luna, while Harry turned to the still huge, rotting body.

He banished the corpse, then he cast a complex series of incantations. Slowly a whirling cone of wind arose in the Chamber. The air rushed into the cone and it built higher and wider as it pulled in the stench left by the dead snake. After three minutes Harry saw that the cone wasn't growing any bigger so he started walking back towards the front of the Chamber, near his friends. As he did, the controlled tornado followed him like a faithful puppy.

His friends looked up, startled, as he slowly walked near them followed by a howling whirlwind. He seemed preoccupied, staring at the wall. Finally, he stopped about twenty feet away from his friends and stared hard at the wall for a moment. With a flick of his hand, the tornado moved towards the wall. As it did, it scoured ages of dirt off the surface, revealing a fist-sized opening in the wall. With another flick, the base of the cone leapt from the ground to the opening and the tornado slowly entered the small pipe the scouring had revealed.

The others stopped their cleaning efforts to watch this unusual display of magic. When the tornado had vanished entirely, Harry lifted his hand. A bright beam of light shot from his palm and rock around the hole boiled and melted, sealing the opening.

Canceling his bubblehead charm, Harry took a deep breath, and then signaled for the others to cancel theirs as well. The air was sweet and pure again. His friends approached him with curious expressions on their faces.

"Why that particular hole, Harry?" asked Draco. "You passed dozens of others, looking for that one in particular."

Harry managed to look sheepish. He looked down at the ground scuffing his feet. "Well, that one leads to the air ducts that bring fresh air down to Snape's quarters."

Everyone looked at him in astonishment for a second before Draco's eyes suddenly narrowed. "Wait a second, is that the only place the pipe goes?"

“Oops,” Harry said, his eyes wide in mock innocence.

“Oops? What do you mean? Where else does it go, Harry?” demanded Draco.

“Slytherin House and the potion lab,” came the quiet and unexpected reply. There was a moment of silence before the first sounds of laughter echoed off the ancient stone walls.

---

Great Hall, Breakfast, Early February...

“I don’t understand why it’s taking so long. It’s been more than two weeks now,” complained Harry at the breakfast table.

“The process is convoluted and complex,” explained Draco. “The Wizengamot started with a field of twenty seven candidates, and in the past two weeks they’ve narrowed that down to two.”

“Well it just seems like a lot of effort for a temporary position. Why isn’t there a Senior Under-Secretary or Vice Minister who could have stepped into the position?”

Hermione watched the byplay with interest. Harry, raised as a muggle like herself, had little knowledge of the workings of the British Magical Government. Both of them had read up on the topic and knew the basics, but what was happening now was way beyond the basics, even if their pureblood friends seemed to instinctively understand it. Surprisingly, it was Draco who took it upon himself to explain the process. Growing up as the Malfoy heir, Government was one of the topics he had cut his teeth on.

Right now Harry was upset. According to the Daily Prophet, an entire graduating class of Aurors, over two hundred people, had graduated and immediately took work in other countries. With the Ministry paralyzed, the graduating class had not been allowed to make the transition from cadet to paid employee of the Ministry.

The Wizengamot had finally narrowed the field down to two candidates, Amos Diggory and Archibald Richfield. Diggory was a known member of the Order of the Phoenix and Harry was mistrustful of him because of his connection to Dumbledore. Richfield was an enigma. He was the brother-in-law of Fergus McNulty, owner and publisher of the Daily Prophet who, in turn, was cousin to escaped convict Lucius Malfoy. Richfield had been a long time member of the Wizengamot, and his political leanings tended towards favoring the more extreme pureblood oriented views. But his voting record, even on that subject, was somewhat ambiguous, as he didn’t always come down on the side of the purebloods.

Right now Harry sat at the table with the Daily Prophet in front of him. The headlines screamed about the ineffectiveness of the government and the rise of attacks by Death Eaters on magical and muggles alike. It also screamed again about the evil being taught at Hogwarts, viciously attacking Dumbledore. And just so Harry didn’t feel left out, they had started a series of investigative reports digging into Harry’s upbringing and comparing his past with the way past Dark Lords had been raised as children. Not surprisingly, they never mentioned the current Dark Lord, finding

ample items to use to compare between Harry and the likes of Grindelwald and others. Harry looked up at Draco again, listening to his explanation and nodding.

“One thing’s for certain. The names of stuff might be similar, but this government is nothing like the muggle Ministries,” Harry said softly, shaking his head in amazement.

“I have to agree. It’s a wonder the Ministry of Magic manages to accomplish anything,” added Hermione. “It’s so inefficient!”

Ginny looked at Hermione, her expression puzzled. “But it’s always been this way, Hermione.”

Draco snorted in amusement. “I know what it sounds like, Hermione, but every European Ministry is run like this. It’s been like this since the great families ceded their rights to Govern about five hundred years ago.”

When Hermione arched an eyebrow inquisitively, Draco shook his head. “You know, the problem with this school is that they give us have teachers like Binns. He’s so lost in the Goblin wars that he’s completely forgotten to teach the other parts of our history,” he said in disgust. “The great families, the Potters, Malfoy’s, Zabini’s, Bones, Dumbledores and yes, even the Weasleys, were among the last of the noble families to recognize the British Royal Crown. When the Ministry was first formed about five hundred years ago, the great families were afraid the new Ministry would try to drive them out. The crown allowed them to set up a Ministry that was highly inefficient in return for their oaths of fealty.”

Draco paused for a moment, and then gestured around the table. “Most of us here can boast a title of some sort if we wanted to. Luna can lay claim to the title of Countess, even Harry can lay claim to a Viscount title and, if I’m not mistake, there’s an Earldom floating around in his family as well. And it’s all perfectly legal and recognized in the muggle world.”

Hermione glanced over at Harry in shock. He simply shrugged. “This is all news to me too, Hermione. I don’t think the titles mean all that much if you ask me. You saw the only time I even came close to using it at Gringotts,” he replied. Draco grinned at him.

“Harry’s right. The Goblins are very proper when it comes to things like titles. But the rest of us pretty much ignore them anymore...unless you’re a Malfoy, of course. My father was pretty insistent that I learn all about the Ministry when I was growing up, as well as our place in it. I think it always bothered him that the Malfoy’s weren’t among the oldest families, even if we were considered to be one of the great families. I know he spent a small fortune trying to prove a connection between the Malfoys and Slytherin,” he finished off softly, scowling.

Luna placed her hand on his. “There’s only one title you need worry about Draco, and that’s ‘boyfriend’,” she said smiling sweetly at him. “Another day I’ll instruct you in other possible titles like fiancé, husband, father, that sort of thing.”

The rest of the Outcasts watched in amusement as Draco got lost in Luna’s gaze. Luna’s condition was finally explained to the Outcasts over the Christmas holiday and, after the initial curiosity had

worn off, the group accepted her added abilities without question. Since then, everyone had felt the full brunt of Luna's attention at least once. Draco experienced it more than most, however, and it drove him to distraction.

---

The Three Broomsticks, Hogsmeade, Hogwarts Board of Governors Meeting...

Esther Hampton looked up from her papers, glancing to her fellow Governors. With a nod to Amelia, she had an aide open the door admitting Albus Dumbledore and Severus Snape. The two men took seats in front the table seating the Board. Esther looked towards Augusta Longbottom, she nodded back as she set up a quick quotes quill and parchment.

Esther cleared her throat. "This is a special meeting of the Hogwarts Board of Governors. Our first order of business will be to examine the details surrounding the death of Argus Filch, long time caretaker at Hogwarts. According to our records, Hogwarts had employed Mr. Filch for nearly thirty years. Mr. Filch was a squib with no family, hence the burial in the castle graveyard.

"According to the reports, on the night of January 29th, Mr. Filch was climbing the staircase up to the seventh floor landing when he tripped and fell over the banisters, plunging six stories to his death.

"Professor Snape, you were a witness to the event, along with the two students, Miss Abbot and Mister Finch-Fletchley. Were either you or the two students near Mr. Filch at the time of his accident?" asked Esther.

"No, Madam Hampton," Snape answered. "Apparently Mr. Filch had caught the two students in question in some infraction of the rules. As caretaker, he was not empowered to assign punishments to the students, so he routinely brought them to the attention of the staff. I can only assume he was bringing them up to Headmaster Dumbledore's office when he spotted me on the landing above him. When he spotted me, he instructed the two students to remain on the lower landing, presumably so he and I could discuss their infraction first."

"Where were you coming from that night, Professor?" asked Amelia.

"I was returning from the Headmaster's office, Madam Bones. The Headmaster and I had just finished discussing the lab schedule."

"Is it safe to assume that you traveled that same stairway earlier in the evening, Professor?"

"Yes, Madam Bones."

"Was the staircase wet? Had it been recently washed?"

"Not to my knowledge, Madam Bones. Mr. Filch normally took care of such matters and, as far as I am aware, he had Professor Flitwick charm mops that he would release to clean the floors. As a squib, he couldn't do magic himself, but he took as much advantage of it as he could."



“I’m curious, Professor. If the stairs weren’t wet from cleaning, what do you suppose made him slip sideways? Even you have to admit a lateral movement when one is walking forward is rather unusual,” asked Amelia.

Snape leaned back in his chair trying to appear cooperative and thoughtful. “Madam Bones, I’ve thought of little else since that night. Mr. Filch suddenly staggered to one side as if he had lost his balance. I saw no spells cast or any discharge of magical energy. I can only surmise that Mr. Filch must have suffered from some sort of vertigo, which resulted in him pitching over the railing.”

Amelia nodded and turned to Dumbledore. “Headmaster, can you shed any further information? I realize that from your statement you were not present when the accident occurred, but did you check the stairway for spells, traps or jinxes?”

“While Professor Snape went to get help from Madam Pomfrey, I ran a series of detection spells on the stairway and found nothing out of the ordinary. The stairs, as you recall, are enchanted but, except for the normal enchantments, there was nothing,” replied Dumbledore.

Amelia looked at Esther, nodding to indicate she was done with her questions. Esther then turned to Dumbledore.

“Headmaster, Professor, I’d like to thank you both for taking the time from your busy schedules to help us with this matter. We have but one more item to cover and then we’ll be able to adjourn for the day,” Esther said mildly.

Dumbledore cocked an eyebrow looking interested. “Oh? I wasn’t aware of any further orders of business. This is rather unusual Madam Chairwoman. Normally the Headmaster is informed of the Board’s topics before the meeting begins.”

Esther shot an appealing look to Amelia Bones. “Yes, Headmaster, I understand. However, this matter was only brought to my attention just before the meeting started by a representative from the Department of Magical Education and Certification. It seems that near the middle of last month, the DMEC received a stack of papers, student’s work, from Hogwarts and they were asked to explain why papers that contained essentially the same information were receiving such a massive grading discrepancy.”

Dumbledore looked up in concern and Snape swallowed nervously as Amelia produced a stack of student homework.

“Upon receiving these documents, the DMEC conducted some further investigation and made some recommendations, which they have since passed on to us. The documents in question are entirely potions homework and exhibit a clear cut pattern of bias towards one Harry James Potter,” Amelia said, holding up several papers. “Here are two reports, one from Hermione Granger of Gryffindor and one from Harry Potter, also of Gryffindor. Both reports are nearly identical in length and cite the same key points in the correct order. But Miss Granger received an E for her effort, while Mr. Potter received a T. These are just two sample papers of nearly forty homework reports received by the DMEC.

“Examining Professor Snape’s grading history, there is a clear bias towards his own House. As a result, the DMEC is suspending Professor Snape’s teaching certificate, pending a formal inquiry and retesting this summer,” concluded Amelia softly.

Esther turned from Amelia to look at the two ashen faced professors. “Professor Snape, as you can see, our hands are tied. Your past actions have earned you few friends in a position to help you. Pending the re-certification process this summer, we have no choice but to suspend you without pay. Once you have been re-certified by the DMEC, we will be able to renew your contract. If you fail to certify, we will not be renewing your contract. Regrettably, Professor, we will have to ask you to vacate your quarters within the next few days.”

Snape slumped in his chair, ashen faced and in shock. Dumbledore’s expression grew angry. He needed Snape! “Madam Chairwoman! Surely there is...”

“I’m sorry Albus, but the Ministry was quite firm on this subject. In fact, they informed Amelia that their initial thought was to press charges. Professor Snape publicly assaulted a student, in front of witnesses mind you, on platform 9 3/4s before the start of term. His bias towards his own House is legendary and his treatment of the Potter heir has been nearly criminal. The really surprising thing is that, even though the homework assignments belong to Mr. Potter and Miss Granger, the complaint itself came from a totally unexpected source. Draco Malfoy-Black.

“I’m afraid the Board can do nothing in this situation, Albus. See that he vacates the castle before the end of the week. Oh and Albus, there will be no housing of former teachers like you did with Sybil Trelawney last year. According to the DMEC, your own actions in the past year are highly suspect,” said Esther sternly.

“And speaking of Sybil Trelawney,” she continued, “since there are no current teachers at the school who are alumni of Slytherin House, we have decided that Sybil Trelawney will take over the position as Head of Slytherin and you, Headmaster, will assume Professor Snape’s duties as Potions Professor.”

Dumbledore sat back in his chair and felt as if he’d been slapped. No one had questioned his right to lead his school in years, and now this! Nodding numbly to the Board, he stood and approached Severus. While their relationship had always been based on need and necessity, a grudging friendship had built between the two men. Dumbledore placed his hand on Snape’s shoulder, shaking him from his shock.

Snape looked up at Dumbledore, his eyes still echoing the bewilderment he was feeling.

“Come, Severus, it is not the end of the world. There is much I can still do for you, my friend,” Dumbledore said gently.

---

Lessons in the Room of Requirement...

Harry had found a section of the library that seemed to be rarely used. Mostly the books were

Muggle in nature, and he found the topics to be fascinating. Muggle science was rarely discussed in school, except for the rare discussion in Muggle Studies class. The section that Harry had found concentrated on muggle science and the muggle world in general. It didn't come as a shock to Harry that the muggles were far more advanced in their technology than the Wizarding world wanted to believe. But he knew it was an attitude that he'd have to work with his friends on.

But even more importantly than working with his friends on their attitude towards muggles, he knew he had to work on his girlfriend's attitude. The change in their relationship had brought Harry and Hermione much closer together and they made love as often as they could. As they grew closer, he noticed a specific trait in her that he wanted to help her change. Which was exactly why he had spent hours pouring over the muggle section of the library before dragging her to the Room of Requirement for a special dinner.

The room was pitch black except for a lit table near the center of the room. Harry had enlisted the aid of Dobby and Winky in preparing a simple meal. The thrust of tonight's activity wasn't romance, it was to teach the love of his life, to love life.

After they were seated at the table and Dobby had served them a dinner, Harry looked at Hermione thoughtfully. She was a little nervous because Harry had been exceedingly tight lipped about tonight's dinner. To be honest, she was afraid of what would happen tonight. He had made a few comments over the past few days that had caused her to believe he was upset with her. She wasn't sure why he was upset and it scared her that he might be thinking about breaking up with her.

"Hermione," began Harry.

She nearly jumped from her seat in fright and he frowned at her. "Harry, what ever I did, I'm sorry," she whispered.

He blinked in confusion. "Do you think I'm angry with you?"

She nodded and he chuckled, then he reached over and grabbed her hands in his. "I'm not mad at you, I'm not angry about anything. I am, however, going to show you something. Will you promise to look with an open mind and not get angry with me?"

She nodded and Harry waved a hand to activate the room in the sequence he had planned.

The room wavered and suddenly they sat at the table on the edge of a huge canyon. "This is the Grand Canyon in the United States. I found a bunch of photos of this place and others and I've set the room to take us there for a bit. Tell me what you see when you look at it."

Hermione looked out over the scene. She had to admit it was breathtaking, but she was sure that wasn't what he was asking her. "Well the canyon was built over millions of years by the action of the Colorado river cutting through the rock. It's one of the largest canyons in the world. The various colors in the wall come from different mineral deposits," she offered.

Harry smiled and shook his head as the room darkened and the ceiling overhead shifted to display

images he had found from the Hubble space telescope. “I’m sure you recognize some of these images, Hermione, but what do you see ?” he asked stressing the last word.

“Well this is the famous photo of the Horse Head nebula. It’s a stellar nursery where millions of new stars are being born. Many of these stars are so close together they destroy each other.”

Harry laughed and let the room shift again. Now their table was cleared off of leftovers and there was a box in front of Harry. He reached into the box and pulled out a kitten, which he handed to Hermione, then reached into the box and pulled out another kitten.

“What do you see Hermione?” he asked gently.

Hermione looked down at the little ball of fur in her hands. It was obviously a kneazle half breed mix. “It’s a kneazle mix,” she said, faltering as she watched him.

“It’s a cute kitten?” she offered lamely when Harry’s expression fell

Harry smiled gently at her. “I love you Hermione, and nothing will change that,” he said, then he cuddled the kitten in his hands for a moment. “What I want you to learn is to see the world, not analyze it all the time.”

Still holding the kittens, the scene shifted back to the Grand Canyon and Harry continued talking.

“The colors are beautiful. The understanding that nature took millions of years to build this is awe-inspiring. But look at how the sunlight casts shadows and makes some of the layers in the wall almost glow in vibrant color. That I can share this with the woman I love makes me feel good inside, like knowing a funny little joke that just the two of us share.”

The scene remained, but darkened and overhead came the same images as before.

“The astronomy photos are awesome, Hermione. Forget stellar nurseries for a moment, forget light years and all that. This is nature drawing on the biggest canvas it could find - the universe itself. Michelangelo couldn’t have done so well. I look at this image and ask myself, what put it there? Is there some higher power that put together the universe in all its majesty? Is what put that marvelous image in our heavens the same thing that granted me the ability to love someone as special as you?”

Then he held up the kitten in his hand. It was busy gnawing on his finger and making little growling noises. “This kitten, this helpless little creature, is born with a capacity to love. An emotional capacity we share with it, despite being a totally different creature from it. It begs to be nurtured, to be played with. Just looking at it tugs at your heart.”

Hermione watched and listened to him carefully. This was a side of him she had only seen when he played his tin whistle, and even then he rarely expressed himself in words during those times.

“My point is a simple one. You’re the smartest person I know and I hope someday that together we’ll have children even smarter. But you need to learn to step back sometimes and look at things

from a different angle,” he said softly. “I know you’ve been wanting to talk about our love making and what we’re experiencing. To be honest, I’ve avoided the topic because I’ve been afraid I’d disappoint you with my comments.”

“How so?” she asked him gently.

“Because I don’t see things clinically like you do,” he told her. “I don’t look at it in terms of time, or how many times I can bring you to orgasm. How can I describe touching Heaven, Hermione? That’s what it’s like for me and I don’t have the words to describe it. How can I describe what it’s like to be given the most precious gift in the world? That’s exactly what I feel like every night when you fall asleep in my arms. Loving you isn’t something I can easily put into words. My favorite witch in the world would tell me to ‘quantify my feelings and qualify them with examples and anecdotes’,” Harry said, doing a very good imitation of her. “The problem is, I can’t. I need to learn to see the world more like you do, but you need to learn to see it like I do.”

He held up the kitten in his hands and scratched its head gently, causing the small animal to push its head back against him and purr loudly.

Hermione smiled gently at the sight of Harry with the kitten. His words had touched her in ways even she couldn’t describe. She realized he was right, she did tend to over analyze things. And while that wasn’t always a bad trait, she had been applying it to their relationship and their activities. She had wanted to talk to him about their love life, but now she was convinced that had she forced it, she never would have understood where he was coming from.

“I’ll talk to you about it, Hermione. But try to see where I’m coming from. Some of these things I just don’t have the words for, and some shouldn’t need any,” he said softly, still scratching the kitten’s head.

She reached out to him and put her hand on his arm. The kitten in his hands swatted her hand and growled in mock anger. “You have the soul of a poet. I should have seen that with your music. You also flatter me more than is necessary. Our relationship has changed greatly in the past months and I’m very happy with that, but ‘touching Heaven’? Isn’t that a bit extreme?”

“You might feel that it’s extreme, but I certainly don’t,” he replied in a whisper. “How else can I explain being truly happy for the first time in my memory? I don’t feel alone anymore. That alone is a gift I can never repay you for.”

Chewing on her lower lip, she nodded. He placed the kitten back in the box and she handed him the other kitten, which he also put away. With a wave of his hand the scenery shifted again and they were sitting at a table on a wind swept beach. Dobby appeared and served tea while they talked about their relationship.

---

Headmaster’s Office, Hogwarts...

Dumbledore sat heavily in his chair. It had been a long day, and it hadn’t been a pleasant one. The

firing of Professor Snape had come as a complete surprise. Dumbledore snorted to himself. The Board of Governors could call it what ever they pleased, but it was a sacking.

He sighed and removed his glasses before pinching the bridge of his nose. Severus had been of enormous help to him over the past years and he still could be, but he was also a marked man. If he stepped outside of the castle, Voldemort would have him hunted down and killed. Dumbledore felt obligated to do something about it.

He looked up as the door to his office opened and Severus Snape walked in.

“Severus, come in! I’ve been giving your problem some thought and I have some ideas about how we can turn this to our advantage,” he said, waving the man to a chair.

Snape sat down dejectedly. “I hope so, Headmaster. Right now I find myself at a loss.”

“Here’s what we’re going to do with you, Severus. And I promise you, we’ll do our very best to protect you. First thing, I’ve had the Hogwarts House Elves cleaning up the interior of the Shrieking Shack. The first floor will be set up as a potions lab for you, as well as kitchen space. The second floor is being fixed up into living space, including library and bedroom. From the outside, the shack will look as run down as ever, but it will be much nicer on the inside.

“What I’m going to do is arrange to pay you from Order funds to make potions for us. Healing potions, interrogation, empowering potions, that sort of thing. When you’re not making potions, you’ll be free to conduct potions research, which I know you’ve always wanted to do.”

As Dumbledore spoke, Snape sat straighter in his chair. The Headmaster’s words made him realize that, not only did he still have work he could be doing, but he also had time to work on projects that interested him now. Potions research was something he had always wanted to do! No more teaching ungrateful brats!

Snape smiled gratefully. “I do believe that your solution is both elegant and efficient, Albus. There are several areas of research that I have wanted to delve into, areas that might help us in our fight against the Dark Lord. But I haven’t been able to do so with my teaching duties.”

Dumbledore leaned back in his chair, relieved that Snape had accepted his solution so easily. “Excellent, Severus! I will, of course, have to make the announcement at breakfast tomorrow. In the meantime, I will make arrangements with the House Elves to allow you access to a Hogwarts Owl if you need to obtain any special supplies. The elves are stocking the potion lab with a basic ingredient supply even as we speak.”

Severus nodded. For the first time since their meeting with the Board of Governors earlier in the day, he was a happy man.

“I’ll also schedule an Order meeting to let everyone know of the changes in your status and what you’ll be doing for us,” Dumbledore offered.

Snape, barely hearing the Headmaster, nodded in agreement.

---

Breakfast, the Great Hall...

Harry and Hermione came down late once again to the Great Hall for breakfast. Their time spent in the Room of Requirement the night before had been very fruitful for both of them. Like all new relationships, not all of the issues had been resolved, but they had made great progress in learning to discuss issues that embarrassed them both.

When they'd retired for the night, Harry had made love to her with a tenderness that took her breath away. Everything she'd heard in the dorms about boys from people like Lavender Brown and Parvati Patil was turning out to be so totally different from what she was experiencing with Harry. Either Lavender and Parvati had bad experiences, or her Harry was truly different from other boys his age.

Entering the Great Hall, still holding hands, Harry led Hermione over to their friends at the Gryffindor table. It wasn't until after they'd sat down that they noticed the hush that permeated the Great Hall. Glancing up at the Head table, they noted that Sybil Trelawney sat in Professor Snape's chair and was wearing robes signifying her affiliation to Slytherin House.

Dumbledore stood and waited for the few students loitering by the entrance to take their seats. "I have an announcement that I need to make, so might I have everyone's attention please?" Dumbledore asked in a voice that carried throughout the Hall.

"Due to a complaint lodged by Draco Malfoy, Professor Snape has been relieved of his teaching position pending a formal enquiry by the Ministry's Department of Magical Education and Certification. With his teaching certificate suspended, the Board of Governors had no choice but to relieve Professor Snape of his duties as Potions Master and Head of Slytherin House."

A gasp rang out through the hall and a number of the Slytherins cried out in protest. Snape was popular among his own House because of his bias towards them. The few Slytherins who didn't like him were those who openly supported Voldemort and knew of his spying activities.

Once the Hall had quieted down again, Dumbledore continued. "Starting today, I will take over the position of Potions Professor until a replacement can be found, and Professor Trelawney has graciously agreed to become the Head of Slytherin house."

That announcement left the room in total silence except for Lavender and Parvati, who both cheered briefly, but even those two faded into silence when they noticed no one else cheering.

Draco pushed his plate out of the way and sunk his head into his hands murmuring, "They are going to kill me. I'm a dead man."

Luna leaned over and patted him on the back. "If you want, I'll sneak you up into my dorm room. Your dorm mates won't be able to reach you there. And since I have my bed warded against the

Antenna Snapping Whistle Jumpers, you won't have to worry about them, either."

Draco peered up at Luna in confusion. He couldn't tell if she had invited him to her bed or not.

Harry looked at the two of them and snickered. They'd been dancing around each other for a while, much to the enjoyment of everyone else. But now Draco looked desperate. As breakfast ended, Draco pulled Harry, Neville and Terry off to one side.

"Did she just invite me into her bed?" Draco asked. It was hard to tell whether his tone was hopeful or terrified.

Neville snorted in amusement. "Draco, when she invites you to her bed, you'll know because she'll be stripping you as she pulls you in."

Harry made a strangling sound as he tried to choke and laugh at the same time. Terry pounded on his back while Draco eyed Neville with renewed interest. "Speaking from experience, Longbottom?" he asked in a drawl.

Neville eyed Draco calmly, then buffed his nails against his shirt. "Yes, I am," he replied in a matter of fact tone.

Harry's eyes lit up and he waved a hand where Neville and Draco couldn't see. His hand flared briefly and the backs of Neville and Draco's robes changed. Terry looked at his two fellow Outcasts and watched as the robes changed to read: *Draco 'Clueless' Black* and *Neville 'Studly' Longbottom*.

Terry's eyes widened and he dragged Harry to the floor as he collapsed in a fit of laughter. Draco and Neville eyed the two of them suspiciously.

---

Hogwarts Dungeon, that night...

Having said goodnight to Luna up in the library, Draco trudged down to the Slytherin common room and, ultimately, his dorm room. The day had been particularly rough on him since the morning announcement about Snape getting sacked. Contrary to popular belief, Snape had been popular with the Slytherin House members and they were not very pleased with his involvement in getting the man sacked from his job.

There had been a few verbal exchanges with his fellow Slytherins during the day, but nothing major. The simple fact was that Draco was a better duelist than most of the students in the school. His knowledge of spells, light and dark, rivaled that of Hermione Granger and Draco was known to be a ruthless fighter when pressed. The problem with being one of the best or one of the strongest, or smartest, is that one can still be surprised. All it takes is a few brief seconds of inattention for one to lose his or her advantage.

That surprise came when Draco was descending the last set of stairs into the dungeon. The



explosive hex came from behind and above him. He never even heard the assailant. Hit in the shoulder, he sailed off the stairway in a spinning motion. His vision grayed out almost immediately and the last thing he remembered was seeing the floor spinning as it rushed up to meet him at high speed.

Draco reconnected with a world gone crazy a few minutes later. He was on his side, looking up the stairway at an angle. From behind him, deeper in the dungeon, came the sound of footsteps. He tried to move his head, but the pain was excruciating.

Severus Snape leaned down so Draco could see him clearly. “I don’t know who did this to you Draco, but it is a pity you survived.”

With that single comment, Snape stood and walked from view.

Draco tried to move, tried to speak, but an inexplicable weakness pervaded his body. He heard another set of footsteps approaching, this time from the stairway, and whoever it was, was in a great hurry. Draco felt comforting hands on his body and a face framed by a halo of blonde hair filled his vision. He was sure it was an angel.

“Rest easy, my Draco. Help is coming for you,” whispered Luna through her tears. As she touched him, he relaxed and her feelings washed over him, drowning out his pain and anxiety.

Luna concentrated on holding Draco as Harry appeared. She didn’t even look up or acknowledge his presence. Harry took in the scene in a single glance, the huge wound in his shoulder, the blood, and Luna somehow keeping Draco anchored in this world. Grabbing Luna’s wrist and Draco’s hand he concentrated for a tandem apparate and with a soft pop they were all gone.

As soon as they appeared in the infirmary, Harry went straight to the door leading to Madam Pomfrey’s office and quarters, calling loudly. A moment later Madam Pomfrey was stepping out of door, throwing a robe on over her nightgown. She took in the scene of Luna and Draco and rushed over to help the stricken young man. Harry watched for a moment before vanishing again.

Luna refused to release Draco while Madam Pomfrey struggled to levitate him into a bed. Once he was in the bed she was about to tear into the young woman when another voice cut through the silence of the infirmary.

“Leave her be, Poppy. She is the only thing keeping Draco anchored to our world, rather than passing on,” said a voice.

Madam Pomfrey looked up to see that Harry Potter had returned with Nymphadora Tonks and Narcissa Black.

Narcissa rushed to the bedside, and her expressions wavered between gratitude and anguish as she looked between Luna and her son. “Luna is a child of Gaia, Poppy,” Narcissa explained softly, “Draco is her chosen one. She’s dampening his pain and he’s anchoring his soul to hers. As long as she continues to hold onto him, he’ll live long enough for you to treat the wound and get him

out of danger.”

Understanding flared in Poppy’s eyes and she quickly began casting healing spells, closing up the wounds and repairing broken bones. Once the major damage was dealt with, Madam Pomfrey pulled out the necessary potions and, with Luna’s help, got Draco to drink them.

After nearly an hour working on Draco, Madam Pomfrey stood and ran a few more diagnostic spells before nodding in satisfaction. “He’s out of danger now, thank Merlin... and thank you, Miss Lovegood,” she murmured.

Luna released Draco’s hand and leaned back in her chair, smiling softly at the sleeping form. Then she leaned forward again and gently smoothed the hair on his brow. “It is not yet your time, Dray. We have much still to do together, my beloved,” she whispered to the sleeping young man.

Narcissa’s eyes filled with tears and she placed a hand on Luna’s shoulder. Luna looked up at the older woman and then cried in surprised happiness when Narcissa pulled her into an embrace. The two held each other while Tonks, Harry and Madam Pomfrey looked on.

Harry made a move to back away from the scene, thinking to give the women a bit of privacy, when Narcissa looked up from holding Luna. “I owe you and Luna both a life debt, Harry. You both played your part in saving Draco’s life.”

Harry shook his head, denying Narcissa’s claim. “I merely did what family is supposed to do, help each other. Tonight I helped two of my closest friends. One was badly injured, the other stood to lose her heart if Draco died. No Narcissa, there is no debt between family.”

Tonks watched impassively. She stood waiting to take statements about tonight’s events as soon as they were ready for her.

Harry stepped back and started to turn when Luna stopped him. “Hermione is a lucky woman, Harry Potter. Thank you, from both of us,” she whispered.

Harry smiled and nodded before leaving the infirmary, heading back to his own bed, and his own love. As he walked, he couldn’t help but be impressed by how focused Luna was tonight, but still withholding the wash of emotion over people. Either he was getting used to it, or she was getting better at controlling it.

---

### **Author’s Notes:**

The yahoo group is an adult group. If you want questions answered and can’t join the group, then you can email us with your questions. We will however, not answer any question which might be considered as a spoiler. The link to the group can be found in my profile under the homepage.

“What makes you think the wizarding world isn’t run like ours? I mean you could sue for slander in ancient times so why not in the wizarding world.” Simple. If we assume that the British

Ministry of Magic is patterned off of the muggle British Government, Sirius black would not have gone to prison without a trial. Since he did, we can't make that assumption about the Ministry of Magic, can we? I don't think we can.

Harry is definitely getting used to having to kill Death Eaters. He will still continue to have his moments where he feels some remorse, and he'll definitely feel it for any innocents that might get caught in the crossfire. But its something you grow accustomed to after a while.

For those that thing we are relying on prophecies far too much. Well you're welcome to go try to write your own fiction. This story was plotted with them there as a means of providing a push in the direction we want our characters to go. If we pull the prophecies out, then we'll have people scratching their fuzzy little heads and wondering "How the heck did we get here?"

Why must Harry lose his temper? The simple fact is, he (a) can't slag Hogwarts right now, he needs it and (b) That means he can't kill Dumbledore either. Dumbledore force the Outcasts to duel the entire school? I bet you thought that Draco swimming the lake would prove him to be on the side of the light too.

Harry did want a stealthy approach to getting to the Grangers, until they started getting tortured. After that, all bets were off and Harry decided it was time to send Tommy a message.

Heh. Quite a few thought that Arthur had been put under the imperious curse. Fooled you!

For those complaining about the gore and the ever darkening theme of this story, get used to it. It's going to get darker and darker. That's why the story is called SUNSET over Britain.

MarinePotterFan: You've been one of our longtime reviewers, even in our other stories so we'll admit, no we really don't have any plans to torture you. These things just happen.

**Pet Peeves.**

**ADULT THEMES!!!**

If you are writing for an adult audience, then do so. If you're writing for a T or K audience, then don't. I hate authors that are incapable of spelling curse words properly. Hmmm if I write it as shite then no one will know that I really mean shit. Euphemisms! I remember reading one story where Harry and Ginny were using a few spells to enhance their sex life, and instead of saying they screwed like bunnies in heat, the author, in every other paragraph had to mention them using "those spells for personal enjoyment."

## **Sunset Over Britain**

### **Actions and Reactions**

#### **Standard Disclaimer:**

Hermione steps out onto the stage wearing a full length formal gown and steps up to the podium. Harry, dressed in a tuxedo, approaches from the opposite side of the stage to meet her at the podium.

Harry leans over the microphone. "The authors would like us to tell you that they do not own any part of the Potterverse. And now that you understand that, the nominees for Stupid Git of the Year are, FEMA for it's handling of the Hurricane Katrina, Ronald Weasley for his attempt to eat a plastic twinkie, and the Admins of Fanfic.net."

Hermione squeals and tears at the envelope, then leans over the microphone showing a wonderful amount of cleavage. "And the winner is... Ron Weasley! Come on up here, Ron!"

The spotlight swings madly through the crowd and people jump to their feet applauding wildly. Ron, looking completely surprised, jumps from his chair and runs down the aisle. Climbing up the stairs to the stage, he turns and waves to the crowd before approaching the podium.

At the podium, Harry hands Ron a stick of dynamite with the fuse lit. Then Harry and Hermione walk off the stage while Ron looks at his award with admiration.

"I'd like to thank my mum for pushing me to be a butthead in this story, and my Dad for abandoning me, leaving me with psychic trauma from which I will never rec....BOOM!"

---

#### **Sunset over Britain**

#### **Chapter 17**

---

#### **Hogwarts Infirmary...**

Draco woke slowly from a deep slumber feeling as though he were clawing his way out of a deep hole and the effort of waking was exhausting. At the very edge of his senses, he could hear two distinct voices urging him to wake up. Both voices belonged to important people in his life.

He opened his eyes and a moment later he blinked as a moist cloth wiped the sand from them. Looking up, he could see his mother sitting next to him, gently sponging away his sleepiness. He tried to turn, but his shoulders felt heavy and unresponsive. Looking at his left shoulder, he spotted the large bandage encasing it.

“That will come off later today, Dray,” Narcissa said softly. “Madam Pomfrey has immobilized your shoulder to help it heal for now, but by noon it should be fine.”

“What happened, Mother? The last thing I remember seeing was Professor Snape standing over me, then he walked away and I could have sworn an angel came to me.”

“I’ve been called a lot of things, but no one has ever called me an angel before,” Luna said sadly from the other side of his bed. Draco turned to towards her, his face lighting up in a smile.

Draco looked at Luna and was struck by her expression. Something was clearly not right. “Luna? What’s making you sad?” he asked of her. It tore at his heart to see her upset like this.

“Her father will be along later today. We have something important to discuss with him...and her, I’m afraid,” Narcissa said softly. She watched the young woman with no small degree of affection and personally thought the emotional crisis the woman was experiencing was not as big a deal as Luna thought it was.

Draco looked between the two of them, confused. “Mr. Lovegood? But why? Will someone please tell me what is going on?” he pleaded.

The doors to the infirmary swung open and Luna bolted from his side, heading for the exit, crying softly. She tried to run past Harry and Hermione, but Harry, with his seeker reflexes, snagged her, pulling her into his arms where she broke down weeping.

Harry looked over at Narcissa and Draco. Draco appeared to be as confused as he felt. Narcissa stood and walked towards Harry. When she reached him, she gently pulled Luna from his embrace and into her own.

“Come, all of you, sit by Draco and I’ll see if I can explain this properly,” Narcissa said as she walked back to Draco’s bed. Once there, she made a motion to Draco and he obediently moved over on the bed. Narcissa then sat Luna down on it. The young woman looked up wildly at Narcissa and shook her head violently. Narcissa looked meaningfully at Draco and he reached out to touch her cheek. She shivered, then stretched out next to him, burying her head in his shoulder, afraid to look at anyone.

Harry and Hermione sat on a nearby bed, looking to Narcissa for an explanation of Luna’s strange behavior. Narcissa gently ran her hand through Luna’s golden hair before she began to speak.

“Last night when you were attacked, Dray, two people helped save your life. Harry and Luna. Harry got you up to the infirmary where Madam Pomfrey could treat your injury. But you were still very badly injured and would have died if it were not for Luna,” she said gently, still stroking

her hair.

“Luna is a Child of Gaia. They have many unique abilities, but few are more unique than their ability to tie a soul. When a Child of Gaia marries, she usually ties to the soul of her mate. It’s similar to a soul mate, or a soul bonding done during a marriage ceremony, but it’s more profound. A soul tie means that, for a short time, the soul being tied enters the body of the Child of Gaia, intermixing the two souls. In a way, it’s almost like a Dementors kiss, as most of your soul leaves your body and enters the other person. The longer the Child holds the soul within her, the greater the mixing. When done, your soul is passed back into your body.

“In a few very rare cases, a Child of Gaia has saved her mate by forcing her mates soul to remain on this plane of existence. A soul tie is permanent. Once it’s been done, the two people have mixed their souls so completely that they are incomplete without the other in their life. While it’s not considered illegal in the eyes of the law, soul tying someone who isn’t your mate is considered the greatest breach of etiquette a Child of Gaia can commit.

“Last night, my daughter performed a soul tying, Dray. She bound your soul to hers, forcing you to remain on this plane and keeping your body alive until Madam Pomfrey could heal your injury. Last night she was more concerned with keeping you alive than what she was doing, but I’m afraid she’s realizing exactly what she’s done now,” Narcissa concluded softly.

Hermione frowned for a moment, then her eyes lit up. “If I understand you, Miss Black, Luna has effectively married Draco against his will? And that’s why you’re calling her your daughter?”

Narcissa nodded. “It’s more profound than just marriage, Hermione. What Luna has done will prevent Draco from loving another woman other than his own family and children. That’s why, among the Children, its considered very bad form to do this.”

Harry scowled and looked at Draco, who was staring at Luna with a strange expression on his face. Then he walked over the side of the bed where Luna was laying.

“Alright, Hermione is probably going to kill me later for this, but this little dance is so unnecessary. Draco, before the attack, would you say you loved Luna?” Harry asked intently. Everyone noted Luna stiffening in the bed and closing her eyes tightly.

Draco looked at Harry for a moment, his eyes hard. He didn’t like this line of questioning from Harry because it was hurting Luna. “Of course I loved her, and if you don’t apologize to Luna, I’ll peel you from your skin and use it as a rug!” he growled at Harry.

Harry ignored Draco, while both Hermione and Narcissa both broke out into great smiles. Harry knelt by the bed and touched Luna on the shoulder. She opened one eye and peered out at him.

“He loved you before you tied yourself to him, Luna. You might have skipped his proposal, but I think he would have gotten around to it sooner or later. He *is* a bit dense that way,” Harry told the blonde girl gently.

She blinked in confusion. “Luna,” Harry said softly, “he loved you before and loves you now. You’ve saved the life of a man who already loved you. Ask him your yourself, but I’ll bet a million galleons that he is convinced you didn’t do anything wrong. Plus if this means he gets to marry you sooner, he’ll be all for it.”

Luna glanced up at Draco, who had wrapped an arm around her when he realized what Harry was doing. Draco gazed into those perfect sky blue eyes of hers and nodded as he smiled at her. He was surprised to feel that wash of emotions that normally assaulted him now came as a comfort. He could feel her uncertainty and fear...and her love. He tightened his grip on her and hoped she could feel something of his emotions as well. Then he colored as some of his baser emotions broke through. A moment later, Luna blushed as well and she smiled shyly back at him.

Harry stood looking at the two and smiling, then he turned to Hermione and Narcissa. “I don’t think we want them to wait too long, but is anyone adverse to a late spring or early summer wedding?” he asked cheekily.

Draco looked up at Harry and couldn’t help but smile. “Potter, you’re such a peasant!” he said fondly.

“Maybe, but this peasant has to admit to being a little jealous,” Harry said, almost too softly to be heard. Hermione looked up at him in shock, while Narcissa’s eyes narrowed speculatively.

---

### **Malfoy Manor, Aberdeen and scattered points throughout the U.K...**

Lucius Malfoy stood in his Master’s chamber. Next to him stood a muggle who he’d been priming for this moment for several weeks. Sweat trickled down his brow as he waited for Voldemort to notice him and his strange companion. The art of prevarication was not something that Voldemort was known for yet, tonight, it was necessary. Lucius had spent days explaining that to his Master. Tonight he would see if they could carry it out.

For the purposes of tonight’s little charade, Lucius had conjured several large tables with maps of the country on them. The muggle standing next to him, Sir Charles Worthington, DSC, Commanding officer of the Her Majesty’s 1st Armoured Division, stood at attention when Voldemort finally stood and approached the table. He snapped off a salute of such perfection, the likes of which can only be achieved by a lifetime of military service.

Voldemort nodded to the muggle. “Sir, thank you for the opportunity to show you our capabilities with this civil uprising simulation,” said the Brigadier.

“The pleasure is all mine, General. If you would kindly explain tonight’s exercise?” asked Voldemort, slipping into the role of a visiting dignitary. Apparently the deference built into military command structure for the civilian authority appealed to Voldemort.

“Tonight, Sir, we will start by simulating a country wide power loss, followed by selected raids on key supply depots. The purpose of the exercise is to see if we can scramble enough security in

time to defend the depots. Meanwhile, red team, Commandos from 16th Air Assault Brigade, will fan out to assault the depots, stealing material and commandeering transport to relocate selected supplies.

“If all goes well, Sir, elements of the 4th Armoured Brigade will provide security as our Blue Team.”

Voldemort nodded and eyed Lucius. He had been unwilling at first to play along with this fancy little game of his, but the more the muggle talked, the more interesting it sounded.

The Brigadier checked his watch and nodded to a nearby Death Eater. To the Brigadier, the man was dressed in a normal uniform. At the nod, the Death Eater started placing small flags on the map. Others joined him, moving the flags to key locations.

“Sir, the exercise kicked off precisely at twenty one hundred hours with an act of simulated sabotage to a power station just out side of Aberdeen. This station is one of the key stations in the national power grid and, unfortunately, it has not yet been updated with new computer monitoring systems. We’re able to take advantage of that weakness...”

It started as a simple overload in the local power grid. A sensor reported the overload and a computer attempted to compensate by shunting power from another nearby grid. The second grid, unaware of the new burden being placed upon it, read the increase of power usage as another overload, which in turn resulted in more power being drawn from another interconnected grid.

In truth, this sort of failure had happened only a few times before, and never in the U.K. The original failure that started the whole process was caused by simple sabotage. The result was a cascading failure that rippled through the entire power grid of the United Kingdom in a matter of minutes. Within the first ten minutes, ninety percent of Britain, Scotland and Wales were without power and would remain that way for most of the day as emergency crews rushed around to switching stations to resetting the system.

In the ensuing chaos, it would be several days before the authorities noticed that certain military facilities had been robbed. And even then, most of those doing the noticing were under Voldemort’s control, so the thefts were mostly ignored.

Many hours later, Brigadier Worthington turned to Voldemort, his attitude was both elated and somewhat crestfallen. “Sir, it will take a few days for my staff and me to put together a clear report as to how well everything worked, but from what I can see, we had some successes and some failures. Several key depots where successfully raided and some were not. With your permission, I’ll go consult with my staff and start putting together that report for you.”

Voldemort nodded and the Brigadier stepped back, snapped off another precise salute and left the room. Voldemort turned to Lucius. “Well?”

Lucius chuckled. “It went as I predicted, Master. Our muggle friend doesn’t realize he’s stolen enough material to keep their army running for quite a while. We have nearly their entire



command structure, down to the company level, under our control. When the time comes, that fool will lead his army out to suppress a terrorist threat that he thinks has already taken over the government. Tonight's little play was designed to make sure they'd have the supplies they need, and to show you exactly what they could do, my lord."

"So he doesn't even realize that tonight's exercise was real, did he?" asked Voldemort trying not to laugh.

"No, my lord. To him, this was all faked...some pretty lights, some flags on a map," Lucius replied.

"Excellent, Lucius! Excellent! Go see to the comfort of our muggle guest. I do believe he will turn out to a very useful slave for us."

Bowing, Lucius turned sharply and left the room.

---

## **Lunch Time, Great Hall...**

Harry and Hermione sat off to one side of their friends. Hermione had been distant since their visit with Draco that morning Draco himself had yet to be released and probably wouldn't be until later in the day.

In the meantime, Tonks and several other Aurors were investigating the attack. It was a fact that was driving the Headmaster crazy. Dumbledore had been splitting his time between the Wizengamot and the school for weeks now, and throwing in an official investigation only compounded the demands on his time.

Harry watched Hermione eat. She sat stiffly, clearly upset about something if one knew what to look for. And knowing what to look for was something Harry was striving to learn diligently. When he could take it no longer, he touched her on the arm, startling her. She jumped slightly, and then shot him a glare that spoke volumes.

Harry sighed. "Do you want to tell me what is bothering you or would you rather continue to stab me over and over with that glare of yours?" he asked, softly enough that only she could hear him.

She put her fork down, her hand trembled in anger. "Why are you jealous of Draco? Because he has Luna?" she hissed back at him.

Harry blinked at her for a moment in confusion. When he started to laugh, her eyes narrowed angrily. Tears streaming down his face, he laughed so hard he held his sides and nearly slid off the bench. His laughter ended abruptly when he found himself staring down the business end of Hermione's wand. He looked at the anger and hurt in her eyes and his own eyes narrowed. Using two fingers he gently pushed the tip of her wand away from his face.

"Hermione," he said loud enough for the rest of the Outcasts to hear, "I'm not jealous of Draco

because of Luna. I'm jealous of the fact that he now has a very valid reason for marrying the woman he loves and not waiting. I doubt we could be so lucky."

There were several gasps around the table and both Ginny and Susan frowned at Harry. "No ladies, she isn't pregnant," he told them. "But it's their story, so I won't tell it. Ask them when they show up at dinner."

Harry leaned over far enough to touch his head to Hermione's. "I'm just jealous of what they can do, Hermione," he whispered.

Her eyes softened as she looked at him. "How come you've never wanted to talk about our getting married or having a future together before?"

Harry's expression became guarded and his eyes darted to the others around them. The guys were occupied talking to each other, but Susan and Ginny were watching Harry and Hermione like hawks.

He tried to pull away from Hermione and signal to her that they'd talk about it later, but she was having none of that. Harry had put this particular conversation off for too long and Hermione had an expression on her that said it was going to happen here and now.

"Because it wasn't fair to you, Hermione. How can I talk of marriage or a family when I still have to deal with Voldemort? How fair is it to talk of those things, to make plans, when I wasn't sure I had a future? Sure, I have more power than he does, but he's got over fifty years experience in dueling over me. He knows thousands of spells, and while I may be catching up, his experience is a powerful multiplier.

"I'd like nothing more than to rebuild Potter Manor in Godric Hollow and live there with you and raising a family. You've given me a reason to want very much to survive this war. Before our relationship, I didn't have any such reason," he said, lowering his eyes.

She placed a finger under his chin, forcing him to look at her, and was startled to see unshed tears in his eyes. He was an intensely private man when it came to his own feelings. That he would shed tears in public shocked her.

Harry's eyes locked with hers. "Is it wrong for me to wish we could do the same as they can, Hermione?" he whispered to her.

She shook her head, smiling at him.

Harry's eyes became unfocused for a brief moment, then he refocused on her. A few minutes later, Hedwig flew into the Great Hall to land near Harry.

"You are so going to have to teach me how you manage that, Harry." remarked Hermione as he caressed his owl.

"Manage what?"

“Summon Hedwig like that.”

“I’m not sure it’s something I do. Hedwig’s very smart and she always seems to know when I want to send a letter,” he replied, and then he reached down into his book bag and pulled out a small package. Hermione leaned closer to see what he was up to. He attached the package to Hedwig.

“Take this to Remus, girl. If you’re tired, stay the night and come back tomorrow,” he said to the owl. Hedwig blinked at him in acknowledgement, then sprang aloft with the small package.

“Do I want to know what that was all about?” asked Hermione.

“Hmmm? Oh, the package. That was the Basilisk parts we salvaged. I shrunk them down and I’m sending them to Remus. He’s going to have the hide turned into armor for all of us. He’ll save some of the parts and sell off or trade the rest. There’s enough hide in that box to make boots and a vest for every one of the Outcasts, plus the adults at Grimmauld. According to Remus, a one thousand year old Basilisk hide will be stronger than armor made from a Hungarian horntail. Lighter and more comfortable too.”

“Trade? He’ll trade the parts for something?”

“Well, you know how hard it is to enchant an object strong enough that even a muggle can use it?”

Hermione nodded knowingly. Even the portkey he had made for the Grangers to go back and forth between their surgery had taken Harry nearly half a day to charge. There was no problem using a magical artifact with muggles, so long as another wizard or witch was lending their power to the object. But when the artifact was to be used solely by muggles, it required an extensive charging process.

“So what are you having made for my parents, Harry?” she asked, now really interested.

“Each will get a medallion to wear. It will act as a shield and a portkey. The moment the shield is activated, they’ll be portkeyed straight to Padfoot. Even if they had wanted to use the portkey that I had made for them, they couldn’t have. It was a timed portkey and wouldn’t go off for another three and a half hours. Also, I’m getting you a wristwatch similar to the clock the Weasleys have in the Burrow. It’ll let you know what condition your parents are in.”

Hermione reached over and placed her hand on his arm. “You don’t need to do this.”

“But I do. Yes, they are your parents, but someday…” Harry stopped and he flushed.

“Someday?” she asked softly.

“Someday I hope they’ll be my in-laws,” he whispered.

Hermione eyes widened and she fought the urge to leap onto the table and show Hogwarts that the bushy haired book witch knew how to do a victory dance. She squeezed his arm gently. “Why,

Mr. Potter, are you proposing to me?”

Harry looked up at her and she could see him gathering his Gryffindor courage. “I think I am, Miss Granger. Not today, not soon, but yes, I think I am. I would like very much to make you Mrs. Potter.”

“Well before you two start preparing for your upcoming nuptials, you might want to take care of this little matter first,” said Professor McGonagall, interrupting them. She laid a package down on the table before them and Harry reached for it. Hermione was busy blushing and trying to stammer an apology to the Professor.

McGonagall smiled at her. “You should consider yourself lucky, Miss Granger. His father proposed to his mother in the middle of a Quidditch match. At least the both of you are sitting down. James was on the back of a broom, dodging a bludger at the time. He shouted his proposal to her in front of the entire school.”

Harry looked up from examining the paperwork that the Professor had supplied. “My dad did that?” he asked, the admiration and awe was evident in his voice.

“Proposing on the back of a broom in the middle of a Quidditch match is NOT my idea of a romantic proposal,” Hermione protested.

Harry looked crestfallen for a moment, “I guess I could have been more romantic as well, right?”

“Well...”

Harry snapped his fingers and his eyes lit up as his magic flared in him. “Alright. Forget about that proposal. I’ll do it right and give you a really romantic proposal. It may take a while, but I’ll get it right!”

Hermione looked at him with dismay. He had that look about him that usually signaled trouble ahead. She was perfectly willing to accept his first attempt, but nothing would sway him from his goal, the perfect romantic proposal. Ginny started choking on her drink and Susan pounded on her back.

McGonagall smiled in commiseration to Hermione. Ginny and Susan both had watched in awe as Harry first proposed half heartedly, then took it back with a promise of a much better one.

Ginny leaned over towards Hermione. “I thought you were smart, Hermione! He proposed and then you let him take it back while he works up a properly romantic proposal? Knowing Harry that could take years!”

Ginny groaned and started to pull on her hair. Susan nodded, her eyes sympathetic, and Hermione pushed her plate away from her so she could pound her head against the table.

Harry slid the package that McGonagall had given him to Susan. She opened the envelope to find the names and home addresses of every student in the school. She made two copies of the list and

gave one to Terry. The other would be sent to Narcissa.

---

## **Headmaster's Office, Hogwarts...**

“Come in!”

Dumbledore glanced up and then did a double take as he waved Nymphadora Tonks to a seat in front of his desk.

“Thank you for seeing me, Headmaster.”

“Nonsense Nymphadora! Please, have a seat. Lemon drop?”

“No, thank you, Sir.”

“So what did I do to deserve the honor of this visit, Nymphadora?”

“Headmaster, I am following up on my investigation into the attack on Mr. Black last night.”

Dumbledore nodded sagely. “Yes, terrible business that. Most unfortunate that it should happen to young Mr. Malfoy.”

Tonks' eyes narrowed. “Mr. Black,” she emphasized, “was probably injured on the stairway. He was attacked from behind. One thing he did report was that, before help arrived, he saw your former Potions Professor who, according to Mr. Black, made a comment, then continued walking, rendering him no aid whatsoever.”

“Well Ms. Tonks, to be fair, my former Potions Professor, as you call him, had been fired only that day. The person who had been instrumental in that firing lay at his feet, and as a he was no longer a professor here at Hogwarts, he was under no obligation to render aid to the student,” Dumbledore retorted hotly, still upset about Severus being fired.

Tonks eyed the Headmaster calmly before replying. “What you say is true, Sir, but I need to know how to get in contact with your former Potions Professor. He is a possible witness to the attack and I need to question him.”

Dumbledore leaned back in his chair and peer over his glasses at the young Auror. She had certainly changed considerably from the cow eyed, clumsy student she had once been. She had even changed from the clumsy, star struck rookie Auror she had once been, but maybe he could still reach her.

“I might be able to help you, Ms. Tonks. In return, if you could see fit to help me with young Harry, I would appreciate it. It seems that he has gotten himself more heavily involved in Miss Granger than is prudent.”

Tonks kept a straight face, but inwardly was completely shocked by what the Headmaster was

suggesting. She waved a hand trying to dismiss this line of conversation but Dumbledore pressed ahead.

“I seriously doubt Miss Granger’s parents would appreciate what their daughter and Mr. Potter have been doing. I would separate them myself, but there was that Ministry decree to put them into separate quarters, which we have done.”

“Headmaster...”

“In fact, I will be surprised if Miss Granger doesn’t show up in the infirmary one morning, pregnant.”

“Headmaster...”

“Since Harry refused to cooperate with me in the slightest way, I have been sorely tempted to contact Miss Granger’s parents, and yourself as Harry’s guardian, to put a stop to this foolishness.”

“Headmaster Dumbledore! Is it your intention to see if I am willing to arrest you or not?”

Dumbledore blinked in surprise.

“Headmaster, I am not here to discuss the sexual habits of my ward and his girlfriend. I am here in my official capacity to investigate a crime, and at this point, I could rightfully bring you in for obstructing that investigation. Now I ask you, how might I get in contact with Severus Snape?”

“I am not fully cognizant of Mr. Snape’s post-Hogwarts plans. However, you can be assured, Auror Tonks, that I will inform him that you need to speak to him should I see him,” Dumbledore replied stiffly.

“Thank you, Headmaster. I’ll put out a detain-and-question warrant on Severus Snape. Right now, he’s wanted as a possible material witness. I strongly advise you to tell him to contact us as soon as possible when you see him next.

“As far as Harry and Hermione go, I can assure you that I will inform her parents of the issue as well as speaking to both of them. Good day, Headmaster,” she said, standing and heading to the exit.

Leaving Dumbledore’s office, Tonks went to McGonagall’s. If anyone knew where she found Harry and Hermione, it would be the Deputy Headmistress of the school.

---

## **Transfiguration Office...**

Tonks was looking out one of the windows in the office when the door opened and Harry and Hermione slipped into the room. McGonagall looked at Tonks, who nodded in thanks, then she

slipped back out of the room to return to her class.

“Sit, you two,” Tonks ordered softly.

Harry and Hermione both looked at her questioningly, then sat. Without thinking, they both reached for the hand of the other.

Tonks tried to hide the smirk before she turned to face them. “Alright you two, I’ll be blunt here. The old man knows you’re sleeping together. That means I have no choice but to tell your parents this evening Hermione...before he does.”

Harry paled and swallowed nervously but Hermione tightened her grip on his hand and lifted her head defiantly. “My parents already know. Well, my mum does, and she said she’ll tell my dad.”

Tonks eyed the young woman suspiciously for a moment then relaxed slightly. “I’ll still have to talk to them, Hermione. I’m sure you can understand that.”

Hermione nodded, while Harry looked as if he wanted to bolt for the door. Tonks glanced at him sympathetically for a moment, and then looked at them both again. “Alright, I don’t know how he found out, but you two should consider the possibility that he has some way you haven’t found yet of monitoring you. Lastly, Harry, you hurt Hermione and I’ll skin you alive before her parents can. Hermione you don’t want to know what I’ll do to you if you hurt him. I’ve never been a parent before and I’m still not sure I’d be a good one, but Harry’s like a little brother to me. Hurt him and I’ll hurt you. Simple enough?”

Both nodded at the young Auror.

“Good, now that I have that out of the way, I’m going on record as saying I’m happy for you both. I think you’re both made for the other. Remus and your parents might have problems with it, but as long as you two don’t have problems, I don’t have a problem. You’re both old enough to know what you’re doing. However, do not make me an Aunt just yet. Got that?”

Once again, they both nodded, though their faces were red enough to make her smile.

Harry’s eyes narrowed and became unfocused as he thought for a moment. Then he snapped his fingers. “House elves!” he exclaimed. “That’s how Dumbledore found out!”

Hermione’s eyes widened. “Can we do anything about it?”

“I think so, we can’t keep the elves from coming to our quarters to clean and, frankly, I don’t care if the old man knows I’m sharing my bed with you. I’ll shout it from the Astronomy tower if you’d like. But there are a few other precautions we need to take,” Harry replied.

Tonks looked at the two for a moment, then made a decision. She walked over to Harry and pointed a finger at him. “Alright you, out. Time to run for a bit. I want to talk to Hermione, girl to girl, and you just don’t fit the description.”

Harry blinked in surprise and gathered up his books.

Tonks watched him walk from the room before turning to Hermione. “So what’s this I hear about you messing up big time with Harry today? Ginny told me you went off your trolley today...said you made a real shambles of things.”

Hermione’s expression changed to disappointment and she sighed heavily. “Ginny isn’t far off the mark about that. Harry made a halfhearted proposal today and, when I mentioned he wasn’t very romantic, he took it back, promising he’d do a more romantic one next time. Ginny’s trying to tell me that ‘next time’ could be years from now.”

Tonks snorted in amusement and leaned up against the desk, eyeing the younger woman. “Oh, I wouldn’t worry about Harry too much. He’ll spend some time talking to people and thinking about it, then he’ll pick a way and ask you. Which is far better than I can say for the wolf I’ve been chasing,” she finished with a sigh.

“He does love you, Tonks,” Hermione offered.

“I know he does sweetie, but his Lycanthropy is the biggest stumbling block. Do you remember back during the summer when you and Harry had that fight about him not wanting you to get involved with him?”

“Yes. He didn’t feel he was worthy of me and, since he had to face Voldemort, he didn’t want me grieving after he was dead,” Hermione said sadly. “I told him he didn’t have the right to make that sort of decision for me and I’d stick by him no matter what happened.”

“I’ve said the same thing to Remus, but he isn’t willing to listen to me.”

As Tonks spoke, a glimmer of an idea burst into Hermione’s brain like a rocket.

“Tonks, I don’t want to get your hopes up, but I have an idea...”

---

## **The Chamber of Secrets...**

Harry stood in the exact center of the Chamber of Secrets and looked around. The Chamber had undergone a major renovation in the past few weeks. Gone were the snake statues and the large foreboding carvings. The ceiling echoed the Great Hall, with its fancy skylight charm. The Chamber had been greatly expanded and, even though the renovations were not yet complete, he felt it was time to put some necessary touches on it now. With Hermione busy with Tonks, he had the time necessary to come down here and cast the spells he needed to cast.

The last of the snake shaped sconces had been replaced with more ordinary looking sconces and even though things still responded to parseltongue, they also now responded to regular spells like a ‘Torca Ignis’.



Satisfied that everything was in order, Harry pocketed the parchment strip he had already made up and then he glanced at the ceiling. *Good*, he thought. *Dusk approaches, always a good time to cast a permanent charm, during the last fading light of day.*

Standing with his legs slightly apart he lifted both hands as if to clasp both of them in prayer. “Securus Falsus dissumulo fidelita Harry Potter!” he said loudly.

His hands flared briefly, then the light traveled up his arms and into his body. From his body the light wave passed down through his feet, hitting the Chamber floor.

From the floor, the light swept through the room. The spell he’d cast wasn’t an ordinary Fidelis charm. This one not only hid the location of the room, but its very existence from everyone not privy to the secret. Anyone who had actually visited the Chamber in the past would remember that it existed, but not how to find it. People could be sent to the Chamber via portkey, but unless they knew the secret, they would forget ever being in it once they left. They wouldn’t forget what happened there, they just wouldn’t remember where they had been.

Up in the Great Hall, dinner was had just been served and, for a brief moment, there was a complete pause in the noise level as everyone halted what he or she was doing. Hermione halted as she lifted a slice of roast from the platter. She frowned for a moment and shook her head, then placed the meat on her plate.

At the Head table, Dumbledore and the other staff members paused for a moment, then continued again with their dinner as if nothing had happened.

---

## **Great Hall, Dinner time...**

Twenty minutes later, Hermione looked up in relief when she spotted Harry limping to his seat next to her. He had his cane out and his leg was obviously bothering him again, which meant he had been up to something. As he sat down, he handed her a slip of parchment.

“Read this, memorize it, then pass it to the person next to you.”

Hermione looked at the slip of parchment in confusion. “*The Entrance to the Chamber of Secrets can be found behind the Head Girl’s bed in the Gryffindor Head Suite. Harry Potter is the Chamber’s Secret Keeper.* ”

Hermione experience a wave of dizziness as the secret wiped the block from her memory and she looked at Harry in confusion for a moment before it sank in. Then she nodded and handed the parchment to Ginny.

“So that explains why you’re limping so badly,” she murmured.

Harry nodded and grimaced. “I’m afraid so. On the other hand, I figured that since you were busy with Tonks, I could get that taken care of. I used your modified version of the charm and it

seemed to work fine. I wonder what Voldemort will say when he discovers that even he can't enter the Chamber anymore. Won't that be an insult to the Heir of Slytherin?" He glanced up to see all of the other Outcasts grinning back at him. The thought of denying the Heir of Slytherin what he considered his birthright somehow tickled their fancy.

Terry handed the slip of parchment back to Harry, who pocketed it. He would have to see that Professors McGonagall and Flitwick got a look at it later.

"Are we going to need an extra therapy session tonight, Harry?" Hermione asked, the concern written all over her expression.

Harry looked down at his plate and sighed. "I'll just soak longer than usual tonight. I'll be fine. There's been no improvement since shortly after Christmas. Even then, the improvement has been negligible. I think we've reached the limit of what therapy can do." The disappointment was evident in his voice.

Hermione looked disappointed.

"No improvement, yes, but you've strained the leg badly today. If you don't let Hermione help you with it, later tonight your leg will be so badly cramped you won't be able to walk. I honestly don't understand why you always try to make it seem like it's less than it really is." exclaimed Ginny.

Harry stared at her in shock.

"What?" she asked acidly. "Do you think we don't notice how you always seem to put other people's troubles forward and downplay your own? Look, Harry, we're your friends. All of us have at least some clue of what kind of life you've led and understand why you do it. But just once I'd like to see you say, 'Gee, you know what? My leg is killing me. Hermione, could I get your help with it?' She wants to help you and every time you make her fight you for it, it hurts you both. Maybe the therapy won't help improve your leg anymore, but her massaging your leg will help ease the pain. And Hermione wants to ease your pain."

Harry blinked at the petite redhead. She had been a bit put out with him over his prank on Neville the other day but, by the same token, even she admitted it was a decent prank. What she was saying made a lot of sense.

"Hermione?" he asked softly. "I don't think the exercises are helping anymore, but I'll never turn down your massages, especially on a day like today when my leg hurts."

Then Harry did something he had only done once before. He reached out and gently touched Hermione's aura. Over the link, he sent her a silent apology, as well as a gestalt of his feelings for her, and then he carefully broke the link. Like before, breaking the link was harder than creating it. It almost seemed like she fought him over the connection.

Hermione leaned against him. He wrapped an arm around her and she seemed to shudder with an

intensity that was nearly orgasmic. Hermione closed her eyes relaxed into a pleasant afterglow.

It was hard to describe the sensation, it was orgasmic, but it wasn't. Harry had done that only once before and she vowed that tonight she was going to talk to him about it when they were alone. In that brief instant of connection, he managed to convey a soundless apology that was beyond anything mere words could have conveyed.

The three other female Outcasts were looking at Hermione jealously. If this was something Harry could do, maybe he could teach it to their boyfriends...

---

## **Dinner at Grimmauld Place...**

Tonks leaned back in her chair and sighed. Sometimes there was nothing better than the feeling of a full stomach after a long day of fruitless investigation. Emma was sitting next to Dan working on the daily crossword puzzle. It was something that Tonks could not understand. Even Hermione enjoyed working on those little muggle games, but they seemed too much like schoolwork to her.

Dan read his newspapers. Every day he'd scan the papers and if he found anything that remotely sounded like it might be Voldemort related in the muggle news, he'd show it to Remus and they'd bring it to Harry's attention.

"Anything interesting tonight, Dan?" asked Remus.

Remus was coming to enjoy the after dinner conversations with Dan and Emma immensely. The Grangers offered insight into the muggle world that he lacked and, surprisingly, he found himself thinking of Dan as a friend. Perhaps not as close as Sirius or James, but a friend nonetheless.

"It seems as though some parts of the Government took your message serious, Remus. According to the Times, the Royals will be embarking on a world tour in early April, ostensibly to escort the Crown Jewels on a museum tour. First stop will be Washington D.C., followed by New York, Toronto, Calgary, Sydney, that sort of thing. According to the article, the immediate Royal family, except for the Queen and the Duke of Edinburgh, will escort the collection.

"Add to that an announcement that the Royal Navy will be participating in a joint exercise with the Yanks, also beginning in April, and it sounds like someone might have listened to you."

Remus nodded, satisfied that something was happening. It had been a while since they'd delivered the message to the Prime Minister and he had begun to worry that nothing was being done.

"Now that you two have discussed the state of the realm, would be alright to bring up a subject that is a little closer to home?" asked Tonks.

Both men looked at her in surprise. Usually she never had much to say during these conversations, instead preferring to use the after dinner time as a way of de-stressing from her day. Both men nodded and Emma looked up from her crossword puzzle.

“I had an interesting conversation with Dumbledore today concerning the investigation into the attack on Draco. He wasn’t very helpful and suggested that if I help him, he might be able to help me. Then he offered me some information that he hoped would upset me and, I think, make me more agreeable to helping him.”

Now she had everyone’s attention. She reached into her pocket and pulled out a five-galleon coin and slid it across the table to Emma.

Mrs. Granger’s eyes widened and she grinned brightly.

The two men looked between Emma and Tonks in puzzlement.

“What’s going on, Emma?” asked Dan.

“If I may?” asked Tonks

Emma nodded, still grinning. “This show’s all yours.”

“The Headmaster hit me with some news today, and threatened to tell you and Emma about it, Dan. That’s why I’m even bothering with this now. If he does tell you, it won’t come as a total shock. Your daughter loves Harry.”

Dan leaned back in his chair in confusion. “I know she likes him, maybe even loves him, and he is crazy about her. But why would that be a shock?”

“No Dan, Hermione *loves* Harry. Literally, figuratively, biblically...in every sense,” Tonks said, trying to maintain a straight face. Men could be so dense sometimes.

Dan’s brows furrowed for a moment, then his expression darkened. His hands crumpled the newspaper he was reading and his arms trembled.

“Daniel, knock it off! This shouldn’t come as a surprise to you. In fact, I’ve been expecting this for weeks now,” Emma said hotly.

Dan turned to look at his wife in shock. “Weeks? And you didn’t tell me?”

“I didn’t tell you because I knew you would be acting this way. You have no right to be upset with either of them. He’s sixteen and she’s seventeen. You and I were both fifteen when you convinced me to do it. Our little girl has been trying to work up her nerve to convince Harry to take their relationship to that level since before Christmas.”

“She’s convincing? Where is her sense?”

Emma growled in the back of her throat and grabbed her husband by his head, forcing him to look at her.

“Aren’t you listening? She’s in love, Dan. The worse part of this for her is she’s had to play the

aggressive role here. Harry won't do a single thing to her without first hearing her say he can. Personally, I find it rather refreshing that a sixteen year old male is not only capable of controlling his hormones, but he respects my daughter enough that he refuses to make a move on her!"

Dan's eyes narrowed again. "Wait a minute. You knew this was going to happen and bet with Tonks over it?"

Emma had the grace enough to look sheepish for a moment. "Well, it wasn't really a fair bet. We made it before the attack on us both. I don't think Tonks would have made it afterwards.

Now Dan, I know this is going to be hard, but if you ever want to share my bed again, you'll not give either of them a hard time over this. I mean that. Even if she decides she wants to sleep in his bed, you'll leave them be."

Dan cringed and nodded to his wife. Remus smiled at his friends discomfort.

"What are you smiling about?" demanded Tonks, poking Remus in the chest. "What goes for Dan, goes double for you!"

Remus swallowed nervously and looked around quickly for a way of changing the topic. "Umm... Say Dan, I have to go to Padfoot tomorrow, would you like to join me? I have several errands I have to run."

Dan glanced at Emma nervously before turning to Remus. "I'd love to help, Remus."

---

### **The Pentagon, Washington D.C., Mid Afternoon Same Day....**

The intercom buzzed for a moment, then a burly hand reached over and flipped a switch. "Yes?"

"Admiral, CINCLANT is on the STU, Sir."

"Thank you, Casey. I'll take the call," he told his aide.

The Admiral picked up the handset attached to the strange bulky telephone. There was a moment of electronic noise on the line as the two units negotiated for a moment.

"Mike is that you?"

"Rusty! So what have you done with my fleet this time that you're calling to apologize about?"

"Aw man, you're never going to let me live down the fact that I parked one of your boats off the beach of the Newport Nudist Colony's World Volleyball Championship and had it video taped?"

"It's not exactly standard practice to use a Los Angeles class submarine so you could produce a 'training film' for the fleet."

“Well...”

“Oh alright, I’ll stop yanking your chain. I know you never gave that order and it really was just a broken rotor that landed the Chicago there for the twenty-four hours. So Mike, what can I really do for you?”

“Sir, it’s these new orders concerning the joint exercise with the Royal Navy. You do realize this looks a lot like Red Europe, that simulation we ran back in ’82?”

The Admiral sat up in his chair and flipped a switch on his desk that locked his door. Red Europe was a classified war game that had been run a number of years ago in which the scenario allowed for the Warsaw Pact to achieve dominance in Europe and what militaries that could, managed to evacuate to the United States and Canada.

“That’s exactly how you are going to treat this, Admiral. Is Atlantic Command up for the challenge?”

“Jeezus, we’re ready Mike, but you realize you’re telling me this is a bug-out of the entire blue water component of the Royal Navy?”

“I know what your orders are saying, Rusty, I cut them myself after speaking to the NCA. Requisition what you need to get the job done. I want total security for this. I don’t want to find out about it on CNN.”

“Aye aye, Sir. We’ll handle it.”

“Thanks Rusty, I knew I could count on you. Send my best to Helen, will you?”

“Will do, Mike. I’ll be in touch.”

The connection on the STU broke off and the Chief of Naval Operations placed the handset back on its cradle. Then he turned to look out his window and shook his head. The United States Navy would be playing host to the Royal Navy and it’s nuclear deterrent in order to prevent them from falling into the wrong hands during a coup attempt. And if necessary, would destroy said force in order to prevent it from falling into those hands.

Meanwhile, sixth fleet was coming home from the Med and the seventh fleet was heading at high speed into the Atlantic in order to be in position to provide evacuation for those Americans who might get caught up in the turmoil of a coup attempt. The sixth fleet would take up station off the east coast and make sure that no British Warships sailed from an American port once they docked.

---

**Hogwarts Library, later that evening...**

“Five minutes ‘til curfew, Mr. Boot,” Madam Pince told the Ravenclaw. “I’d suggest packing your things and leaving...now.”

“Yes, Ma’am. Thank you. I must have lost track of time,” Terry replied.

He stuffed his homework into his book bag under the watchful, disapproving stare of the irritable librarian. Throwing the bag’s strap over his shoulder, he rushed from the library, mentally kicking himself for not watching the time. He was supposed to meet Susan in the Room of Requirement after curfew, but he had wanted to finish his homework first.

Rounding the corner and heading for the staircase, he didn’t notice the shadows converging on him. Placing his foot on the first stair, he was suddenly yanked backwards and spun around. His book bag went flying, scattering his homework throughout the hall. Before he could register what was happening, someone kicked him hard between the legs. As his knees buckled, he leaned forward, and a fist grazed his temple, dazing him further.

Someone grabbed his hair and pulled his head back so far he thought his neck would snap.

“Tell Potter to come out from behind his wards and play,” a voice growled in his ear. “If he doesn’t, the next friend of his we catch will get it much worse than you!”

His hair was released. Leaning forward, he gasped for breath and blinked, trying to clear his vision as he stared down the staircase in front of him. Placing both hands on the floor, he began to push himself up when he was suddenly kicked in the back. The force of the kick, and his own momentum propelled him down the staircase.

Blackness engulfed him, but not before he heard the snapping of bones breaking. His last conscious thought was that Susan was going to be upset with him for being late.

The shadowy forms watched the Ravenclaw for a few moments, waiting to see if he moved. When footsteps were heard behind them however, they scattered. Most fled down the staircase, making no effort to avoid stepping on or kicking Terry as they rushed passed.

Irma Pince rounded the corner and noticed books and parchment scattered throughout the hall. Her lips thinned and she scowled. She’d always felt that students couldn’t be trusted with books, and this was a prime example!

Glancing around the hallway, she found no one to explain the mess. Reaching the staircase, she paused in her descent and frowned in puzzlement. There was something at the bottom of the stairs.

Drawing her wand, she cast the light spell and gasped at the crumpled form below her. She rushed down the stairs, her heart pounding in her chest. She may dislike the students and the way they treated her books, but that didn’t mean she wanted to find one dead at her feet!

Bending down, she paled when she saw the face of Terry Boot. The boy had just left the library! Unwilling to leave the injured student and not knowing what else to do, she pointed her wand at her throat.

“*Sonorus* !” she all but shouted. “Help! I need help on the landing of the third floor staircase! I’ve found an injured student!” she cried out, her voice greatly amplified.

Canceling the spell, she leaned down to peer at Terry. “Hang on, Mr. Boot. Help will be here soon, and I plan on having words with you about your treatment of my books!”

---

## **Room of Requirement...**

Harry heaved himself out of the pool and stood up. He caught the towel Neville tossed him and smiled his thanks. They were running a bit behind tonight, but his leg had been bothering him earlier and his massage had been painful, and the swimming helped ease some of the pain.

Draco watched as Harry dried himself with the towel and shook his head despairingly. “You know, Potter, there are quicker ways to dry yourself, and we are in a hurry. Susan’s been chewing her nails for the last twenty minutes, waiting for us to leave,” he drawled.

“I have not, Draco!” the Hufflepuff in question said indignantly.

“Oh, so I guess you wouldn’t mind if we all sat down and played a game of Exploding Snap while Potter waits to dry off?” he asked.

“Leave her alone, Draco,” Luna said, twirling her hair into a neat bun and holding it in place with her wand.

Draco threw up his hands and gave up.

“I’m sorry, Susan. I wasn’t thinking,” Harry said, sheepishly. Dropping the towel, he reached over to his clothing and pulled his wand out of his robe. Before he could cast the drying charm however, Ginny cast it on him first. He thanked her and quickly tossed his robe on over his swim trunks.

“Have we got everything?” Hermione asked, looking around the room.

“That should be it,” Ginny said. “Have fun, Susan!”

“Tell Terry hello for us, and that we missed him tonight,” Hermione added, following the others to the door.

“Don’t get caught when you leave the room later,” Harry warned.

“Thanks everyone. I’ll see you all tomorrow,” Susan replied, a faint blush staining her cheeks.

Hermione, the last to exit the room, closed the door behind her and moved to Harry’s side.

“I never would have thought Susan would ask for the use of the Room of Requirement,” Ginny giggled. “She can be so straight-laced sometimes.”



“Terry’s a good influence on her,” Neville said quietly. “They’re good for each other.”

“She’s just lucky her aunt likes him,” Harry teased.

“That’s one way of making sure he doesn’t take advantage,” Ginny laughed. “When your aunt’s the Director of the MLE, your boyfriend’s bound to be on his best behavior!”

“Oh, is that what he’s going to be doing tonight?” Draco asked, an expression of mock-surprise on his face. “How silly of me. I’d assumed they were going to have sex.”

“Draco!” Ginny, Hermione and Luna all exclaimed.

“What? Am I wrong?” he asked innocently.

Heading down the staircase to the sixth floor, they all froze when a voice cried out. “Help! I need help on the landing of the third floor staircase! I’ve found an injured student!”

“Come on!” Ginny shouted, pulling her wand and charging down the stairs.

“Ginny, wait!” Hermione cried. “Remember Filch? This could be a trap!”

Ginny stopped. Pale and shaken, she looked at Hermione. “I didn’t think about that.”

They moved forward cautiously, Draco and Harry probing ahead of them, scanning the stairs for any nasty surprises someone might have left behind. When they came to the fourth floor landing, they found books and parchment scattered everywhere. Harry’s eyes narrowed as he saw the torn book bag near the stairs.

Reaching the third floor landing, they found Madam Pince, Professor McGonagall, the Headmaster and Madam Pomfrey all gathered around a limp form on the floor.

“What happened?” Neville asked quietly.

McGonagall looked up at the students on the stairs and frowned. “Where did you lot come from?” she demanded.

“My therapy, Professor,” Harry replied, watching Madam Pomfrey work on the still form below. “Who is it?”

“Terry Boot,” the Professor said, scowling down at Poppy. “He’ll live, but he’s pretty banged up.”

“Susan!” Hermione cried. “Someone has to get her.”

Before anyone could gainsay the idea, Ginny spun and sprinted up the stairs and out of sight. McGonagall opened her mouth to deliver a scathing remark, but closed it and sniffed in annoyance.

“I need to get him to the infirmary. He’s lost a bit of blood from the scrapes, but not enough to worry about. The broken wrist and cracked skull need to be tended to, however,” Madam Pomfrey said.

“Is it serious?” the Headmaster asked.

“Nothing I can’t fix. He’ll have a blinding headache come morning, but the bones should be mended by then. What I’d like to know is how he ended up down here.”

“As would I,” Professor Flitwick puffed as he rushed up the stairs. “Oh Terry, my dear boy!” Kneeling, the Ravenclaw Head of House cringed when he saw the blood on the student’s face. “He’ll be all right, Poppy? Truly?”

“He’ll be fine, Filius. We just need to get him to the infirmary,” the Medi-witch told him gently. “Come, you can levitate him there yourself.”

“Terry!” Susan cried, nearly flying down the stairs. “Oh Merlin, what happened?”

Dumbledore stopped her headlong flight and held her arm while Flitwick levitated Terry onto the stretcher Madam Pomfrey had conjured.

“That’s the question of the evening,” Dumbledore said. “Don’t worry, Miss Bones. Madam Pomfrey says he’ll be fine. You may follow them to the infirmary, but only if you promise to stay out of their way while they tend to him.”

“Yes, Sir! Thank you,” she sobbed. When the Headmaster released her, she rushed after the Medi-witch and Professor Flitwick.

“Did any of you see anything?” McGonagall asked, watching the student’s carefully.

“No, Ma’am,” Neville said, watching the stretcher disappear down the next staircase. “Harry had finished his therapy and we were heading for the stairs when a voice started yelling for help. We rushed down the staircase, but Hermione reminded us that we needed to be careful, after what happened to Mr. Filch and all. So we slowed down and Harry and Draco checked the stairs in front of us to make sure they were safe.”

Dumbledore looked up and glanced between Draco and Harry, his brow furrowed. He had thought he had put the rumors about how Filch had died to bed. Obviously he hadn’t succeeded.

“And Susan?” McGonagall asked. “Why was she not with you?” When no one spoke, she scowled. “Well?”

“She...umm...well...” Neville stammered.

“Terry and Susan were going to spend some time together tonight,” Draco replied calmly. “They haven’t had much time alone lately. They’ve both been busy with their studies.”

“Oh dear,” Dumbledore murmured, his eyes twinkling.

McGonagall scowled. “Very well. You lot, get back to your common rooms. Now. And no detours!”

A chorus of “Yes Ma’am” echoed across the staircase as they all rushed off before she could ask any more embarrassing questions.

“There’s a mess on the landing above, Professors,” Madam Pince said. “It looks like Mr. Boot’s book bag tore open.”

“Come, let’s check the stairs and the landing above,” Dumbledore said, drawing his wand.

The three spread out, casting detection charms on the stairs as they climbed, looking for any clue as to the cause of the accident. They reached the landing without finding anything.

Scowling once more, Madam Pince eyed the books scattered on the floor. “This is why students should not be allowed to check out books from the library!” she exclaimed.

Lowering his wand after scanning the landing and finding nothing, Dumbledore smiled at the annoyed librarian. “Why don’t you pick them up and take them back to the library, Irma? I don’t imagine Mr. Boot will be up to much studying for a few days.”

“I’ll do just that, Headmaster,” she replied, the relief in her voice evident. She continued to mutter to herself as she levitated the books into a neat pile. “If you’ll excuse me, I’ll just go file these away.”

Dumbledore fought a smile. “Of course. Good night, Irma.”

“Headmaster, Professor,” the librarian said, nodding her head at them before disappearing up the stairs with her precious books.

“Albus,” Minerva said quietly, looking around the hall. “Two accidents involving stairs?”

“I know, Minerva. I don’t understand it either. This time, however, it seems to be a simple accident,” he replied, flicking his wand and gathering up several pieces of parchment.

“This time?”

“What?” he asked, turning to face her. “Oh, it’s nothing. I misspoke myself.” When Minerva continued to stare at him, he smiled vaguely. “Do you wish to help me gather Mr. Boot’s belongings?”

“What’s going on, Albus?” she demanded, flicking her own wand absently, gathering up more papers.

“It’s nothing, my dear. I’m simply tired and a bit overwhelmed by yet another accident on school

grounds.” Bending down, he picked up the torn book bag and mended it. Then, picking up the notes and homework he’d gathered, he flipped through them idly as he dropped them into the bag. As another paper fluttered down into the bag, the Headmaster froze for a moment, and then glanced up at Minerva. Seeing that she was busy collecting the rest of the paper, he quickly copied the remaining notes in his hand and stuffed them into his robe before dropping the rest into the bag.

He walked to Minerva’s side and held the bag open while she dropped the notes she’d collected into it. “That should do it. I’ll just take these up to the infirmary for Mr. Boot.”

“Albus, perhaps we should be looking at putting alarms on the stairs...something to let us know when there’s an accident like this. Had Irma not been here...”

“Harry and his friends would have found the boy, Minerva. This was an accident, nothing more. The boy was probably in a hurry to meet Miss Bones,” Dumbledore replied, his eyes twinkling once more.

McGonagall’s gaped at him, unable to understand why he was being so naïve. “But Albus...”

“Now, now. You have rounds to complete and I need to talk to Poppy about the boy’s condition. We will talk no more about this, Minerva,” he said gently. Turning away from his once trusted colleague, he walked calmly down the stairs, not looking back.

Minerva watched him walk away and scowled. With no other options open to her, she continued her rounds.

---

## **Headmaster’s Office, the Same Night...**

After visiting the infirmary and dropping off Mr. Boot’s book bag, the Headmaster returned to his office. Seated behind his desk, he pulled out two pieces of parchment and flattened them out on his desk to examine more closely.

The first parchment contained what looked to be a list of the names and home addresses of students. He wasn’t sure what to make of it, but couldn’t think of a single reason for Mr. Boot to have such a list.

The second parchment was much more interesting. Scanning it quickly, it read: THE BASTION OF LIGHT WILL FALL IN THE TIME OF THE BULL... AND THE CHOSEN CHILD MUST FLEE THE ISLE OF MYRDDIN’S BIRTH... DARKNESS WILL ENGULF THE LAND AND THE REALM OF UTHUR’S SON WILL BURN...AS LIGHT IS SWALLOWED BY DARK THE DEFENDER MUST WATCH FROM A FAR...

“Prophecy?” he muttered to himself. Reading it through several more times, he nodded. It sounded like a prophecy, though he couldn’t think of who had given it. Sibyll Trelawney was the only seer he was aware of, and he was monitoring her at all times.

“Bastion of the light?” he murmured quietly. “But does that mean Hogwarts, the Ministry or...?” He sighed. “Perhaps Severus can help.”

---

## **Gryffindor Head Suite...**

Hermione awoke to find the bed empty. She looked around in confusion before spotting the source of her inner anxiety. Harry stood in front of the window looking out on the northern courtyard and a small slice of the lake. Hermione threw on a robe and padded softly over to stand slightly behind him.

“What’s bothering you?” she asked softly. She could see his hands tightly clenched into fists, leaning up against the windowsill.

“The attacks are coming faster now. Me, just before the holiday, your parents, Draco and now Terry. I’m sure some of this is that old goat’s doing. But some are just students confused by the lies that have been spread around. I don’t know how much longer I’ll be able to hold myself in check,” he whispered, and then hung his head for a moment before whirling away from the window.

“I want to rage against them, but I don’t even know who I want to rage against. I punished Dumbledore and Snape for their little adventure with me before the holidays. I killed the Death Eaters who attacked your parents. But who attacked Draco? Who attacked Terry? Or was it just an accident? My friends are being hurt around me and I get there too late to stop it!” he snarled, then he looked down at his hands in frustration.

“You can’t protect us all, Harry. They all knew that when they made their friendship with you obvious at the beginning of the school year. I knew that when Remus came to our house, begging for us to come help you,” she replied, trying to soothe some of his anxiety.

“I know that. I just... Merlin, I don’t like this. Give me an enemy I can fight!” he said in exasperation, running a hand through his hair.

Hermione moved so she was standing in front of him. He looked at her questioningly as she reached up and caressed his cheek softly. “I know you’re frustrated, but there’s little anyone can do, but stick to your plan...stick to your plan and support our friends as best as we can,” she replied quietly, then she took his hand and led him back to bed. Morning would come all too soon and they needed their sleep.

---

## **Slytherin Common Room...**

It was very late and all of Slytherin house was asleep. None heard the sound of the common room door banging shut. Few could help but hear what came next, however.

“Up, my children! We have much to do before dawn! Everyone come to the common room,

please,” the voice of Sibyll Trelawney boomed throughout Slytherin House with the obvious aid of the *Sonorus* spell. “Hurry now, my dears. We haven’t much time.”

Ten minutes later, everyone member of the House stood in the common room, staring at Trelawney with varying degrees of disbelief, disgust and confusion. She stood before them, her hair in disarray, dressed in a ratty bathrobe and wearing a pair of fuzzy slippers resembling dogs. They barked, those slippers, every time she took a step.

“Are we all here? Excellent. Now listen, my children. I have had a vision...a terrible vision. I have seen the fall of Slytherin House. Yes, I have seen its destruction!” she exclaimed dramatically, pacing before the assembled students, her slippers barking and her hands waving. “But with this vision came our beloved House’s salvation!”

“What with the ‘our beloved House’ bit?” Pansy Parkinson whispered to Blaise Zabini. “The woman’s been our Head of House for a matter of days, yet she speaks as though she’s always held the position. She’s not even a Slytherin! She’s barking.”

“No, I believe those are her slippers,” Blaise murmured back.

“Changes must be made, my dears, and they must be made before dawn!” Trelawney proclaimed. “We must work quickly, for there isn’t much time left. All of you go get your school robes and scarves and return to me here. Hurry now, off you go.”

With much muttering, they did as they were told. When the common room was once again crowded with students, now carrying the items their Head of House requested, they stood and watched warily as she paced before them.

“It’s the colors, you understand,” she said frantically. “Slytherin’s colors are the root of all the problems that have plagued this house for centuries. But we shall change that tonight, my dears. Oh yes, Slytherin’s destiny will change tonight!” Reaching into the pocket of her robe, she quickly pulled out a Slytherin scarf. “As of this moment, Slytherin colors will no longer be green and silver.”

At her pronouncement, the room erupted into shouts of disbelief and refusal. The students were shocked that she would even suggest such a thing.

“Blaise!” Pansy hissed. “You’re a prefect. Say something!”

“Quiet!” Blaise shouted.

The students turned to him with hopeful eyes. Surely, as a prefect, he could explain to the daft woman why such a thing should not happen and, thereby, put a stop to the madness.

“Professor,” Blaise began, “I’m sure you thought you had a vision, but perhaps it was simply a nightmare. Green and silver were the colors Salazar Slytherin chose for his House. We would dishonor him and his vision for his House by changing them.”

“He was wrong,” Trelawney declared, drawing herself up to her full height. “My vision was true, but I don’t expect one who does not have the sight to understand such things.”

She stared at the young man, her eyes huge behind her glasses. “Oh my dear boy,” she continued sadly, “your fate has been revealed to me. Death stalks you, and will take the form of a dark haired, blue-eyed woman. Heed my warning, so that you may know her and escape the agonizing death she brings.” She shook her head suddenly and blinked.

“Now, then. As I was saying, Slytherin colors will no longer be green and silver.” She held up the scarf and, with an awkward flick of her wand, cried out, “Novo Coloro!”

The students watched as the green and silver stripes of the scarf seemed to shift and change position, becoming silver and green. A bit puzzled, they looked back at their Head of House, who tucked her wand away and held up the scarf in triumph.

“You see? No longer will the House colors be green and silver, but gray and forest,” she said, shaking the scarf at them. “You all have the incantation, so make the changes to your own scarves, then your robes. Hurry, my dears, we haven’t much time.”

Draco watched his housemates as they stared at the batty Divination Professor as though she were a new species of insect they had just discovered and weren’t sure if they should squish beneath their shoe. In truth, none of them could see the difference between the ‘old’ colors and the new. All she had really done was rearrange the order of the stripes and change the names of the colors.

If the daft woman wanted him to change the order of the colors on his scarf, it mattered little to him. Slytherin House was simply a place for him to store his things and a bed to sleep in. The pride he’d once felt in being part of it was gone, replaced by indifference and a faint hint of disgust. With a shrug, he drew his wand and quickly did as she asked.

“Excellent, Mr. Black,” Trelawney said, beaming at him. “I can already feel the karma of our House changing. Ten points to Slytherin for you! Hurry now, everyone. Follow Mr. Black’s lead. Change your scarves, then your robes.”

With much grumbling, they did as she asked. A few, such as Crabbe and Goyle, needed help, but it only took a few minutes for the changes to be made. Once done, Trelawney stood before them once more, looking grave.

“You have done wonderfully, my dears. Now, I want the prefects to make the same color changes to the common room. While they are doing so, the rest of us will re-arrange the furniture. It’s all wrong. The flow of positive energy has been blocked and we must correct this.”

Over the next several hours, students moved furniture about the room as directed by their new Head of House. She waved her hands about, spouting gibberish about karma, Feng Shui, energy flows and the fate of ‘our beloved House’, all to the chorus of her yapping, barking slippers, until their eyes glazed over. Many of the younger children fell asleep on the stairs, leaving the older students to do the heavy work.

When it was over, Trelawney looked around the room, pride shining from her eyes. “We have done it, my dears. Slytherin shall survive!” she announced grandly. “And just in time. Dawn is here, but we have finished our great work. Now then, get cleaned up and get yourselves down to breakfast.” With that, she picked up her scarf, flipped it around her neck rather dramatically, and marched from the room, her back straight, her head up, and her slippers barking.

The students looked about their ‘new’ common room in a daze. Despite hours of changing the colors of the banners on the walls and rugs on the floor, despite shoving couches here and chairs there, the room looked exactly as it did before Trelawney set them to molesting the furniture.

And now, according to the gray and forest colored clock on the wall, they had thirty minutes until breakfast started, and a full day of classes to look forward to. It was going to be a long day for Slytherin House.

---

## **The Great Hall Breakfast...**

The Outcasts watched in amusement as Luna transfigured Draco’s cereal bowl into a pillow and he sunk into a sound sleep upon it. He had briefly explained Trelawney’s late night excursion into Slytherin house and what she wanted them to do.

Harry tried hard not to laugh for Draco’s sake, but it was hard not to. He’d had three years of Divination with that crackpot and knew full well what she was capable of doing in the name of her ‘craft’.

Harry leaned back in his seat and the front of his robe billowed open to reveal a new T-Shirt. Ginny looked up in interest.

“Let’s see it, Potter,” she growled playfully.

Harry winked at her and pulled his robe open enough to read the shirt. “The ugly fairy must have kissed Voldemort on both cheeks!”

Ginny’s eyes widened and she snorted orange juice through her nose. Neville was torn between helping her and laughing, while Hermione rolled her eyes at Harry. She never saw the shirts when he put them on, he’d just appear wearing one and it was beginning to drive her nuts.

Meanwhile, Draco snored softly next to a platter of bacon, Luna hovering near him, protecting him from something called she called ‘Meepcreeps’. Everyone was there, except Susan, who was upstairs visiting with Terry.

Everyone was still waiting to hear more about what happened to him last night and when he’d be released from the infirmary. Harry was willing to bet money that it had nothing to do with Meepcreeps.

Minerva McGonagall looked up from her breakfast and surveyed the hall. Her practiced eye could



usually spot trouble before it began. But there was no trouble today. Three Houses ate their breakfasts, while Slytherin slept in theirs. She fought a brief battle between a smirk and a frown before the frown won. She'd heard what had happened to Slytherin House from Rolanda Hooch, who had been complaining about some of the younger children who'd shown up exhausted and dead on their feet for an early morning flying lesson.

She turned to Dumbledore. "Headmaster, about Professor Trelawney..."

"Yes, yes, I am aware of it, Professor. Let us see if this one incident is an isolated thing, or part of a larger problem before we take steps," he replied, waving his hand in dismissal.

McGonagall glanced over at the Slytherin table again and sighed. Those children would be absolutely useless in class today! And wasn't that Pansy Parkinson sleeping in a bowl of oatmeal? The vain girl would be mortified when she woke up wearing her breakfast.

From his end of the Gryffindor table, Harry looked up in surprise when Susan walked in and went to her seat, followed by Tonks. His expression darkened and he nudged Hermione.

"So, it wasn't an accident, was it?" he asked of his guardian.

Tonks shook her head. "No, I'm afraid it wasn't."

Susan reached over and placed a hand on his arm. "There's more, Harry. Terry didn't see who attacked him, but at least one was a guy who said, 'tell Potter to come out from behind his wards and play,' and that if you don't, 'the next friend of his we catch will get it much worse than you'.

Tonks watched for a moment before she left and approached the Head table. It was time to inform the Headmaster that another attack had taken place.

Harry stared down at his plate for a moment. Hermione looked up in alarm as the air grew heavy and oppressive in the Great Hall. Suddenly there was a deafening crack, sounding like a clap of thunder.

Most of the Slytherin students fell from their chairs to the floor in surprise. Harry looked up from his plate. Hermione gasped in awe. The amount of magic she could sense in him was stronger than anything she had ever felt before. His eyes blazed with power and the stone table literally rippled like water in a pond under his hands.

He smiled to reassure her, but there was no sense of the magic lessening, in fact it seemed to grow.

"What are you going to do?" she asked in small voice.

"They want me to come out an play, that's exactly what I'm going to do. I don't think they'll like the results, however" he replied, and then his expression softened again. "Don't worry. I won't do anything stupid."

She smiled back at him worriedly. His power level had surged again, that much was obvious. This time though, it wasn't receding, and that was different.

---

### **Authors Notes:**

Well it's time for the dreaded Authors Notes again and this is the first set since we got our arses kicked off of fanfic.net. Do we have anything nice to say about them? Nope, but we're not going to spend a lot of time complaining about them either.

Normally our Notes are driven by the reviews, but we don't really have any reviews this time.

We'd again like to thank Jeconais for his help in bringing you this story. We may be in a new spot, but we're not giving up! Also, a big shout goes out to all our loyal readers who've found us here. MMMMWWWWAAAAA!!! We love ya!

### **Pet Peeves:**

Do I really need to say what I'm peeved about with this chapter? Do I really need to say it? Bet you can guess it!

## **Sunset Over Britain**

### **The Oncoming Storm**

#### **Standard Disclaimer:**

The curtain opens to see Ronald Weasley slither out onto the stage, his clothing rags. He walked on all fours in a lopping type gait. Suddenly a spot light flared to life, and Ron froze in place.

“The Light! The Light! Burns us it does!”

Hermione strode regally out onto the stage, her brow crowned with a circlet of pure Mithril, upon her breast the symbol of the house of Elendil.

Ron stared at her for a moment. “Is she tasty precious? Does she know us at all precious? Trickys we are. Oh yes precious!”

Hermione looked at Ron for a moment, then turned to face the audience. “This fowl creature, loathsome as he is, is what happens when an author does not tell people that they don’t own the Potterverse. The authors of this story beg you to understand that they have no rights to these characters.”

Ron sniffed at the hem of her robe. “Does she smell goods precious! Will she be mine precious?”

Suddenly a huge foot descends and squashes Ron flat. Then a rope ladder drops and Harry Potter climbs down to greet Hermione.

“Oh Harry!”

“Oh Hermione”

Alyx turns to Bob in the corner and frowns. “Can’t you do better than this? The romantic dialogue is totally inane and flat, Ron keeps dying and what the hell is with the Lord of the Rings bit? WE ARE NOT DOING A LORD OF THE RINGS CROSS OVER!!!!”

Bob looks at Alyx in his Darth Vader mask, breathing heavily. “As you command my mistress,” he replied in his best James Earl Jones voice.

Padfoot Manor and Estates, Ireland...

Remus looked up from the blueprints he was holding and spotted Winky waiting patiently for him to notice her. He didn't pretend to understand all of what he was looking at, but the construction foreman was a good man at explaining what they were doing. Remus had left Dan back in the Manor going over some of the other details for him while Remus walked the grounds, inspecting the results of nearly a month and a half of solid construction.

"Winky? Is something wrong?" asked Remus.

"Master Dan sends me to tell yous there be a man outside the wards. The man do be asking yous to allow him inside."

Remus frowned and Winky stepped back warily. Her new family had never abused, and they strived to treat her like one of the family, but it was hard to break years of habit.

"Where exactly is this man, Winky?"

"Near north entrance, Master Remus. He do be waiting where workers come an go," Winky replied.

Remus smiled at the little elf. "Thank you, Winky, I'll go talk to this man, then I'll come back to talk to Dan. Can you have lunch prepared for us when I come back into the manor?"

"Oh yes, Master Remus! Winky can do that!" The little elf bowed and vanished with a pop. Sighing, Remus rolled up the blueprints he was holding and handed them back to the construction foreman.

Remus apparated to the edge of the wards and examined the man for a moment before he crossed the threshold of the *Fidelius* charm. He was a tall man with black hair and very fair, freckled complexion. He looked like a man who was accustomed to getting his way.

Remus stepped over the ward threshold, becoming visible to the waiting man. The man showed no outward reaction, he merely looked Remus over for a moment. Then he smiled and stuck out a beefy hand.

"Good morn to you!" he exclaimed. "Do I have the honor of addressing Lord Potter-Black?"

Remus gripped the man's hand cautiously. "I'm afraid not. Lord Potter-Black is currently in Scotland on business. I'm Remus Lupin, his... well seneschal is probably the closest word for it. Now, how might I help you?"

"Ah, Mr. Lupin, then allow me to introduce myself. I'm Michael O'Dalley and I represent the

Irish Ministry of Magic. I'm an Auror in our MLE, and normally wouldn't be used for this type of meeting, but since I was in the neighborhood, my Ministry asked me to stop by and see if I could find out more about what you're doing here."

Remus sighed and nodded. It was bound to happen. One doesn't spend nearly eighty million pounds on land, then another twenty million galleons for magical construction without it going noticed by someone.

"So what does your government think we're doing here?" Remus asked, trying to sound the man out a bit.

O'Dalley took off his hat and scratched his head. "Well now, I don't rightly know, Mr. Lupin. I know what they've told me, and it's got me wondering. But no one has told me exactly what they think. What I do know is that your Lord Potter-Black, age 16, known in England as the Boy-Who-Lived, has recently moved nearly a half billion galleons to the main branch of Gringotts here in Ireland. I also know that another seventy million galleons have been spent on land purchases and new construction around his enlarged estate. Quite frankly, my government is curious."

Remus chuckled. "I'd be curious if I had that little information as well. Mr. O'Dalley, I am in somewhat of a bind here. I am bound by certain oaths to maintain secrecy but, by the same token, your government has every right to know what is going on. So I'm going to propose a compromise. I will tell you, in broad terms, what's going on here. In turn, you will tell only your immediate superior or your Minister. In the meantime, I will request that Lord Potter-Black allow me to reveal more detail should it become necessary. However, you must understand that secrecy is paramount. If secrecy cannot be maintained, nothing further will be revealed."

O'Dalley looked Remus over carefully before nodding.

Remus conjured two chairs for the men to sit on. "My Lord is preparing for the worst case, Mr. O'Dalley. We have good reason to believe that the situation in England will soon become untenable. We believe that the current Dark Lord will assume supremacy over England in a few short months and Lord Potter is building facilities to house refugees so that they do not become a burden upon the Irish and the Irish Ministries."

Remus gestured. "Inside these wards is enough housing to comfortably fit one thousand families. We've built a school, a hospital, and shops. In effect, my Lord has built a town to house people fleeing from England. My Lord intends to open this facility so that Irish nationals may also use it, but right now it will remain closed until the refugees arrive, or the crisis passes. In either case, this is a boon to Ireland, Mr. O'Dalley. The enlarged estate is broken up into three areas. The refugee town includes housing, a primary and intermediary school and a hospital. The main manor house and a third much smaller area which I am not at liberty to discuss. If the crisis does not come to pass, then you have yourself a perfectly sound Wizarding town, complete with anti-muggle wards. If it does come to pass, then you still have a town, only it will be filled with hard working people, grateful to have escaped from the turmoil.

"We realize that this may be a bit of shock and a burden. Hell, just the processing of so many

refugee claims would be a burden on your government. That is why my Lord has authorized me to transfer twenty million galleons to the Irish Ministry when the refugees start arriving, to... ah... cover processing fees?"

O'Dalley expression broke into a huge grin. "Well, considering you're willing to offer twenty million reasons why we shouldn't be concerned, I think you'll find my government most agreeable." Then O'Dalley turned serious again. "Is it safe to assume that you agree with your Lord Potter in regard to the need to build this refuge?" he asked.

Remus sighed and bowed his head for a moment. "No one likes to think of their homeland being taken over, but that's exactly what's going to happen. We have a prophecy stating it must."

"Aren't you concerned that the unrest there will spill over here? We are only a short distance away, you know." O'Dalley asked seriously.

"That's a valid concern, but one of my jobs is to research problems like this for my employer. I already have one possible solution lined up... You know, it would be a help if your government would help me get access to your libraries..."

"Oh, I daresay something could be worked out. Would you be willing to allow owl deliveries to the estate, Mr. Lupin?"

Remus thought for a moment. "For now, I'll permit owl deliveries in my name only. My employer is a very private man."

O'Dalley stood from his chair and offered his hand again. "Thank you for your time, Mr. Lupin. I'll talk with my superiors. I'm certain we'll be in touch."

---

## **Hogwarts Head Suite...**

Hermione looked up in surprise when Harry entered the room. She watched him limp over to the couch and sit heavily, leaning his cane to one side. It had been several days since he started roaming the halls late at night in the hope of meeting up with whomever had hurt Terry. So far, he had walked himself into exhaustion and no one had confronted him. She didn't like the idea of him deliberately seeking a fight, but that fight hadn't happened.

She smiled at him. "It's probably a good thing you haven't run into anyone, Harry. I don't like the idea of you deliberately looking for a fight. But if you're going to do it, doing it in front of witnesses would probably be best."

Harry cocked an eyebrow at her and his expression turned playful. "Oh, so you think it's best to do it in front of witnesses? I didn't know you liked people watching. Besides, there may be performance issues," he replied with a grin.

Hermione blushed. Harry, to his delight, had discovered that Hermione, despite being shy and

bookish, had a very sexual nature, which she hid carefully. It was an aspect of her that thrilled Harry and opened up a whole new area of their relationship. For one thing, when alone at least, they flirted much more often with each other and tended to be more open about things.

Hermione chuckled and swatted his arm playfully. “Prat, you know I wasn’t talking about that!”

She moved closer to him on the couch. “Besides, if you want an exhibitionist, you should have dated Luna. She doesn’t care who sees what.”

Harry made a face at her. “I like Luna, she’s a good friend, but she’s not my type,” he said, then he frowned. “Have the girls spoken to you yet?”

Hermione snuggled closer to him and he wrapped an arm around them. “Well, Ginny and Susan have. And I know that Neville and Draco have mentioned it to you. I didn’t want to commit to anything without talking to you about it first. You know we’re breaking rules.”

Harry chuckled and leaned over to kiss her on the head. “We’ve done nothing but break the rules since we came back from holiday. Sharing the same bed isn’t exactly in the rules,” he said, then he tightened his grip on her.

“How hard would it be to do?”

“Around you? Rock hard. Oh, you don’t mean that!”

Hermione swatted him again.

“It’s a challenge, but it’s doable. Basically, we’re talking about two portkeys that remember their starting point. I’d only have to make two of them. I just want to point out that if we do this, you’re basically giving up your bedroom, Hermione. I have to adjust the wards a bit, but no big deal.”

She climbed into his lap and wrapped both arms around his neck while straddling him. She could feel his arousal as she held him and she ground down on it.

“I don’t care. I have no intention of returning to my old bedroom. I find sharing your bed has allowed me to discover some amazing things,” she breathed into his ear. Harry shivered and buried his head into the nape of her neck, nibbling softly.

“Oh? Such as?” he murmured back. His hands were already crawling underneath her skirt, reaching for her thighs.

“Things like this,” she replied reaching for his belt.

---

## Hogsmeade, The Three Broomsticks...

“Quiet down, please. Quiet,” Dumbledore called, rapping his knuckles against the table.

The membership of the Order of the Phoenix settled down, some taking seats and turned their attention to Dumbledore. In one corner, Arthur Weasley stood with his son, Bill.

“Alastor? Do you have any new information to report?”

Moody looked around carefully before he began his report. “We’ve had a number of disturbing reports that Voldemort has dramatically increased the membership of his Death Eaters. Also, some of you might have missed that countrywide power blackout last week that the muggles experienced.

“Ordinarily, we don’t pay much attention to muggle affairs, but this particular case was significant. I have reason to believe that Voldemort’s forces used the blackout as a cover to steal muggle military supplies. For what purpose? I’m not sure, but I will remind everyone that before the Christmas holidays there were several attacks by wizards, controlled by the *Imperio* us Curse, and some of those wizards employed muggle explosives.”

“Are you getting any idea of some sort of master plan, Alastor?” asked Dumbledore.

“Just little hints, Albus. To be honest, at this point I can’t really say. With the loss of Snape, we lost a lot of our view into his organization,” came the reply.

“Well yes, Severus was valuable to us in his role of spy, but he’s moved onto other things,” Dumbledore said, then he frowned when he spotted the Weasley men.

“As I’m sure you are aware, Severus has been unjustly suspended from his teaching position...”

“*Unjustly?* I saw those papers he graded, Dumbledore, and Snape got exactly what he deserved.”

“If you have something you wish to say, you must wait your turn, Arthur. Severus’ actions are not up for discussion tonight,” Dumbledore shot back.

“You’re damn right I have something I want to say, and you can’t muzzle me anymore Albus!” Arthur spat back.

A number of the Order members gasped in shock. This was Albus Dumbledore, leader of the light. No one talked to him like that!

Dumbledore sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. “Very well, Arthur. I assume you have something you want to say before you make your exit from our meeting?”

Arthur looked around at the seated people. Some, like McGonagall, returned his look proudly, most merely looked at him in confusion.

“You all think of yourselves as warriors of the light. HA!” spat Arthur. “If you only knew the truth, if you only knew what that traitorous and treacherous bastard has been doing behind your backs! Be afraid, Dumbledore. I’ve sent a full confession to Amelia and it’s all on record now. The thefts from Harry, the times we knew he was being abused by the Dursleys and you ordered us



to ignore it. What's worse Albus is that Harry is aware of it all as well.

"You set that boy down a path to hell where he was abused and starved. You set him up, stole from him and denied him his birthright. To my everlasting shame, I was a willing participant to it all. I accepted your money. I ignored his cries of pain and suffering.

"Since the beginning of the summer, you've spent all your time and energy on a war you can't win without Harry and you've turned him against you forever! Harry now views you as no better than V-V-Voldemort!"

There were a number of gasps in the room and heads turned to stare at Dumbledore, who looked at Arthur with an expression of sadness.

"Arthur, come now. Everything I did, I did for Harry's best interests. The monies, which you admit you accepted, have helped fund the Order. James Potter was one of the wealthiest wizards in Britain. Don't you think he would have donated money to keep the fight going?"

"Aye, James would have done that," came a voice from the crowd. "But you shouldn't have taken the money without asking!"

The room filled with voices as everyone tried to express an opinion. "Quiet! Quiet please!" Dumbledore shouted. When the room finally settled down he turned back to Arthur. "Have you finished?"

"Yes. I am resigning my position in the Order and withdrawing all support for you and this group, Dumbledore. I owe Harry that much, and I will do what ever it takes to recover the honor lost to my family by my actions."

Dumbledore sighed as Bill and Arthur made their way to the exit. A number of people were trying to talk to them. He had to do something quickly or all would be lost!

"Arthur, I deeply regret your feeling the way you do. And I acknowledge that I have made some mistakes in regard to the care of Harry Potter. But every thing I have done has been for the greater good. Even if it meant a temporary inconvenience to someone along the way. Harry will see that and come around in due course."

Arthur looked up at Dumbledore shaking his head. "Albus, what frightens me most is that I fell for your ways. I believed in you," he said, then he motioned to Bill and they both exited the room.

"Is what he said true, Dumbledore?" asked a voice from the back of the room.

Dumbledore leaned back in his chair and smiled like a benevolent Father Christmas. "Arthur is distraught and reading evil intentions where there are none. You heard him yourself. If he confessed to Amelia Bones as he says he did, why isn't he under arrest? No, I'm afraid poor Arthur has become unhinged with the break up of his marriage."

A number of the Order members looked at Dumbledore thoughtfully. His comments made a lot of

sense. Some members, however, filed from the room casting looks of incredulousness back at those that remained.

Dumbledore surveyed most of the remaining members. He guessed that Arthur's comments this evening had cost him just about ten members, but more importantly, all of the ten members were Ministry Aurors or employees of the Ministry. Only Kingsley Shacklebolt remained of the active Aurors.

Dumbledore smiled reassuringly at those who remained. "I will speak with Harry Potter tomorrow. If he believes as Arthur does, then I am sure I will be able to show him that his beliefs are misguided. Now, let us get back to business. As I was stating, Severus Snape has been reassigned. He will be brewing the potions we need in combat, as well as doing research into potions that may help us in our fight. Potions will be delivered to Hogwarts via a secure connection, using Hogwarts House Elves. Severus himself will be in a secure location known only to me.

"In the meantime, work your contacts. We need to find out what Voldemort is up to. I suspect that something is coming to a head very quickly. I know we have spent many hours and months concentrating on the Brotherhood, but I am coming to suspect that Voldemort and the Brotherhood are linked in some way. Find one and you will probably find the other."

"Albus, you're not suggesting that the Weasley's have gone over to Voldemort, are you? Arthur has been seen in their company and, I'll remind you, some other very prominent people have been seen in their company as well," Minerva McGonagall said in a voice that carried throughout the room.

"No, of course I'm not saying they are supporters of Voldemort. Alastor, if you would please? Explain about the occurrence at the Nott property?"

Alastor stood unsteadily on his wooden leg and faced the membership. "A few weeks back, an out building on the Nott property collapsed. An Auror friend told me about visiting the wreckage hours after the collapse to see a group of these 'Brotherhood' members removing bodies from the building and placing them in a row outside. They cleaned the building of any evidence and then apparated away without a word to the Aurors. The senior Auror on duty told my friend that he was under orders not to interfere with any Brotherhood activities. Six bodies were pulled from that wreckage, including Theodore Nott Sr., who, strangely enough, had been disemboweled. Now this is all confirmed. Theodore Nott Senior is dead, and the Ministry is moving to confiscate his properties and vaults.

"I've also heard rumors of other Brotherhood assaults on Voldemort forces, but have been unable to confirm them. Finally, on the day after this attack took place, one of our low level spies in Voldemort's organization reported an attack directly on Voldemort himself, in which he was badly injured. My guess is that the Brotherhood has declared open war on Voldemort and his forces and they have no intention of taking prisoners. All of the dead from Nott's were killed in a most gruesome manner," Moody concluded before sitting down once more.

“Thank you, Alastor. Well, there you have it. The Brotherhood is not siding with Voldemort, but if you find his forces, sooner or later the Brotherhood will show up. Now, unless there is new business, we can adjourn for the evening,” Dumbledore said.

After a moment of silence, members of the Order of the Phoenix started to file from the room.

Severus Snape, who had been sitting quietly in the back of the room, was now waiting by the door. He was looking for one person in particular. As Mundungus Fletcher approached the door, Snape reached out and pulled the man aside.

“’ere now! Don’t be manhandling me, Snape!”

“Quiet, fool! I have need of your services, and it will be profitable if you cooperate,” Snape

“Ah, so now I’m of some use to you, sir? I seem to recall in the past when I wasn’t worth your giving me the time, let alone a kind word.”

“Fletcher, we can sit here all night talking about old times and fun pasts, or we can do business. What is your pleasure?” Sneered Snape.

“Business before pleasure, always my good man. Now what be your need?”

Snape handed the man a scroll. “Find me these potion ingredients and get their prices. Don’t inflate the prices, I know what they are worth. I’ll give you ten percent commission on the items, as long as you don’t cheat me.”

Mundungus scanned the list briefly, his eyes narrowing over some of the clearly dark ingredients required. Then he looked up at Snape again. “Some of this won’t be cheap or easy to get.”

Snape drew himself up to his full height and wrapped his cloak about him. “I’m aware of that, just find me those ingredients and owl me the prices, care of Hogwarts.”

Mundungus nodded. Snape, with his business finished, exited the room with his cloak billowing in his wake.

---

## **Breakfast, Great Hall Hogwarts...**

There were several worried faces among those eating breakfast. Hermione was worried about Harry. His power surge last night had not abated. He had quickly gained control of the more obvious aspects of that much power and was no longer assaulting people just by walking past them, but the fire in his eyes had not gone out. Hermione added it to her ever-growing list of things to research.

Dumbledore sat at the Head table pushing the food around on his plate. An icy knot of fear had grown in his stomach since Arthur’s revelations the night before. He glanced towards Harry and

his friends and wondered just how much Harry really knew. Considering Harry's actions of the past year, he had little choice but to assume he knew everything, or nearly everything. And that meant that Harry would never cooperate with him, no matter what he did. He decided to hold off talking to him for a while.

Dumbledore looked over at the entrance, startled when Amelia appeared in a small crowd of Aurors. She approached the Head table and Dumbledore's fears grew. He broke out in a cold sweat. Steeling himself and waiting for the arrest order, he smiled at the approaching Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement.

"Amelia! What a surprise! Would you care to join us for breakfast or some tea perhaps?" he asked nervously.

"No, thank you, Headmaster. I'm here on official business."

"Oh? And what might that be?"

"As you are aware, there have been a two severe attacks against students in the last two days. Your caretaker died under mysterious circumstances. The Board of Governors feels that they owe it to the parents to take steps to insure the safety of the children while at school. Therefore, they have asked the Ministry to assign Aurors to patrol the grounds and the castle. Normally, this would be a decision of the Minister, but I'm taking it upon myself to assign six Aurors to the school for round the clock patrolling," Amelia said, loud enough for the entire hall to hear.

Dumbledore, in his relief, waved weakly at the MLE Head. "Yes. Yes. I quite agree and welcome their help, Amelia."

Dumbledore had been sure that they had been here to arrest him. Accepting Aurors in his school was a lot easier to deal with than an arrest warrant.

From his seat at the Gryffindor table, Harry watched Amelia and Dumbledore with interest. Minerva had pulled him aside before breakfast and told him what Arthur had said and done at last night's meeting. Minerva's eyes danced when she had described Alastor Moody's description of the Brotherhood's activities. He turned back to the table when he felt a tug at his shirt sleeve.

"Look! Look! I told you he'd do it!" exclaimed Luna as she shoved a copy of the Quibbler under his nose.

Harry quickly scanned the headlines.

*St. Mungos find basement is infested with displaced Yeti from Tibet!*  
*Old Crow opens Yahoo Group. Claims he is not a potion ingredient!*  
*Candidate Richfield a Death Eater!*  
*Coming soon to Diagon Alley, Alien spaceship landing zone!*

"Hmmm... looks like that old Crow finally wised up, Luna. I knew he'd come around," Harry

replied humoring the blond Ravenclaw.

“Yes, now he’s safe from net nazis,” she replied smugly.

Harry passed the paper to Hermione, pointing out the headlines. She took one look and gasped in shock. Draco leaned over her shoulder and shrugged.

“I don’t get it. Do you know this Old Crow person?” Draco asked.

“Oh, yes. We’ve shared some letters and lunches with him,” Hermione replied, smiling fondly.

“We offered to pay, but he said No Thanks and picked up the tab,” offered Harry. “He’s a good bloke, a bit barmy about golf, but otherwise alright. Perhaps someday he’ll discover the joys of Air Hockey.”

Hermione grabbed Harry’s arm and hugged him tightly. “He seems to think we are made for each other.”

Harry smiled at her and she passed the paper back to a beaming Luna. Then he noticed Terry and Susan exchanging worried looks.

“Susan? Terry? Is something wrong?” Harry asked.

Susan nodded to Terry and gripped his hand tightly. Terry swallowed nervously. “Harry, I don’t know if there’s a problem or not, but the other night when I was attacked, Dumbledore returned my book bag. Everything was a mess inside. I’m just worried that someone might have seen some things they shouldn’t have.”

“What was in the bag, Terry?” asked Harry intently.

“Well, my class notes and books, of course. I’m not worried about those. But I also had a copy of the list of names and addresses and Hermione’s first prophecy in there.”

Harry frowned for a moment. “Was anything missing?”

“No, it looks like they just collected the parchment and stuffed it into the bag.”

Harry leaned back for a moment before he turned to look at everyone. “Alright, I think we managed to avoid a problem here, but let’s not take any more chances. I don’t want anyone carrying anything they don’t absolutely need. You’ve all warded your trunks by now, so use them.”

The Outcasts nodded and several breathed a sigh of relief before returning to breakfast.

---

**Grimmauld Place...**

Emma looked up from her little study area when the door opened and Narcissa walked in. Dan and Remus were off to Padfoot again. Remus was working on multiple research projects and the Irish Ministry had opened up their archives and libraries to him with a typically warm welcome. Dan was overseeing the construction of the hospital area and, even though he wasn't a wizard, his suggestions had gone a long way in organizing a much more efficient building.

"How are your projects coming, Cissy?" asked Emma. Over the past few months, and to the great surprise of Narcissa, the two women had formed a strong friendship with each other.

Narcissa laughed. "I think Harry's getting revenge for us being adults by assigning us harder work than he gives to his friends."

"Oh? How so?"

"Well, as you know, until you've finished the letter we'll be sending to the families, Harry asked me to help on another project with Remus. Apparently he came up with this idea without Hermione's help and wants to see if it can be done without bringing her in on it."

Emma chuckled. "He's still a bit of a boy at heart and wants to impress his girlfriend. Although from her last letter, I gather nothing he could do could impress her more than she already is."

Narcissa shook her head. "I guess I just don't understand today's generation. Oh, I don't mean we went to the altar as virgins either, but today it's not only alright to sleep together, but also to flaunt it."

"Ordinarily I would agree with you, Cissy, but in Harry's case, I don't think I can. If only you saw him at the beginning of the summer after he'd gotten over his illness. He was recovering from nearly sixteen years of neglect and honestly believed he was not allowed to love or be loved. It broke our hearts to see that. Hermione slowly brought him out of his shell and now he doesn't want to hide how he feels about her," Emma said, and then paused for a moment.

"In a way, Hermione and Harry have a lot in common. Oh, I don't mean their backgrounds, but both of them grew up with few friends. Hermione has always been a very intelligent girl and that tended to scare other children away. Now she's got a young man who not only appreciated her intellect, but also finds her physically attractive. Hermione's awoken something powerful in Harry. The depth of feeling he holds for her is almost frightening in its intensity, but she seems to thrive on it."

Narcissa sat down and Emma poured her a cup of tea. Sipping carefully, she thought for a moment. "I wouldn't be surprised if the two are bonding without knowing it. A spontaneous bond can sometimes form when two people feel that deeply for each other. The day Draco woke up in the infirmary, Harry expressed a bit of jealousy about Draco and Luna being able to wed this summer."

Emma smiled to herself. "I'm sure that by then my daughter and Harry will have worked out a satisfactory arrangement. But enough of this love talk. What little project did my future son-in-

law pass off to you and Remus?”

Narcissa looked confused for a moment before replying. “Well, I’m not sure I understand the entire thing, but essentially, he wants to erect a barricade. He read some muggle books and he talked about principles of similarity and uncertainty principles. I didn’t quite understand it, but the upshot is, he wants to erect a barricade that will prevent Voldemort and his forces from crossing it. Remus found something that may do just that and I’ve been examining the power requirements. It’s still too early to know if it will work or not.”

“A Barricade? Why doesn’t he just use the wards like he does for Grimmauld Place?”

“Perhaps I wasn’t clear enough, Emma. He wants to barricade the United Kingdom, keeping Voldemort and his forces inside.”

Emma blinked in shock and put a hand to her mouth. “Is that even possible?”

“I don’t know,” came the quiet reply. Then Narcissa’s expression hardened. “But I intend to find out, if not for myself, then for Draco and Luna. I want them to grow up and give me lots of little ones to spoil in a peaceful world. And if anyone has the power to do it, it’s Harry.”

Emma looked at her friend sympathetically. She felt the same way about Hermione and Harry.

Narcissa shook herself slightly and looked down at what Emma was working on. “When do you expect to have a final draft?”

“A week or two. Since this letter will be going on to families who have some magical background, I don’t have to explain everything. But still, it’s not every day you receive a life-altering letter. I have one chance to get it right,” she replied.

Narcissa nodded. “Good. I’ve gone over the list of families we have to deal with. There are exactly forty two muggle families who the twins will have to bring in by hand, and another three hundred and five families who are either mixed or pure Wizarding.”

Narcissa frowned for a moment. “When you count all of the Hogwarts families, then add in the extra families, we’re talking almost four hundred and fifty families. On top of that, Amelia is building a small cadre of Aurors and their families who will be coming with us. I know that Harry wanted to save what he could, but that’s a mighty large crowd.”

Emma leaned back in her chair, smiling. “Cissy, the next time you get the chance, ask Remus to give you a tour of Padfoot. I think you’ll find that Harry has taken it all into account.”

Narcissa eyed the other woman for a moment before nodding.

---

**Defense Against the Dark Arts Class...**

Harry and Hermione filed from their Potions class. While Dumbledore was a much better teacher than Snape could ever hope to be, some of the potions they were learning about were definitely not part of the standard curriculum. Today's potion, for example, had no name, but it was designed to be used as ear drops for the removal of unsightly ear hair. That might be useful when you're approaching two hundred years old, but it didn't seem all that useful today.

Harry followed Hermione into the DADA classroom. Due to an appeal by Ron's mother, he had returned to classes earlier this week. His in-school suspension had not been cut down by much, but without caretaker Argus Filch to supervise him, he had been largely idle.

Ron's new behavior puzzled Harry and Hermione both. Before the holiday, he had been verbally offensive and willing to provoke a conflict, so long as he had some backup. After the holiday, he had changed. He was still nasty if someone spoke to him, but he devoted a bulk of his time to his studies these days.

Taking their seats, Harry prayed Professor Blackthorne would not call on him today. The dueling tourney she had begun a month ago was slowly winding its way through the sixth year students. Hermione had warned Romany earlier in the day about Harry's power surge and she wanted to see them both after class today. Now Harry just hoped that Romany would not make him duel anyone.

Romany stood on the raised stage as the class walked in. Once everyone was seated, she began in her usual manner. "Now then, if you've done your homework you know that the real strategy of dueling comes into play when you're evenly matched with your opponent. Why is that? Miss Granger?"

"When you're evenly matched, the duel becomes a battle based on skill rather than raw power. If your opponent matches you power-wise, you must draw on your knowledge of spells, dueling tactics and trickery to defeat them," replied Hermione.

"Correct! Five points to Gryffindor, Miss Granger."

"Now for another five points, who can describe an example of tricking your opponent? Miss Patil?"

Romany continued the class like that for the next ninety minutes, interspersing her lecture with questions and some practical demonstrations. Finally, she got to the point that everyone had been anxiously waiting for.

"Now that the lecture is done, I'm sure you're all waiting to see who will be this week's duelers and who will advance to the next round."

Romany consulted her class roster for a moment before looking at the class again. "Mr. Weasley, you have not yet had a chance to duel since you just recently rejoined our class. If you will take the left position on the stage, please?"

Ron stood and swaggered up the stairs to the stage and took the left hand position on the stage. He



eyed the class and smirked at them while fingering his wand.

“Miss Abbot? Would you take the right hand position please?” called Romany.

Hannah started to move toward the stage when a voice stopped her.

“No, I want to duel Potter,” Ron said flatly.

Romany looked up in surprise. No one had questioned her dueling assignments before.

“I’m sorry Mr. Weasley, but it’s not yet Mr. Potter’s turn. Your opponent for this match will be Miss Abbot.”

“But...”

“Mr. Weasley, you will duel the opponent I select, or I will give Miss Abbot an automatic win and you will forfeit the match,” Romany stated coldly.

“Fine! Get up on the stage, Abbot,” Ron snarled, his eyes going flat.

Romany waited until both students were on the stage. “Alright then, remember, this is to disarm your opponent. Do not use any lethal spells or I will take you down myself. When the feather touches the floor you may commence.”

Romany stepped out of the way, and then levitated a feather into the proper position before ending the spell. As soon as the feather touched the ground, Ron struck with a series of spells.

“Foetor Fomeus Carcer,” Ron shouted. The spell hit Hannah before she could even react and it formed a dense choking cloud of smoke around her head. With her first breath, she was coughing and unable to cast.

Then Ron fired off a bone-crushing hex, aimed to hit the stricken girl in the legs. Hannah shrieked and fell to the floor as both of her kneecaps were pulverized. Then he summoned her wand.

There was complete silence in the classroom except for the coughing moans from Hannah. Ron had brutally ended a match, displaying a level of talent that no one had been aware of. But more to the point, his technique was cruel, and just shy of lethal.

Romany rushed to aid Hannah while the class just stared at Ron in shock, and horror. Romany signaled to a couple boys from Hufflepuff to come up to the stage. The girl screamed in pain as they moved her to a stretcher. Harry closed his eyes and reached out with his senses. Hannah may have been unfriendly to him this past year, but he hated to see anyone undergoing that sort of pain.

He quickly delved into her aura, looking carefully beyond it and into the core of her consciousness. With a small surge, he suppressed one area, causing the girl to pass out.

Romany gasped as the girl lost consciousness and turned to stare at Harry just as he opened his

eyes. With a nod at the two Hufflepuffs, they gently took Hannah down the steps of the stage and out of the classroom.

Romany's eyes watched the two boys narrowly for a moment longer, then turned to seek her prey. "Mr. Weasley, you have forfeited that match to Miss Abbot. You were instructed not to use lethal spells, but the cloud of choking could have been lethal, so could have your bone crushing hex, which was totally unnecessary since you had effectively incapacitated your opponent with your first spell."

Ron stood there, his arms crossed, his expression stormy. "You want us to duel, I dueled. It's a fight, and I fight to win."

Harry leaned over to Hermione and whispered, "Now that's a message he's sending loud and clear."

Hermione nodded grimly in reply.

"Mr. Weasley, if you ever use excessive force in a class duel again, I will see you expelled from this school," Blackthorne said before surveying the rest of the class. "Class dismissed!"

Harry and Hermione made a show of putting their books in their bags, but hung back to talk to Romany. Draco joined them while the other Outcasts went off to get ready for dinner.

The three of them watched as Ron walked out of the room with a smug expression on his face.

"Merlin! I never thought I'd see the day that the Weasel would be so cruel," murmured Draco.

"He's going to start a war between the Gryfs and the Puffs," Hermione added, shaking her head and thinking back to the time when she thought she might actually fancy him. Then she did something totally out of character for her.

"What a bloody prick! I can't believe I ever thought he was cute!" she exclaimed.

The choking sound from behind her clued her into the fact that she said that out loud. Draco was leaning up against Harry, trying not to laugh. Harry made the choking sounds as he tried to keep a straight face, though his eyes were wide. Even Romany, who stood behind the two, was chuckling.

Turning serious, Harry leaned up against a desk. "I'd like to know where Ron learned to duel like that. His dueling capabilities were never that good. And why did he do that?"

"Ron was getting some special lessons from Professor Snape during his suspension. I asked the Headmaster about it after finding them in my classroom late one night. At the time, it made sense when the Headmaster said they were giving Ron private tutoring lessons so he wouldn't fall too far behind on his studies due to the suspension," Romany offered softly.

Harry looked skyward for a moment as if the answers he wanted were written on the ceiling, then he looked at the others again. "I don't like it. We need to warn the rest of our group to avoid any

incidents with Ron. I'm tired of finding my friends in the infirmary."

"Harry, that was a good thing you did for Hannah. I know she won't realize it, but it was the right thing to do," offered Romany.

Harry blushed from the praise.

"Harry, how is the power control going?"

Harry sighed. "It could be better, but I'm getting there."

Romany nodded. "Very well, if you need to practice, you know where to find me."

Harry nodded and then led his friends from the classroom.

---

### **Weasley Wizarding Wheezes, Diagon Alley...**

The shop had been closed for many hours. The front of the shop held an impressive array of anti-theft and anti-break in devices, including an illusionary Cave Troll, which stood in front of the building all night long. Like so many of the twins' inventions, the Cave Troll Illusion had its flaws. The troll suffered from an extraordinary case of flatulence and if one spoke to the troll, it replied in the voice of a six-year-old girl. Flaws and all, it was still an effective deterrent to would-be thieves for Weasley Wizarding Wheezes.

Light flickered from the windows of that closed shop while Fred and George Weasley worked on a project for Harry Potter, adopted brother and principle investor of their business.

Fred was wearing a polka dotted yellow dress and his wand had been transformed into a parasol, while George rolled on the floor in a fit of laughter.

"OY now! Change me back, George!" yelled Fred.

George rolled over near a large crate and removed a hula-hoop from the crate, which he then tossed to Fred. "You know the rules. We switch off every twenty five hoops and the other gets to decide what the caster is wearing!"

Fred waved his parasol over the hula-hoop and murmured, "Portus", and then he tossed the completed portkey into a nearly empty crate. "Twenty two, and you are so going to regret this!"

A few short hoops later, they switched off, and George found himself dressed in a gorilla suit and his wand had been changed into a banana.

---

### **Breakfast, Great Hall, mid February...**

Harry walked into the Great Hall and made a beeline for his friends, sitting down heavily. For the past week and a half, he'd been roaming the corridors late at night in the hope of running into whoever was attacking his friends. However, the addition of six Aurors patrolling the school had resulted in zero encounters, and he was beginning to get irritated about it.

Harry's irritation unfortunately spilled over onto his friends. They understood why he was snappish, and Hermione kept him largely in check, but he couldn't help being short tempered with them. He knew it was wrong and it only made him angrier with himself. It was a losing situation as far as he was concerned.

He was reaching for the platter of bacon when he noticed everyone staring at him warily. Putting the platter down carefully, he mentally checked to see if he had forgotten his pants and the rest of his clothes that morning. "What? I'm fully dressed," he said in exasperation.

Ginny slid a copy of the morning edition of the Daily Prophet over to him. It took only a single glance to see what the problem was.

*Harry Potter Endorses Archibald Richfield for Minister Position.*

*In a surprise announcement, Harry Potter broke his silence to come out with a ringing endorsement of Archibald Richfield for Minister.*

*"The recent inability of the Wizengamot to make a decision has forced me to come forth and put what little value I can behind one of the candidates. I firmly believe that Archibald Richfield is the ideal candidate for the post of interim Minister of Magic. Mr. Richfield's voting record clearly exhibits a fair minded legislator. His honesty is evident, and so are his values. Mr. Richfield will go to any lengths to advance the cause of pure blooded families everywhere.*

*"I strongly urge the Wizengamot to break this ridiculous deadlock and elect Archibald Richfield as interim Minister so that the Government may get back to governing," said Mr. Potter in an exclusive interview.*

*A spokesman for Archibald Richfield said that Mr. Richfield is pleased and proud that the Boy-Who-Lived would deem him acceptable. Meanwhile, a spokesman for Amos Diggory claimed they have no knowledge of Mr. Potter's comments but did agree that Mr. Potter is perfectly capable of endorsing anyone he wants.*

Harry looked up from the paper and calmly handed it back to Ginny, who looking at him fearfully. His eyes lost focus for a moment, then he conjured parchment and a quill. He pushed his plate to one side and started scrawling a note to someone. From up above, Hedwig flew in through an open window and landed in front of him.

Harry rolled his note up and attached it to Hedwig's leg. Man and Owl stared into each other's eyes for a moment, and then Harry reached out and caressed her fondly. Hedwig bobbed her head once in acknowledgement before springing aloft.

“That is truly eerie, Harry. You just look at the owl and it seems to know what you want of it. I’ve never seen anything quite like that before,” murmured Draco.

“Hedwig’s a very smart owl,” said Luna dreamily. “She bonded to Harry early on in both their lives. Harry talks to her and she hears him. He doesn’t even know he’s talking to her, but she hears him over the bond she made between them. Usually, when Hedwig’s close enough, like just now, I can hear them talking.”

Luna’s pronouncement effectively distracted Harry from the anger that had been building in him since reading that article. He looked at Luna curiously. “I’m talking with her?”

“Well, it’s not really talking as you know it, Harry, but yes, you’re sharing thoughts and emotions with her. She cares a great deal for you,” Luna said.

Harry looked ashamed. “I know and I don’t treat her well enough. She was the only friend I had during some very bad times,” he said, looking down and rubbing a few scars across one wrist.

Hermione’s eyes widened as she realized what kind of scar she was looking at. “Harry?” she whispered afraid of what answer she’d get.

He looked up and smiled at her weakly. “Don’t worry about it. The summer after Cedric was exceedingly bad. I felt so alone. If it hadn’t been for Hedwig...” he replied very quietly. Hermione leaned against him and reached over to caress his wrist.

“Remind me to buy Hedwig a bag of deluxe owl treats,” she said. “And remember, you’re not alone anymore..”

Harry wrapped an arm around her shoulder. “And that’s something I’m eternally grateful for,” he whispered. She shivered in reply.

“Mr. Potter, might I ask what the meaning of this morning’s headline is all about?” came the voice of Dumbledore, interrupting them.

Harry looked up at the Headmaster. “Believe me, Headmaster, I did not endorse that candidate. I’ve not spoken to any member of the press and have no particular interest in the current political makeup of the Wizarding world.”

Dumbledore and Harry stared at each other for a long moment. Dumbledore’s eyes were twinkling like mad, while Harry’s burned with a green flame. As the two locked gazes, the others at the table began to shift around uncomfortably. Then Dumbledore turned away from Harry, breaking eye contact and marched up to the Head table.

Harry managed to out stare Dumbledore, but the limit to his patience had also been reached. Tonight he was going to take care of one of the thorns in his side.

---

## **Later that Evening, Various locations around the UK...**

"I don't like this, Harry. You could get hurt, or worse!" Hermione said, pacing their small common room and glaring at him.

"I don't think anything's going to happen tonight, Hermione. No one's expecting me to do anything, which is exactly why this will work," Harry replied, trying hard to maintain a calm exterior. He had been seething all day because of the Daily Prophet article. Now he stood in their common room, dressing for battle, and Hermione was upset about it.

Hermione spun on him. "Then take me with you!"

Harry frowned for a moment. "No," he said flatly. Hermione made a motion to rebut his decision, but he waved her to silence. "I won't take you with me, but you can help tonight. You can go with my two helpers and make sure they don't get carried away while I deal with Mr. McNulty."

Hermione looked at him in surprise. She'd expected him to leave her behind.

"Get dressed. Wear comfortable clothing, and wear your concealment cloak. We have five minutes to until we meet with Fred and George."

Harry donned his cloak, but left the hood down. A few moments later, Hermione came out of their room dressed in black jeans and a dark blouse. As she approached, he handed her a slip of parchment. She cocked an eyebrow at him in question.

"Portkey to Grimmauld when you're done. Bring George and Fred with you. I'll meet you there."

Nodding, she pocketed the portkey and looked at him expectantly. He grinned and wrapped his arms around her. "Ready for some payback?" he asked, whispering in her ear.

She nodded and with a very soft popping sound, both vanished from the Gryffindor Head suite.

A moment later they appeared in the back room of Weasleys Wizarding Wheezes.

"Oy Harry-kins!" shouted Fred.

"And he's got a Hermione in his arms!" added George with a grin.

"Well, I'd travel with a girl in my arms if I could," Fred replied.

"Oh, quite. A nice soft girl makes traveling so much more enjoyable," concluded George.

"Oh shut it, you two," Hermione replied, trying hard not to grin at them.

Harry did grin as he let go of Hermione, then he stepped back and looked at the twins. "Did you get them?"

George opened a box behind him. The room burst into a bright light as he pulled out a two-liter glass jar that looked like it was full of liquid sunshine.

“Got’em mate, and right hard they were to find too,” George said with a grin.

“What is that?” asked Hermione, staring at the glowing bottle.

Fred stepped up in front of George and puffed out his chest imperiously. “These, my dear Gryffindor, are Amazonian Fire Termites. They live on the consumption of ash, they burn nearly anything, and are very dangerous. Our job is to first ward the area we’re planting them in, then plant them in the building. When the building is totally consumed, the ward collapses, killing the termites in the building so they can’t escape.”

Hermione looked worried as she examined the seething mass of liquid fire.

“Right then. Hermione, you go with Fred and George. When you’re all done, use the portkey I gave you to go to Grimmauld. I’ll meet you all there, probably in a hour or two,” Harry said.

George wrapped a cloth around the jar of termites to hide their glow, and then he put on his concealment cloak. Harry grabbed Hermione into a crushing embrace before he vanished without a sound.

“Man, if I could apparate that quietly, the pranks I could pull would be the stuff of legend,” Fred moaned.

Hermione pulled up her hood and stood near the rear entrance door to their shop.

“Now then, Hermione, the Prophet has two buildings. We need to hit both. The main building is quite large and contains the offices and printing presses. The smaller building contains supplies like paper rolls and ink. Fred and I will hit the main building, which will take longer. While we’re working on that, can you handle the smaller building?” George asked.

Hermione nodded. “Once I see you cast the ward, I should be able to repeat it with no problem,” she replied confidently.

“Alright, but be careful. The building’s full of supplies and some of them are bound to be explosive. Harry would kill us if we let you get hurt!” Fred added.

“Kill us? I don’t think they would find anything left of us if she got hurt,” added George.

Hermione bit her lip worriedly and wondered if this was really a good idea. But then she remembered Voldemort’s connection to the paper and her resolve strengthened. “Let’s do this,” she hissed at the twins and reached for the doorknob.

The three of them crept into the dingy alleyway behind the shop. Fred pointed in a direction and they slowly made their way up the alley. At one point, George held up his hand and tapped Hermione on the shoulder. She looked as he pointed to one building and she nodded. The twins

had pointed out her target.

Creeping further down the alley, they eventually came to a very large building. George pushed his hood back off his head and pulled out his wand. Fred took the bottle of termites from him and George showed Hermione the wand movements for the ward several times. She mimicked them and he nodded.

Once Hermione had the movements down, George cast the ward, giving her the incantation, which was surprisingly simple. There was a brief flash of blue light and the building glowed blue for a moment.

Then Fred opened the lid of the bottle and poured three quarters of the contents onto the stoop leading into the building.

Hermione watched in morbid fascination as the pile of termites stirred to life and flowed out over the stoop like a liquid. The termites moved up the steps and, as they did, the area they moved over crumbled to ash. All three stepped back as the termites hit the main part of the wall and spread out in a thin golden line. There was a groaning sound from the building and Hermione realized that she was literally hearing the building begin to collapse upon itself as the lower sections turned to ash.

“They’ll continue to feed and burn until there’s nothing left. Then the ward will kill them off,” Fred whispered as he handed Hermione the now capped bottle. “Take care of the other building. We’ll meet you there. We need to stay here for a bit to make sure they don’t get loose.”

Hermione grinned. This was more fun than she thought it would be! She took the bottle and headed back up the alleyway to the storage building.

Once Hermione was out of sight, George turned to Fred. “You know she’s going to kill us, don’t you?”

“Yeah, but consider the fun of pranking her!” came the gleeful reply.

---

## Hogsmeade...

It was a modest home set back a way from the narrow cul-de sac. Anyone who saw the house would have trouble believing it was home to the Wizarding Worlds latest media mogul, Fergus McNulty, owner and publisher of the Daily Prophet. McNulty tossed back another glass of Fire Whiskey and once again wished he had not approached his cousin looking for financial help.

The door burst open admitting Lucius Malfoy to the room. Lucius took one look and sneered at his cousin. Fergus had learned a long time ago that he was no match for his cousin in any sort of fight, so all he could do was cower and cringe before him.

“Oh stop cowering you pathetic excuse for a wizard!” Lucius snapped. “First, where are last weeks



proceeds?”

Fergus pointed a shaky hand to a corner where a bank draft sat beneath a large bag of galleons. Lucius walked over to the corner and looked at the draft, then he pocketed it. Opening the bag of galleons, he counted out twenty coins and tossed them on the floor in front of Fergus.

“Your salary,” he sneered. “You should be thankful I grant you that much, considering what you did to my fortune.”

Lucius tied off the bag of coins to his belt. Then he walked over to a chair and sat while he watched McNulty scramble about on the floor for the coins.

Once McNulty had picked up all the coins he stood and looked fearfully at Lucius.

“The Master wishes that you continue using Harry Potter’s name to promote Richfield,” he said, and then he barked a laugh. “These mindless sheep believe everything they see in that paper! Last week we were calling Potter a new Dark Lord and they hated him. This week we use him to endorse our candidate and the public loves him! Sheep, I tell you!”

McNulty shrugged, not daring to say anything.

“The Master wants you to...”

Lucius stopped, drowned out by a loud tearing sound. Dust rained down suddenly on the two men. The lights died and Lucius noted he could suddenly see stars overhead. The house shook and groaned. Then a voice called out.

“Fergus McNulty, come forth and be judged!”

The two men stumbled from the room, heading towards the exit. Before they could reach the door, it was pulled off its hinges and sucked away into the night. From the front lawn came a blinding light and the voice called out again.

“Fergus McNulty, stand and be judged!”

McNulty staggered out of the building and he was suddenly lifted off his feet. He hung suspended in the air several feet off the ground making mewling sounds in his throat. Lucius snarled and pulled out his wand. He had no intention of going down without a fight.

Still hidden inside the house and partially covered by the doorframe, Lucius could see figures in the blinding light. He lunged out of the door and aimed his wand at one of the figures in front. “*Avada Kedavra*,” he shouted.

The green beam lanced out from his wand and hurtled across the lawn. Another beam reached out from the figures and it intersected with Lucius’ spell, causing the killing curse to deflect straight up.

Lucius shuddered as his muscles locked and his wand snapped in his hand. Then he screamed when the bones in that hand were crushed to powder. He felt himself lifted up off the ground to hover next to Fergus.

His vision grayed for a moment. It then cleared enough for him to see a tall figure, whose face was concealed by a deep hood, step in front of the others. The light made it hard to see detail, but the man was tall and very thin. His hands appeared to be gnarled with age.

“Fergus McNulty, thou dost stand accused of lying to the public and of being a secret supporter of the half blood bastard, Voldemort. Thou art also accused of fabricating lies about Harry Potter,” said the gaunt figure in a dreadful voice.

The figure waved his hand and McNulty moved higher into the sky. As he moved, his clothing was torn from his body until he hovered twenty feet above the lawn, naked. Fergus moaned and tried to cover his nakedness.

“Thou hast been judged and found wanting, Fergus McNulty,” said the figure.

From the group of figures a ball of pale yellow light appeared. It rose slowly to hover near McNulty, who stared at it fearfully. The ball slowly started to circle McNulty and with each orbit it touched his skin once before returning to its orbit. McNulty screamed and whimpered in pain as the ball touched him and he fouled himself in fear.

Every point where the ball touched him, he was branded with the word “LIAR” in smoking flesh. The ball sped up in its orbit and McNulty passed beyond his threshold of acceptable pain as he fell unconscious. In a final flash of light, the ball vanished and McNulty was lowered slowly to the ground where he lay, barely breathing.

Lucius cringed at the treatment his idiot cousin had received and, for the first time that night, was afraid of what was going to befall him. He hovered only a few feet off the ground, immobilized by some unknown spell, and could only watch, helpless, as another figure approached him and started to search him. The figure removed the bank draft as well as the large pouch of galleons he had gotten from McNulty. He found another wand, which he snapped, and a portkey, which he banished. When the figure was done, Lucius had all the papers on him removed and, surprisingly, a muggle style wallet.

The figure finally turned to his fellows, bowed to the tall figure in the front and walked back to join the others.

“Lucius Malfoy,” intoned the gaunt figure in front, “know that the Brotherhood of Druidic Knights, along with the Order of the Phoenix, supports Harry Potter. Turn back from thy evil ways, lest thee risk thy immortal soul. Do not cross our path again. If thou dost, thy life will be forfeit.”

With a minor gesture from the gaunt figure, Lucius fell into a sound sleep. Then he was gently floated to the ground. All of the figures, except one, faded from site.

Harry pushed back the hood off his head and grinned. With a casual wave of one hand, a huge glowing silver Celtic cross appeared in the night sky, hovering over the wreckage that was the home of Fergus McNulty.

Harry chuckled. His illusion had worked even better than he thought possible. He took one last look around, then vanished without a sound.

---

## **Grimmauld Place...**

Fred, George and Hermione appeared in the foyer of 12 Grimmauld Place. Hermione was grinning and the twins were holding themselves, unable to contain their laughter any more.

Alerted by the noise, Remus appeared at the top of the stairs. “Hermione? Fred? George? What the blazes are going on here?”

Turning to look in the other direction, he called out, “Dan! Emma! Come on down to the kitchen. Hermione’s here.”

Remus quickly came down the stairs and ushered the giggling trio into the kitchen. Dobby appeared and put on a pot of tea. Fred and George collapsed in their chairs and broke into gales of laughter again. Hermione was finally coming down from her own adrenalin rush and watched the pot of water boiling with a heartfelt need for a calming cup of tea.

Remus sat down and looked at the twins and Hermione. “Alright Hermione, why are you out of Hogwarts and why are you with these two? And where the devil is Harry?”

“I think we should wait until he arrives, Remus. He said he’d meet us here.”

Remus slumped into a chair just as Dan and Emma burst into the room. Both of them went to Hermione, who stood to hug them both.

Remus waved to seats. “Sit down. I don’t know what’s going on yet, but apparently Harry will be here soon and we’ll learn what these three have been doing tonight.”

A few minutes later Tonks came into the room. She skidded to a halt spotting Hermione and the twins, and their concealment cloaks. Her eyes narrowed and looked at the three suspiciously before turning to Remus and the others.

“I’m sorry I’m late. We had two fires in Diagon Alley tonight and I had to remain on duty until they could clear away the mess...” she trailed off and looked at the twins as they broke down into fits of laughter again.

Placing both hands on her hips she glared at the two. “Would you mind telling me exactly what’s so funny about the destruction of two businesses on Diagon Alley tonight?”

Hermione gasped and turned white as a sheet. “Two businesses?” she stammered.

Tonks looked at Hermione and nodded. “Aye, the Daily Prophet burned to the ground, and someone did the same thing to Zonkos.”

“I see someone got a little creative with my instructions,” came a voice from behind Tonks.

Tonks screeched and tried to spin around, but tripped and fell into Remus’ lap, who instinctively put his arms around her. Harry stood grinning at Tonks, then his expression darkened as he turned to look at Hermione.

Seeing her expression, he turned to the twins and scowled. “Explain to me why my girlfriend looks ready to cry, and why you three destroyed Zonkos?”

Fred broke into a fit of laughter. “It’s not like it looks, Harry. Zonkos is a small business like our own. They rent part of the building, the rest of the building was owned by the Prophet and used for the storage of supplies,” stammered George.

“Burning down Zonkos was just the icing on the cake.” Fred said with a chuckle.

Hermione looked up, relieved that she had not *just* burned down an innocent business. Relieved, until her father jumped into the act.

“Hermione Jane Granger, please tell me you did not partake in arson tonight?”

Hermione sunk back down in her chair and wished she could become invisible.

“Now hold on everyone and I’ll tell you what is going on,” Harry said as he emptied his pockets, then unhooked the large pouch of money from his belt. “Tonight I put the Daily Prophet out of business, plain and simple. They’re gone and, while my little firebug squad might have gotten carried away with their efficiency, I can’t really fault them. While they were taking care of the physical buildings and printing presses, I decided to have a chat with Fergus McNulty, who by some strange quirk of fate, was being visited by his cousin tonight.”

Remus and Tonks stared hard at Harry when he mentioned McNulty’s cousin. “Malfoy? Did you leave him alive? You should have contacted Aurors, Harry!”

Harry sighed and shook his head. “Yes, I left him alive, though nursing an injured wand hand. Not that it matters, as he doesn’t have any wands anymore. And no, calling Aurors would have only put him back into a cell from which he would only have escaped again. Instead I left him with a message to not cross the Brotherhood if he wished to live.”

He pointed to the small pile of papers and the bag of money on the table in front of him. “This is all the stuff Lucius had on him; a bank draft, some money, some useless papers and a muggle wallet, if you can believe it. Tonks? Can you find a worthy charity that could use the money? Merlin knows I don’t need it.”

Dan reached over and started looking through the wallet.

Tonks nodded. “Sure, Mother Wilma’s Home. They provide a loving home for orphans of...” she trailed off, seeing the stricken look on Harry’s face.

She leapt from Remus’ lap, rushed to Harry’s side and wrapped him in a tight hug, while he fought a losing battle to keep from crying. It seemed that every time he turned around, he was learning about alternatives in the Wizarding world that could have provided him with a safe and happy home. Everyone sat in silence for a while, giving Harry a chance to pull himself together.

Tonks finally released him and he gave her a grateful glance as she sat down next to Remus. Then he angrily wiped away his tears. “Mother Wilma’s, you said? Emma, could you add that to our list? I don’t want to leave orphans unprotected.”

Harry blinked in astonishment as Emma produced a notebook from seemingly nowhere and scribbled a note down.

Hermione giggled at Harry’s expression. “Now you know where I get it from, Harry. Mum just uses pockets where I summon my notebook.”

“Let me get this straight,” Remus said heatedly. “Tonight you destroyed the Daily Prophet building, including irreplaceable printing presses that no one knows how to enchant anymore? You burned down Zonkos by mistake and you managed to beat up Lucius Malfoy, snapping his wand and robbing him of all his money in the process? Tell me Harry, what’s next?”

Harry frowned and looked at Remus. “I’m sorry, Remus, but that newspaper was working for Voldemort. I could have destroyed the building in the day, but I didn’t want to kill anyone. They were printing lies about me and I am getting tired of seeing it. And I will NOT allow them to use my name to elect a Death Eater Minister. Richfield might not be marked, but he’s supportive of the types of policies that Voldemort advocates.”

Remus sighed and slumped in his chair in defeat. “Alright, Harry, I can understand why you did what you did, but can you at least warn us before hand? Is that too much to ask?”

“I’m sorry, Remus. You’re right, I should have told you about it before hand. I’ll try to keep you informed of any actions I plan to take outside of Hogwarts from here on. In the meantime, to answer your question of what’s next. Simple, I’m going to have a spot of tea, then Hermione and I are going to return to Hogwarts.”

“Hermione,” Dan began, “I understand why you went along and why you did what you did. But if you’re going to insist on going on missions like this, I am going to insist you be more protected...”

“I have that partially covered, Dan,” said Harry in a serious tone. “I’m having Remus make up... well, armor of a sort...that we will be able to wear.”

“That’s all well and good Harry, but I don’t want my little girl...”

“Dad...”

“Not now pumpkin. As I was saying, Harry, I don’t want...”

“Daddy...”

“Hermione hush, I’m talking.”

“*Silencio*,” Hermione said in a sweet tone, her wand pointed at her father.

Dan’s mouth stopped moving as soon as he realized nothing was coming out of it. Everyone, including Harry, looked at Hermione in astonishment.

“Daddy, I love you to bits and, hopefully, after I’m done saying what I have to say, you’ll still love me. But you have to understand, I’m an adult and my world is at war. I’m fighting for my life and for yours. If Voldemort wins, you’ll die. I’m fighting for my right to be an active part of my world. If Voldemort vanished today, as a muggle born, I’d still be discriminated against. Oh sure, Harry would still love me and treat me as an equal, but if I wanted any meaningful work, I’d have no choice but to turn to the muggle world for it. I’m fighting for my right to live the way I want to live, to raise a family of children with the man I love in a peaceful world. It’s war and people are going to take chances and get hurt.

“Harry is doing everything in his power to keep me safe. He didn’t want me to go along tonight. He sent me along on the safer of the two missions. I know him. If he had his way, I’d always be left behind. But he respects me too much to do that to me. He knows I’ll be by his side when he eventually faces Voldemort. And I know he’ll take every step he can to protect me during that fight, but he won’t stop me from going.

“Daddy, it’s time to let go. I’ve grown up, I’m not your baby girl anymore and while I love how you’re always there for me, I don’t need you to bandage my skinned knee anymore,” she concluded softly, and then she released Dan from the spell.

Harry leaned back in his chair and watched the two of them as they exchanged one final silent clash of wills before Dan slumped in defeat.

“Pumpkin, I’m sorry,” Dan offered with a weak smile.

Hermione leaned over and hugged her father before standing and walking over to Harry. “You ready to go?” she asked. Harry looked up and did a double take. Hermione had a look on her face that he was slowly coming to recognize. Quickly he stood and bid everyone a good night. Hermione stepped into his arms, wrapping her own around his neck. The two vanished with a soft pop.

Back in the Gryffindor Head Suite Harry found himself being pushed into the bedroom by Hermione. As she did, she fumbled with his pants. This was an interesting aspect of Hermione that

he'd have to consider.

---

## Hogwarts, Ravenclaw Dormitory...

It was an unassuming thing, really. A small red book with a locking clasp, lying on the nightstand. Those sharing the room with its owner had learned to leave it alone in their early years at Hogwarts, but the man staring at it now wasn't aware of that.

Albus Dumbledore's eyes narrowed as he contemplated the little book. His search of the so-called 'Outcasts' belongings had been frustrating, as all their trunks had been warded against intruders. But the book intrigued him. He knew he didn't have a lot of time before classes were over for the day and he was becoming desperate. The notes he'd found in Terry Boot's book bag had raised some very dangerous questions in his mind, and he needed answers.

He picked the book up off the nightstand and ran a hand over the lock. Discovering it needed a key he drew his wand instead. With a flick and a murmur, the book popped open. A soft breeze blew through the room and he looked up, startled, but found nothing amiss. Frowning, he looked down at the first page.

*This book belongs to me, Luna Lovegood. Opening it is an offense that shall not be taken lightly. Several jinxes have been placed upon it, and you shall suffer each one in turn for invading my privacy. First shall be the Screaming Greenies, then the Brindle Braids, and finally, you will find yourself feeling quite sheepish over this foul deed you have committed.*

Dumbledore's lips twitched. The girl certainly had some bizarre ideas. The jinxes she listed didn't exist, of course, but they were amusing. What he couldn't figure out was why Harry and his group of friends had accepted the strange girl into their group.

With a shake of his head, he quickly turned the page and began scanning Luna Lovegood's diary for information, unsurprised to find that her entries fell in no particular order. He read about her troubles adjusting to Hogwarts and the cruelty of her housemates, about her crush on Draco Malfoy, her sexual fantasies and her goals for her life after graduation. And then, he found it.

### The Exodus from Hogwarts

*The plans are going well. Draco and I were informed over the Christmas Hols what our roles would be. I'm surprised that Harry would give me such a responsible job, but then, he's always treated me different than the other students at Hogwarts. He really is a nice person, and I'm so glad he and Dray are getting along now...*

The entry continued to ramble on for a few more pages, but never came back to the idea of 'The Exodus'. Albus scowled down at the little book in frustration. There had to be more!

Flipping pages more rapidly now, his frustration mounting, he had to restrain the urge to find the daft girl and shake the answers out of her. He honestly didn't want to know that her menstrual

cycle was as regular as clockwork, or that she fantasized about covering Draco Malfoy in chocolate pudding and licking it off.

He froze suddenly as his eyes quickly scanned the page before him.

### The Conflict

*Remus Lupin has informed us of a conflict that now exists between the prophecies. He's figured out a temporary fix for the problem, and I must say it's rather ingenious of him. But then, I always thought Professor Lupin was a smart man. It was a real shame when they replaced him as the DADA instructor. Honestly, to take a brilliant man like him and replace him with a Death Eater for a Professor? Sometimes I think I'm not the one who should be called 'Loony'!*

The entry came to an end and Albus nearly threw the diary across the room. Why couldn't the girl concentrate! He was quickly running out of time and the diary wasn't in any sort of chronological order. If he wished to learn anything further from the little book, he would have to copy it and take it with him.

Locking the book once more, he placed it back on the nightstand and drew his wand. With a swish, he murmured the spell to duplicate the diary...but nothing happened.

Dumbledore gaped at his wand, shocked. "What in Merlin's name is going on here?" he exclaimed, more loudly than he had intended. "Hmm...the wand? Doubtful, but...Lumos!"

His wand tip lit up brightly and he shook his head. Perhaps he's misspoken the incantation? Repeating the spell twice, he found he was still unable to copy the diary and, short of taking it with him and raising the girls suspicions, he had run out of time to read it further. Classes were due to let out any moment, and he could not be caught here!

Slipping his wand up his sleeve, he turned and quickly left the room. Reaching the Ravenclaw common room, he pulled out a small velvet bag of floo powder and tossed it into the fireplace. "My office!" he said firmly before stepping into the flames and disappearing.

---

### **Hogwarts Great Hall, Breakfast the Next Day...**

"Are you sure?" Ginny asked the blonde Ravenclaw intently.

"Yes...well, no, not really. I always put it back in the same place every time, but I was in a rush the last time I wrote in it. It's possible I wasn't paying attention when I put it back," Luna replied.

Ginny caught herself in time before she could roll her eyes at the other girl. Luna and 'paying attention' rarely went hand in hand. "Was there anything embarrassing in it?"

"Of course there was, Ginny. It's my diary after all." Luna frowned suddenly. "But that's not the problem. I wrote about the prophecy conflict, the evacuation of Hogwarts, the fact that we were



gathering a list of student names and addresses and why. There's a lot of information in my diary that we wouldn't want the other side to find out about."

"Damn," Ginny growled. "Could it have been a student? Maybe one of your dorm mates?"

"What's wrong?" Hermione asked the two, noticing their concerned expressions.

"Someone may have read Luna's diary yesterday and she'd written about some of our plans," Ginny explained.

"Oh Luna," Hermione said, closing her eyes. "You know that sort of stuff wasn't supposed to be left lying around! Now we have no idea who may have it."

Luna shook her head rather violently. "No, not true. I learned during my first year to protect my diary. I placed several jinxes on it and my House knows not to touch it now. I change them periodically, so no one knows if it will be something minor, like a boil, or something a little more serious, like spontaneous organ rejection."

Hermione and Ginny gaped at her.

"Spontaneous organ rejection," Hermione breathed. "Luna, you could kill someone with that!"

"Oh no, it's nothing that serious," the blonde replied with an airy little wave. "It simply expels an unneeded organ, like an appendix. Matilda Martin found that out when she tried to read my diary back when we were first years. She thought she had a cold, but when she threw up her appendix, she decided to visit Madam Pomfrey."

Hermione gagged. Ginny closed her eyes and tried desperately to clear her mind of the mental image.

"So," Ginny went on gamely, swallowing heavily, "you'll know who read it when they barf up an organ?"

"Ginny!" Hermione gasped. "I'm trying to settle my stomach, if you don't mind."

"Sorry, Hermione, but..." The younger girl looked at her helplessly.

"No, I didn't place that jinx on the diary this year," Luna replied, unaware of her tablemates' difficulties. "The first indication will be the Screaming Greenies."

"What..." Hermione began.

"Don't," Ginny whispered. "Please don't ask her."

Draco, who'd been listening to the conversation between the girls, couldn't help himself. He leaned towards the two Gryffindors and, wide-eyed, said, "I hear we're having kidney pie for dinner tonight."

Hermione closed her eyes and looked down, trying to control her rolling stomach. Ginny gave up and bolted from the Great Hall, her hand clasped tightly over her mouth.

“That was mean, Dray,” Luna said gently, watching the ginger haired young woman exit the hall with more speed than grace.

“True, but fun!” he quipped before turning back to his plate.

Harry, who hadn’t been paying attention, passed a platter to Hermione. “Sausage?” he asked her politely.

When the smell hit her, she had no choice but to follow Ginny from the hall.

He looked between the smirking Slytherin, the vague Ravenclaw and his fleeing girlfriend. “Was it something I said?”

Draco began to laugh. Luna shook her head and explained what had happened. When Hermione and Ginny returned to the hall, they found Harry watching them, his expression a cross between concern and amusement.

“Don’t even think about it, Potter,” Ginny growled as she sat back down.

“Wouldn’t dream of it, Weasley,” he said before turning to Hermione. “Are you all right?”

“Better, but please don’t offer me any food,” she pleaded.

Before he could reply, the air was filled with the rushing sound of wings as the morning post arrived. Not expecting anything, Harry was surprised when a plain looking buff colored owl landed in front of him and held out its leg. Taking the letter and tossing the bird a bit of sausage, he broke the seal and began to read.

With the Aurors in the school, we can’t continue our game. Meet me on the Astronomy tower at 2am tomorrow morning. Unless, of course, you’re too cowardly to come out from behind your wards!

When Hermione’s hand touched his arm, he jerked, startled. Looking up, he found her staring at him fearfully.

“Calm down, Harry,” she said softly.

When he looked at her uncomprehendingly, she reached over and picked up the spoon on his plate and held it up. His eyes grew large when he saw it was tied in a knot. She then waved her hand at the rest of the hall, and he found that his wasn’t the only spoon to have undergone a mutated form of the Uri Geller treatment. Students and teachers alike were all examining their new cutlery in puzzlement.

“I’m sorry,” he told her.

“Don’t be sorry, just tell me what’s happened.”

“Here, read this.” He passed her the letter and waited.

Reading quickly, she looked back at him, her eyes concerned. “You’re not thinking about going, are you?”

“I have to. Whoever wrote it was right about one thing. With the Aurors here, we’ll never find out who they are. This is my only chance.”

“I’m going with you,” she stated firmly.

“Hermione,” he began.

“No! Either I go with you, or you have a troupe of Aurors following you. Either way, I’m not letting you go alone,” she retorted fiercely.

He scowled and thought quickly. “All right, listen. We’ll sneak out using the invisibility cloak. Once we reach the Astronomy tower, you’ll stay under the cloak until we know what’s going on. Agreed?”

“Agreed, but don’t you think we should...”

She was interrupted by a gasp from Luna. Turning quickly, she found the blonde staring at the Head table, her blue eyes huge, magnified by the tears that began to well up. “How could you?” Luna whispered.

“Luna, what’s going on?” Draco asked, reaching for the girl.

“Look!” Ginny exclaimed loudly, pointing at the Head table.

Heads began to turn and laughter could be heard throughout the hall as students stared at the Headmaster. Albus Dumbledore was scowling down at his hands...his very green hands. Pulling up the sleeve of his robe, he saw that his arm was the same shade of green.

“You’re face too,” Minerva confirmed when he sent her a questioning look. “A prank, perhaps?” she asked, trying very hard not to snicker.

“Perhaps,” he muttered. Turning to face the students, he sought out one in particular. Scanning the hall, he found several Aurors openly grinning at him and clenched his teeth. He finally found who he was looking for when she stood up and pointed at him.

“How dare you!” Luna shrieked. “You, who is supposed to be good and wise and protecting? You’re nothing but a dirty old man! How dare you read through my diary, you pervert! Did you enjoy reading about my sexual fantasies?”

“Luna,” Draco said, standing beside her, “you need to calm down.”

When he suddenly flinched back from her, Harry looked at him sharply. Before he could ask what had happened, Luna's emotions washed over him and he blanched and found himself leaning away from her as well. She was enraged...and more. The pain and sense of betrayal she felt was heartrending.

The laughter in the hall stopped as each person experienced Luna's pain and anger and Dumbledore quickly found himself staring down at a hall full of scowling students.

"What's this?" a squeaky voice called out. "What has happened, my dear?" Flitwick asked, rushing toward the blonde.

"Professor Dumbledore has invaded my privacy and read my diary," she shouted, her blue eyes burning with anger and focused intently upon the Headmaster. "The reason his skin's green is because of the jinxes I placed on it to keep people from reading it."

Flitwick, who had reached Luna's side, turned suddenly and stared at Dumbledore in disbelief. "Is this true?" he asked.

"I do not think this is the place to discuss it, Filius," the Headmaster replied, trying to gather what was left of his dignity.

"Indeed it isn't," Auror Keith McComb called out, striding towards the Head table. "Perhaps this should be taken to your office, Headmaster." It wasn't a question.

"An excellent idea," Dumbledore replied.

Turning to face the hall, McComb found the distraught young woman and her Head of House. "Professor Flitwick, would you please escort your student to the Headmaster's office?"

"No! I don't want to be anywhere near that man. He's sick!" Luna cried.

Filius reached out and grabbed her hand in his. "Oh my dear," he said softly, tears falling down his cheeks, "of course you don't. We shall get this settled. I'm sure the good Auror can speak to you privately if he has any questions."

"As you wish, Professor," McComb said, eyeing the tearful girl closely. "Perhaps we should call in Auror Tonks."

"An excellent idea," Minerva said. "Miss Weasley, Miss Granger, please escort Miss Lovegood to my office. Auror Tonks can meet her there."

As Ginny and Hermione stood up, Draco gasped and Luna began to laugh coldly. Both girls spun quickly and stared at the Headmaster, their eyes wide. His skin was still green, but his hair and beard had become brindle colored and vine-like. As those in the hall watched, both hair and beard braided themselves tightly. So tightly in fact, that the Headmaster's eyes become mere slits and his mouth was pulled down into a fierce frown.

“The Brindle Braids,” Luna said, her fists clenched. “That’s the second jinx.”

Flitwick glared at Dumbledore. “So it’s true. You did read her diary,” the little man said in disgust.

“It certainly seems that way,” McComb said, his lips twitching into a smile. “Excellent charms work, Miss Lovegood.”

Luna faced the balding Auror, the heat of her gaze cooling some. “Thank you, sir. But what do you intend to do with the pervert?” she asked, jerking a thumb at the Headmaster.

“Ten points from Ravenclaw for your disrespect, Miss Lovegood,” Dumbledore exclaimed angrily.

“I don’t think so,” Filius said, glaring at the aged Headmaster. “Ten points to Ravenclaw for charms work beyond anything taught at Hogwarts.”

“And another ten points for Ravenclaw, Miss Lovegood,” Minerva called out, “for standing up for what’s right.”

Dumbledore scowled and Hermione and Ginny lead Luna from the hall. Standing, he drew himself up to his full height. “If you’ll follow me?” he asked the Auror and Flitwick. At their nods, he walked towards the exit.

---

### **Gryffindor Head Suite Common Room, That Evening...**

“The Board of Governors must be getting tired of having to meet because of Dumbledore,” Hermione said. She was angry over the decision to dump the situation into the Board’s lap, but understood that McComb didn’t really have a choice in the matter. The real damage, however, had yet to be calculated. Dumbledore now knew at least two pieces of their plan. Whether he could put them together was unknown.

Luna had joined her, Harry and the other Outcasts after dinner to explain what decisions had been made about the Headmaster’s actions. Most were sure Dumbledore would wiggle his way out of trouble like he’d done so many times before, but Luna seemed to shrug it off.

“If they’d just do something about the git, they wouldn’t have to meet so often,” Ginny said angrily.

“Don’t worry, Ginny,” Luna said calmly. “He’ll get what’s coming to him. Besides, the last jinx is going to take awhile to wear off. Having hair and a beard made of wool isn’t so bad in February, but the bleating sounds he’s making are rather distracting.”

The laughter ebbed away to be replaced by the shuffling of books and the crackle of parchment as the group pulled out their homework.

## **The Starry Sky...**

Harry slowly opened the door at the top of the stairs and he and Hermione stepped out on to the Astronomy tower. They had arrived early so they could be in place and prepared for whatever might come.

Walking to the corner closest to the door, Harry slipped out from under the invisibility cloak. “Stay here, Hermione,” he said quietly. “If you move, I may hit you if I have to cast.”

“I understand. Just make sure you’re not standing in a place where you can be caught by crossfire,” she warned.

With a nod, Harry walked away, finding a place against the stone rail. He turned his back to the door and looked out across the lake. It was a clear night, but bitterly cold. The stars were bright and their light appeared hard and unyielding, rather than soft and wavering.

He stiffened and palmed his wand when he heard the door behind him open.

“Well, well, what do we have here,” a cold voice asked. “While you may not be a coward, you certainly are stupid, Potter.”

---

### **Authors Notes:**

Yes its once again time for the dreaded authors notes. Do not touch that button! Sit and Read! We command it! Ok, we don’t really command it, but humor us eh?

First off, if you want to be added to the list of email alerts, click the link thingie that says Email Alerts. It just may surprise what it does.

As I have answered in previous author’s notes. I have never served in the military. I did however work for many years in the field of ASW for the US Navy and I consider myself a bit of a military history buff. I have enough of a military background, and boy I probably could do a great Harry Potter on a submarine story, but I think that’s taking AU to extremes. What I don’t know, I research. There is ample information on the net to make things sound correct. Not to mention my former boss of Engineering had a precursor to the STU in his office.

Yes I enjoyed most of Clancy’s earlier novels. I don’t care for some of his new stuff however.

Private note to Mozes: Yes you can printout our story for your daughter and her group of friends. AND if they come up with a suitable proposal idea for Harry, I wouldn’t mind hearing about it. Just one thing though. No room of requirement. That’s old hat and I’m hoping to come up with something refreshingly different.

Some of you have forgotten this IS A SUPERPOWERED Harry story. A VERY

SUPERPOWERED Harry. His heart is pure, he has the strength of ten grinchies etc... Heh... he may be superpowered, but don't expect me to let him use it all that often.

Last chapters AN's were short because we have few reviews to drive them. Sorry about that, but that's FF.net's fault, not ours.

As far as where you should post reviews. As of this chapter, if you have a question and want it answered, post it to our Yahoo Group. If you just want to issue a death threat, or pat us on the back, post the review to this system. If you want to pay us in money, sheckels, yaun, pounds, marks, francs or jelly donuts, email me. (Jelly Donuts are our preferred method of currency)

Ok, in case no one saw it. This chapter puts us effectively at MID-FEBRUARY. The clock is ticking down and things are starting to really roll downhill.

Fanfiction.net. Let's put that issue to bed right now. The sequel to Sunset will not be posted at ff.net. They burned their bridge when they took sunset down with no warning whatsoever. DA and SC will eventually migrate to this system, hopefully after Sunset is finished.

Red Europe represents a worst case scenario where the remnants of Europe's military forces flee Europe as the Soviets take over. Its similar to what happened to the French Navy when a lot of its ships fled to French Algiers in World War II and ultimately came under control of Vichy France. In this case, escaping to American and Canadian ports would keep a bulk of the British Navy out of Voldemort's hands and remove their nuclear component. While once a upon a time Britannia might have ruled the waves, they really don't anymore (But don't tell the British that, we don't want them mad at us!). It's a powerful navy, but its not going to give Voldemort access to more territory.

And now.... drum roll please!

(Alyx steps out from behind the curtain and rolls a drum around the stage)

Alyx looks and Bob and scowls. "This is really silly Bob!"

IT'S TIME FOR...

**PET PEEVES!!!**

RECAPS!!!!!! Lets see if I understand the logic here. I'm reading Harry Potter fan fiction, mostly 6th and 7th year fictions. Now I would have to guess it would be safe to say the odds are good that I probably know the plot line at least up until the end of Order of the Phoenix right? RIGHT? Then why do so many authors seem to find it necessary to recap Harry's life with chapter after chapter of material. I mean, yeah, we know who Harry is. The Boy-Who-Lived. Do we really need to know the number of bowel movements he had in his second year? A couple paragraphs of recaps is ok... but I've seen some authors take recapping to whole new levels by repeating verbatim things that happened in the books. I've seen a couple stories that completely puke up that whole Harry/Dumbledore conversation at the end of book five. Got news for you guys. I've read the

book.



## **Sunset Over Britain**

### **A False Sense of Security**

#### **Standard Disclaimer:**

Ron Weasley cackles evilly as he lifts above the cloud cover on his stolen Firebolt. “They’ll never catch me now!” he shouts to the empty sky, then he turns to the camera.

“Imagine the nerve of them! They wanted me to tell you that they don’t own these characters, then they’d try to kill me! But I’m too smart for them! I escaped and they’ll never catch me now!”

Behind Ron on his Firebolt a RAF Harrier rises vertically from the cloud cover. Cadet Pilot Alyx flips the weapon selector to Sidewinders and grins evilly. Behind her, Harry and Hermione fall into a backup position flying F-20 Tigersharks.

---

#### **Sunset Over Britain**

#### **Chapter 19**

---

#### **U.K. Side of the Channel Tunnel...**

The first sign there was a problem came from a leak monitor in a control building, at the Channel Tunnel Shuttle station. Before anyone could react to the minor alarm, more alarms all over the building started screaming.

An operator paled at his console and slammed his hand down on the emergency control that signaled to the trains in the tunnel of a possible problem.

For the two high speed Eurostar passenger rail trains it was too late. Both trains, one traveling towards France and the other traveling to the U.K. slammed into a wall of rushing water at over one hundred miles per hour.

Investigators on the French side would later speculate that a large cache of high powered explosives had exploded in the middle of the service tunnel, which interconnected the two outer rail tunnels. While interesting, it was little comfort to the more than four thousand dead.

## Showdown atop the Astronomy Tower...

Harry turned to find himself confronted with Theodore Nott Jr., flanked by Vincent Crabbe and Gregory Goyle. Behind them, Anthony Goldstein of Ravenclaw and Pansy Parkinson rounded out the group.

Harry crossed his arms over his chest. He wouldn't need a wand with this crowd. "Well, if it isn't the Hogwarts chapter of the 'I lick Voldemort boots' club," Harry sneered.

"Hand over your wand, Potter. We have you outnumbered," snarled Nott.

Harry barked out a laugh. "Outnumbered? I didn't realize you knew how to count, Nott. You five couldn't outnumber me if you brought another fifty people with you."

All five pulled their wands. And all five cast spells, or they would have, but Harry had already immobilized and silenced them.

"Oh, put those away and kneel." Harry said softly, his magic pulsed just beneath the surface and his eyes flared with power. A chill wind whipped across the top of the tower and Harry's robes billowed out behind him. Each of the five Death Eaters felt a chill run down their spines as the power of his gentle command took hold. Harry then dispelled the silencing charm.

Pansy trembled, then moaned as she put her wand away and pitched to her knees. A moment later Goldstein, Goyle and Crabbe followed her. Nott stood trembling, his eyes bugging out as he put his wand away and fell to his knees.

"How are you doing this, Potter? What magic is this?" Pansy screamed.

Harry smiled softly, but the smile held no warmth. "I've not yet begun to really use my magic, Pansy. Now the real question is, what should I do with you, a couple of junior Death Eaters? Old Voldemort wouldn't care if I killed you, and he probably wouldn't care if I crippled you. No, I think something special's needed tonight. Something that'll embarrass him and shame you."

Harry gestured and five right sleeves were torn away exposing their Dark Marks. "Now, let's see. Being a Death Eaters is a crime, but you cowards will only claim you were under the *Imperio* us Curse and get off with a warning from our lovely Ministry. Killing you is so messy, blood and gore and all that. Not to mention the problem of disposing your bodies. I certainly can't leave you to rot up here, can I? You know, I have just the job for you five!"

All five sagged in relief at the pronouncement. He wasn't going to kill them!

Harry looked to an apparently empty spot next to the door. "Hermione, would you please go down to Professor McGonagall's quarters? Ask to use her floo, then contact Tonks, ask her to gather some Aurors, Mr. Lovegood and his photographer and meet me in the Great Hall in a half hour?"

There was the sound of cloth swishing as Hermione came out from underneath the invisibility cloak. She looked undecided and very worried. The five students gaped at her sudden appearance, then Nott turned back to Harry.

“You’re the one going to prison, Potter! You used an *Imperio* us Curse on us! She’s a witness to it!”

Harry looked at Nott in amusement. “You know Nott, you’re almost as much fun as your father was before I disemboweled him. Now, for your information, I didn’t use any form of *Imperio* us Curse on you. I am manipulating your bodies directly via your auras. For example Teddy, how would you like to know what it’s like to be unable to breathe?”

“Harry,” warned Hermione.

“No, no, Hermione. I’m not going to really hurt him. I’m just giving him a little demonstration.”

Hermione nibbled on her lip worriedly before nodding. Nott knelt on the floor staring up at Harry, his eyes bugging out of his head as he tried to suck in the air his body was screaming for. Thirty seconds later, he discovered he could draw air once more and sucked in huge quantities in great gulping gasps.

“Hermione, please? Get Tonks and Mr. Lovegood? I promise you that the punishment I give them will be appropriate. In fact, it will be ironically suiting.”

Frowning, she finally gave in and walked through the door. Harry watched her go, smiling fondly. “She’s a marvelous girl. Trusting and smart as a whip. I think one day she’ll be more famous than Rowena Ravenclaw, despite her muggle parents. Is it any wonder that I love her?” Harry asked, and then he paused in thought before continuing. “But then you Death Eaters turn up your nose at love, don’t you? Oh well, your loss.”

Harry paced the tower twice. Standing in front of his victims once more, he looked them over carefully. “I think I should mete out a punishment that you must live with, and can’t tell anyone about. And while I have use of you, you’re going to help me bring down the great Albus Dumbledore.”

He noticed the look of panic in their eyes and chuckled to himself. “Oh, don’t worry, I’m not going to make you fight Dumbledore. Although that would be amusing. No, I am just going to expose you and your marks to the world and let public opinion do the work for me.

“I’ve recently become interested in memory charms coupled with the idea of manipulating auras. You’d be surprised what I’ve discovered. However, this is a poor place to be giving lectures, especially to five boot lickers such as you. Not to worry, that particular career path will be closed to you shortly,” Harry said, smiling coldly.

Harry stretched out a hand in front of the five kneeling students. Pansy moaned in fear and even Nott cringed when Harry’s hand burst into a coruscating halo of light. Harry’s expression

darkened and his stance seemed to alter, to become more menacing. The wind whipped across the tower top in a steady shriek and Harry's eyes burned with power.

Anthony Goldstein whimpered "Mercy... oh Merlin, have mercy! I didn't know what I was doing!"

"I curse you five. For your crimes I curse you. From this moment forward you will renounce your magic and demand to live as muggles. From this moment forward you will harm no one. To do so will cause you pain beyond mortal reckoning. From this moment forward you will remember your crimes each night, and spend your days working to atone for them. From this moment forward you will tell no one of what has happened here tonight," Harry intoned.

When he finished speaking he looked at the five sadly. They looked at each other, shuddering and afraid.

Nott was sobbing softly in front of Harry. Pansy looked up from her spot. "Who are you to curse us so harshly?" she asked in a whisper. Her body wracked with tremors as Harry's power coursed through her.

An odd sort of feeling came over Harry as he contemplated her question. "I am what our world has needed for many centuries, Pansy. I am a Gray Lord," he replied softly. "Now come my friends, let's go prepare a little surprise for our Headmaster, shall we?"

All five cringed and slowly got to their feet.

---

## **Malfoy Manor...**

Lucius stumbled into his Master's chambers. He had been absent for a few days while forced to heal himself. There were few healers among the Death Eaters, at least none that Lucius would trust.

"Lucius! I sent for you days ago! Why have you ignored my summons?" snarled Voldemort. The gaunt Dark Lord stared at Lucius Malfoy, his red eyes balefully gazing at him.

"I beg your forgiveness, my Lord, but I was injured and attending to my wounds," he replied, then he held up his hand which was still a deep purple in color, even though the bones had been fully re-grown.

"Injured? Why was I not informed of this? How were you injured?"

"I was delivering your instructions to my cousin Fergus when we were attacked, my Lord. Fergus is now hospitalized and probably won't be released for months, if his mind ever recovers. This happened the same night that the Daily Prophet was destroyed my Lord."

“Come closer, Lucius. I would see this attack for myself,” Voldemort said in a sibilant whisper.

Trembling Lucius stepped forward.

“Legilimens,” Voldemort murmured, his bony hand pointing his wand at Lucius.

Lucius’ trembling increased and he moaned in pain as Voldemort ripped the memory of the attack from him and examined it. Legilimency could be as gentle as a feather or as brutal as a battle-axe and Voldemort preferred a straightforward approach. Lucius fell to his knees, trembling violently. Another Death Eater quickly handed him a bucket which he leaned over, waiting to be sick. Voldemort kept up his assault on his mind while the last scion of House Malfoy trembled and lost his dinner into the small bucket.

Finally Voldemort released Lucius from the spell and the man collapsed to the floor.

Voldemort holstered his wand and sat back in his chair, his chin cupped by one hand, thinking. Then he waved to another Death Eater who came forward to stand next to Lucius Malfoy. “Take him up to his room and see that a healer checks his hand. Then see if our spy is still in the building. I would speak with him.”

Bowing, the Death Eater levitated Lucius and left the room with the floating limp body following him.

Less than ten minutes later a tall bald black man entered the chamber.

“Ah, excellent. Tell me, what do you know of this Brotherhood of Druidic Knights?” asked Voldemort.

“Almost nothing, my Lord. Dumbledore had gone to great lengths to try to find out information about them, but I am beginning to wonder about his actions. He protested their actions too much, then drops all interest in the group. If I didn’t know better, I’d suspect there might be a connection between Dumbledore and the Brotherhood that we do not know about.”

“Interesting. Yes, I can see how a secret alliance between the Brotherhood and the Order would be to his advantage. He can keep his do-gooders who are afraid to really fight in check while he lets the Brotherhood do the dirty work for him and he still gets the credit for it because the Brotherhood is so secretive,” Voldemort said.

Then he turned to his spy. “Find out everything you can on the Brotherhood, and why they are so attached to Potter. Is he leading them? Is the Brotherhood really a more violent subgroup of the Order, or are they two separate organizations?”

The spy bowed. “As my Lord commands,” he replied, then he spun around and walked from the room.

## Hogwarts Great Hall...

The suspended lights in the Great Hall were out when the doors swung open. Professor McGonagall led a party of eight Aurors, Hermione Granger, Bertrand Lovegood and a photographer into the Great Hall. She looked up in surprise when the overhead candles failed to turn on when the doors opened. The spell was built into the skylight charm on the room!

She gave Hermione a questioning glance and Hermione motioned to the Head Table. There, a single small spotlight moved and danced, changing color. As they approached, Hermione relaxed. She could hear Harry playing his Tin Whistle. The orb of light was pulsating, moving and changing its color to the beat of the music.

As the group approached, they saw that Harry sat with his feet up on the table, his chair tilted back. He seemed oblivious to their presence and, as he played, the orb spun in an entrancing display of magical pyrotechnics.

When he finished, he seemed to shake himself out of a trance and looked up. Spotting McGonagall and her displeased expression for his current relaxed posture, he started. Feeling like a first year caught after curfew, he quickly removed his feet from the table and his chair slammed upright. He was convinced that fifty years from now, his Professor would still be able to make him feel ashamed at his actions.

“You’re all here! Excellent,” Harry said, standing up.

“Harry, what is this all about?” asked Tonks bewildered.

Harry looked to Hermione who grinned impishly. “I didn’t exactly tell them why you needed them, Harry.”

His return grin was wicked and his eyes danced with amusement. “We’ll make a marauder out of you yet, Hermione!”

Turning back to the bewildered Tonks and the others, he spotted Luna’s father. “Mr. Lovegood, I know you’re a busy man as the owner of the largest Wizarding publication in Britain, but I have a story for you which I think might interest your readers. As I’m sure you are aware, the defunct Daily Prophet used to routinely claim that Hogwarts contained Death Eaters. A charge, I might add, our illustrious Headmaster denied vehemently.

“Well, I intend to prove him wrong tonight. You see, earlier today I received a message inviting me to a meeting where I was supposed to provide the entertainment.”

As Harry talked, his orb of light slid higher and moved close to one wall.

“It was an interesting meeting but wisdom prevailed and I managed to talk some sense into my fellow students.”

As he finished speaking, the orb burst into a blaze of light, illuminating the Great Hall. Everyone blinked for a moment and, as their vision cleared, they could see five students stuck to the wall. Their Dark Marks were clearly visible on their arms.

“Mr. Lovegood, I’d like to introduce you to five Death Eaters...students of this ‘safe’ school. Starting on the right we have Theodore Nott Jr., Gregory Goyle, Vincent Crabbe and Pansy Parkinson of Slytherin House. The one on the end is Anthony Goldstein of Ravenclaw.”

Harry continued, explaining how he had managed to convince these students of the error of their ways and how they were ready to confess everything. As he did, Mr. Lovegood’s photographer was merrily clicking away while Mr. Lovegood scribbled notes down. When Harry finally wound down, Tonks motioned to the Aurors to disarm the students. She glanced at Harry with a questioning look.

“No, Tonks, I’ve used no potions on them. They truly want to confess their crimes and are willing to give information freely,” Harry said with a bit of a grin.

Hermione shot him a startled look, wondering just what he had done to them. Harry released them from the wall and waved his hand to activate the regular lighting in the Hall. Every Auror present whipped out their wand when the students slipped free. A moment later they stood in total shock as five wands dropped to the floor. Each student looking at their own wand as if disgusted with it.

“What in the name of Merlin is going on in here?” shouted Dumbledore from the entrance of the Great Hall. He wore a night robe, and even from a distance it was obvious that something was off about him.

“I was wondering when the Supreme Mugwump would show up,” Harry said under his breath. Then he turned and plastered a huge grin on his face. “Headmaster! Come see! We have five Death Eaters who are willing to confess their crimes!”

Harry waved the Headmaster to come closer while the Quibbler’s photographer continued to snap off photos.

Dumbledore stumbled up the aisle towards the waiting group and, as he did, Harry’s eyes widened. Dumbledore’s beard and hair had been replaced with a thick curly coat of gray wool. Hermione leaned closer to the startled Harry and murmured, “It’s Luna’s final hex for reading her journal.”

Harry fought a losing battle with the desire to snicker at the wooly Dumbledore. The Quibbler photographer backed up slightly to be partially out of sight from the Headmaster and continued taking his photos, making sure to include the Headmaster in some of the shots.

Dumbledore scowled when he saw the Aurors present, and five students with exposed Dark Marks. His scowl only deepened when he noted the presence of Bertrand Lovegood and a photographer. He had to nip this in the bud right now or his reputation would be ruined. For years people believed that Hogwarts was safe because, he, Albus Dumbledore, kept the Death Eaters and other bad elements at bay.

“Mr. Lovegood, while I respect the power of the press, I must insist that you print none of this. These children have obviously been forced into taking the Dark Mark and are not truly evil. They are misguided by their parents and other authority figures in their lives,” Dumbledore said.

Bertrand on the other hand merely nodded and continued to write down everything the Headmaster said.

“That’s not true, Headmaster,” offered Theodore Nott. Dumbledore paled as Nott added, “At my initiation revel, I helped kill one muggle and raped another. We all did something similar in our initiations,” he offered with a gesture to the others, who nodded at his comment.

“B-B-Baaaaa...But...no this can’t be. I’m sure you weren’t yourselves. Yes, that’s it. You were probably under the influence of an *Imperio* us Curse,” Dumbledore stammered lamely.

“Headmaster, while I’m sure this is all very interesting, I have to remove these students to the Ministry for questioning, and you have to inform their parents that they have already confessed to being willing supporters of Voldemort,” said Tonks.

Dumbledore nodded and sat heavily on one of the benches. He was watching his reputation go up in smoke.

Harry placed an arm around Hermione’s shoulders and turned towards Professor McGonagall. “Professor? Unless you need us, I think it’s time we turned in. We have class tomorrow and it’s quite late.”

McGonagall frowned at him for a moment, then nodded. “Quite so, Mr. Potter. Off you two go, then.”

Everyone filed out and, within moments, the only person still remaining in the Great Hall was the Headmaster.

---

## **Gryffindor Head Suite, Later That Night...**

“What did you do to those five anyway?” Hermione asked. She was curled up on their bed, watching as Harry went through his nightly Tai Chi meditations.

Harry stopped and looked over at her, grinning. “It wasn’t nearly as bad as you might think. I gave them a heavy memory charm, altering their views on several subjects. I gave them a fairly impressive light show, making them think I was doing a lot more than I really was. I’m shamed to admit I seriously thought about hurting them though,” he said, his eyes sliding away from hers.

“But I couldn’t!” he then blurted. “I’d already subdued them and they were no threat at all. Hurting them or killing them just wasn’t an option. I wasn’t protecting anyone at that point.”



Harry walked over and sat on the bed pulling his knees up to rest his chin against them. “As much as I wanted to hurt them, and believe me, I wanted to hear them whimper and beg for mercy, I just couldn’t do it. I had to settle for something entirely different. I wanted them to pay, but I couldn’t hurt them.”

Hermione smiled gently at him and placed a hand on his arm. “So instead you gave them a desire to live their lives as muggles, knowing that deep down they’d hate every second of it? If you ask me, you’ve hurt them far worse with that punishment than you could have by crippling or killing them. It is a suitable punishment and you have no blood on your hands from it. That alone should make you proud of what you’ve done tonight.”

Harry peered at her for a long moment as if he were trying to determine if she was trying to hold something back from him. Slowly he relaxed and nodded. She held out her hand. “Come to bed, Harry. It’s late and we need to get some sleep.”

Smiling, he took her hand and silently thanked whatever gods there might be that he had not given into to the temptation to blast Nott to pieces.

---

## **Ministry of Magic, Department of Magical Law Enforcement...**

It was later than usual for Amelia and ordinarily she would have been at home, but earlier tonight Remus Lupin had firecalled, letting her know that Harry needed Aurors at Hogwarts. Hearing that, she had decided to return to the office. So it was no surprise to her when Auror Tonks knocked on her open door.

Amelia waved the young Auror to a waiting seat. “So what do you have tonight, Tonks?” she asked with a slight smile. Knowing Harry was involved meant that it was either going to be very messy, or very surprising. His last adventure resulted in the rescue of the Grangers, and six dead Death Eaters, plus a fair amount of personal injury to himself.

“Director, it seems Harry managed to convince five Death Eaters to surrender peacefully tonight. Every one of them is right now providing a full detailed confession without the use of any truth serum, although all have agreed freely to use a truth serum to verify their confessions. And all five are currently sixth year students enrolled in Hogwarts,” Tonks said softly.

Amelia’s eyebrows climbed high up on her forehead as she realized the magnitude of what Tonks was telling her.

Tonks handed Amelia her Aurors Pensieve with a copy of her memories of the night’s events.

“Tonks, I’d like a full report on my desk by nine hundred tomorrow. In the meantime, I need to make a firecall. Good work tonight,” Amelia said with a smile to mitigate the curt dismissal.

---

## Gryffindor Head Suite...

While Harry and Hermione slept quietly in their beds, two people arrived in the other bed room, only a few minutes apart.

Draco arrived a few minutes ahead of Luna and he took the opportunity to light a few candles in the room. Harry had made two special portkeys that remembered the starting point. The portkeys were passed among the couples of the Outcasts so they could take advantage of the unused bedroom in the Gryffindor Head Suite. This was the first time Luna and Draco were using them, and Draco was honest enough to admit to himself that as much as he wanted Luna, tonight was going to be a night for talking only.

Luna was still upset about Dumbledore violating her privacy. Though Professor Flitwick had assured her that he would lodge a formal complaint with the Board of Governors this very evening, she took little comfort from it. Draco wanted desperately to help her in any way he could. If that meant listening to her rage, or just giving her a shoulder to cry on, he would do it.

Placing a silencing charm on the room and sealing the door, he dug a few bottles of cold butter beer out the bag he brought and placed them next to a platter of snacks he'd had a house elf make up for him before he came to the room.

It had taken him a fair amount of convincing to talk Luna into using one of the portkeys he had borrowed for the night. He had to chuckle. A few weeks back most of the Outcasts had met without Harry and Hermione to discuss asking them to make the portkeys. After Harry had made them, no one had been able to work up the nerve to ask for them yet...until now!

He lit the fire in the fireplace and had just settled into the small loveseat when Luna appeared. Her attire shocked him. He was still fully clothed and she was barely dressed. She wore a loosely tied robe and underneath that, a thin gossamer night shirt that made his heart beat wildly.

Seeing his mode of dress, she gave him a questioning look as he waved her to the loveseat. Draco blushed under her gaze and he shifted uncomfortably on the loveseat, trying to hide what she was doing to him.

"Dray? Why are you still dressed?" she asked in her typical airy tone.

Draco blushed even deeper. "Luna, I... I... I didn't ask you here for that..."

"Oh... I thought you wanted to have sex with me," she replied softly.

"I do Luna... Merlin, never doubt that! But you were so upset tonight in the Great Hall, I thought you might want to talk about it..." he said, trailing off and feeling foolish. Inwardly he winced. *Me? The arrogant pure blood son of a Death Eater wanting to comfort my girlfriend and get all*

*touchy feely with her emotions? What am I turning into?* He wondered to himself, trying not to shake his head.

Luna smiled gently at him and he could feel a wash of warmth flood him. “I really thought you wanted to have sex, Dray. But this is even nicer. You’re turning into a wonderful man. You might not see it, but I do.”

“I’m sorry if I gave you the wrong idea, Luna. I just wanted to be there for you if you were still upset,” he added.

Luna turned on the loveseat so she could lie against him and stared into the fire. Her robe opened, revealing more detail, and Draco trembled as he wrapped an arm around her.

“I admit I was very angry tonight. I know how badly the Headmaster has hurt Harry, but this is the first time he’s really done anything to me. In a way, tonight, he proved Harry’s case once and for all time in my mind, Dray. I don’t get angry like that often, it’s not good for people around me,” she said, then she shifted her position on the loveseat slightly, giving Draco an even better view.

Draco bit his lip for a moment and pulled his eyes away from the view to stare at the fire. “I’m glad you don’t get angry often. You had everyone in the hall angry. I’m a strong wizard and I don’t think I could do what you did in just a few seconds. I was worried about you,” he replied, then he shifted slightly trying to get comfortable.

“That’s sweet,” she murmured. “But I think it’s even sweeter that you’re trying very hard to keep me from noticing how excited I’ve made you.” She twisted so she was lying on her side against him, then she reached up and caressed his erection through his pants. Draco closed his eyes and tightened the grip he had on her. “Are you sure you don’t want to have sex, Dray?” she asked softly.

Draco gently pushed her to a sitting position, stopping her from what she was doing. “I can’t, Luna. As much as I want to, I can’t have sex with you, at least not tonight.”

“May I know why?” she asked in an inquisitive tone.

Draco dropped his eyes and refused to meet her gaze. “Because I don’t want sex with you Luna, I want to make love with you,” he whispered.

Luna laughed a throaty laugh and caressed his cheek gently. “You surprised me,” she said softly. “You really have a romantic side to you. If you want to make love, I’ll have to start to teach you how.”

Draco looked at her in surprise. “But…”

She silenced him with a gentle hand over his mouth. “Hush for a moment, Dray. Let me explain. Making love means you’ll have to get used to my emotions, all of them. We could have sex right now and you’d not feel them, but if you want to make love you feel them all.” She stopped and

noticed just how uncomfortable he still was. As much as he tried, his eyes kept straying to her body. “Do you trust me?” she asked him.

“You know I do!”

“Then let me show you what I mean.”

She reached over to him and opened his pants at the waist and exposed his erection. Draco blushed and reached for her as she gently gripped him. She pumped him a few times softly then moved so she could straddle his legs. He ran one hand along her flank and gently cupped her breast through her nightshirt.

Still holding his erection gently she looked over his shoulder for a moment. “In order for us to make love, Dray, you need to learn how to handle what I feel, or this is what will happen.”

She stared intently into his gray eyes and a wave of passion and arousal swept through him. His body shuddered and he pulled her down on top of him tightly. She closed her eyes holding him as he came against her from her emotions alone. His whole body trembled and he chanted her name into her hair again and again. It was unlike anything he had ever experienced. After what seemed like an eternity to him, his body finally began to relax. Luna pushed herself up slightly against the back of the loveseat and looked at him dreamily.

He reached up to caress her cheek and suddenly became totally aware of what he had just done. “Luna... oh Merlin, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean... it just... oh Merlin!”

“You need to learn to control that response so we can make love,” she said, smiling softly and leaning over him. “And I’ll be happy to help try to teach you. My mother started to explain what would happen, but she died before she could explain it all. We’ll have to help each other learn, I’m afraid.”

He pulled her into his arms again. “You and I are going to talk about this,” he replied in a mock growl, but he couldn’t help smiling.

In the other bedroom of the Gryffindor Head Suite, Hermione opened her eyes. Her first response was automatic, she glanced at the clock that Harry had bought and sighed. It was only four A.M. She rolled to face Harry and was surprised to see him smiling at her.

“What?” she said in a low tone.

“Nothing, I was just thinking,” he replied, then he started to chuckle.

“What’s so funny?”

“I was just thinking how I sounded the last time we.... um... did it.”

“How you sounded?”

“Yeah, like that Bulgarian Viktor Krum. ‘Hermy-own-nee’”

She leaned up on one elbow and frowned at him. “And this amuses you? That you mangle my name in the throes of passion?” she asked in a frosty tone.

“Not that, exactly. See, I’ve been laying here thinking about possible nicknames for you.”

*Now he’s really on thin ice*, she thought. “Oh? Such as?” she asked again in a tone approaching glacial.

“Well, Hermy is out if you ask me, so are any variations like Herms or Hers. So next I tried chopping the ‘Her’ off...you know, like ‘Mione’. It’s actually not a bad nickname, but still doesn’t quite fit you. Then I thought, all right, really short names. Nee? Mi? Ion?”

Harry proceeded to rattle off a dozen more names, never noticing the slowly steaming girl in his arms. She was about to interrupt him when he paused and looked at her seriously.

“None of them really suit. You will always be my Hermione. It’s a wonderfully unique name for a wonderfully unique woman. I may occasionally stumble over it, but I wouldn’t want to call you anything but Hermione,” he concluded, then he kissed her forehead gently and pulled her close to him.

Hermione lay in Harry’s arms wondering what the heck had just happened. Within the span of a minute he had gotten her spitting mad at him, then he yanked the rug out from under her feet. And she couldn’t be mad at him now. Besides, it wouldn’t do her any good. He’d fallen asleep! She huffed a few times to herself, promising that she’d seek some suitable revenge on him, then she snuggled closer and quickly fell asleep herself.

---

## **Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, Early morning...**

Minerva McGonagall was still in her nightgown and robe when a house elf informed her that visitors had arrived at the castle and were asking for her specifically. She instructed the elf to inform the visitors that she would be with them shortly, then she hurried to get dressed.

Ten minutes later, she rushed down to the Entrance Hall and was surprised to find Esther Hampton, Amelia Bones and Constance Longbottom. She wasn’t sure what was going on, but something extraordinary was in the works.

“I apologize for getting you up so early, Professor, but we have need of your services as Deputy Headmistress today. And this is why,” Hampton said, handing her a copy of the morning’s edition of the Quibbler.

Death Eaters Captured Hogwarts

*Confessions made to crimes within the school grounds!*

*Last night in a surprise move, the publisher of the Quibbler was asked to attend a meeting at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. We were invited to attend the meeting by Harry Potter, the Boy-Who-Lived. Also attending the meeting were several Aurors, Professor Minerva McGonagall, Hermione Granger, a student of Hogwarts and Headmaster Dumbledore, who for some strange reason, was dressed like a sheep.*

*At the meeting, Harry Potter, the Boy-Who-Lived, and a close personal friend of the publisher's daughter, exposed five students, all sixth year students and all marked Death Eaters. According to Ministry sources, all five Death Eaters voluntarily surrendered to Aurors and have provided full, detailed confessions. The students names are being withheld pending notification of the Nott, Goyle, Crabbe, Parkinson and Goldstein families.*

*Headmaster Dumbledore arrived late to the meeting, dressed in some bizarre sheep costume. The Quibbler has long suspected that Dumbledore may be raising an army of lethal sheep in the dungeons, now we know for sure. The five student Death Eaters discarded their wands without being told, then one admitted to killing a muggle and raping another. According to the Ministry, all of the surrendered Death Eaters have offered similar stories. It must be noted that these stories and the presence of the Death Eaters in Hogwarts goes entirely contrary to everything Headmaster Dumbledore has been saying in regard to the school. Ministry sources indicate that they are now opening several investigations into some crimes that have occurred within Hogwarts where the victims may have been obliterated.*

Minerva looked up from reading the article and paled. Her school! Her students!

“Professor McGonagall, we are here on school business. Please accompany us to the Headmaster's office,” Esther Hampton said in a coldly formal tone.

All Minerva could do was nod and fall in behind the other members of the Board of Governors.

At the entrance to the Headmaster's office, Esther made a motion with her wand and the Gargoyle sprang to life, lifting the stairway. One by one the women stepped onto the moving staircase and were lifted up to the landing and the door to the Headmaster's office.

Esther led the procession into the office. Dumbledore looked up in surprise when the door opened. He was sitting at his desk, his facial hair still sporting a very sheepish look. Minerva, still not understanding what was happening, stood near the door as the other women came to a stop in front of Dumbledore's desk.

“Albus Dumbledore,” Esther intoned, “by majority order of the Hogwarts Board of Governors, and at the formal request of the Department of Magical Education and Certification, you are hereby placed on a sixty day administrative suspension, pending a full review of the events of this past term and others. We regret having to take this action, but in light of recent events, we find that too many parents are expressing concerns over the safety of their children in this school. For the duration of the investigation, we ask that you return to your home. In the meantime, Professor

Minerva McGonagall, Deputy Headmistress, will assume your duties as Headmaster. Records show that Madam Hooch can substitute as the potions instructor until such time as a permanent teacher can be located...”

As Hampton talked, Dumbledore cringed and sunk lower and lower into his chair.

---

## **Grimmauld Place...**

Narcissa was having a cup of tea in her sitting room, relaxing when there came a knock at her door. “Come!” she called.

Emma walked in carrying a parchment in her hands. “Good morning, Cissy,” she called as she entered.

Narcissa smiled up at the muggle woman and waved her over to a seat. “Good morning, Emma. Would you like some tea?”

“That would be lovely. I got up early this morning because Remus and Dan were going over to Padfoot again. Then I finished up the final touches on our letter.”

“Oh? Is that what you’ve got there?”

Emma handed the parchment over to other woman. Narcissa eyed it eagerly. She’d been waiting for it for a while.

*Greetings,*

*You have received this letter because your child attends Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. We are sending this letter to let you know about the measures we have undertaken in light of the unrest currently sweeping the nation. These measures are designed to protect your child, and offer you an opportunity.*

*In short, we are making plans that will be put into place only if necessary. However, should it come to pass, your child will be evacuated to a safe location. And for you and your family, this letter offers you a chance to join your child in that safe location.*

*First, a couple of key points. This letter is heavily charmed. You may discuss this letter with immediate family members, but will be unable to discuss or show it to anyone else. This letter acts as a portkey. Simply have your family touch the letter as you would a regular portkey. Tap the letter twice with your wand and say “sanctuary” and you will be transported to the same location as your child. The portkey functions will become active starting April Fifteenth and will last for all of April. After that, the function will deactivate and the letter will consume itself.*

*The staff of Hogwarts is extremely concerned with the current state of affairs and thinks you should be as well. We have taken these steps because we are committed to the safety and well being of our students and will go to extraordinary lengths to protect them.*

*Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.*

“You’re making it sound like an official letter from the school? And how come it isn’t signed?”

Emma frowned for a moment, idly stirring her tea. “Harry didn’t want his name put to the document because his recent publicity has been mostly bad. We’re not sure how it’s going to be signed as yet, but he sent word last night to leave the signing space blank for now. That was the one thing holding up the process, really. And yes, I admit it’s deceptive. We want them to think it’s an official letter. By the time they get to Padfoot and find out what’s going on here in England, they won’t care who saved them.”

Narcissa sipped her tea for a moment, considering Emma’s words. “It makes sense. Far too many would reject the letter knowing Harry had something to do with it. Yes, I think this will do,” she said with a smile, and then her expression turned sly. “I think you would have made a fine Slytherin, Emma.”

Emma looked shocked for a moment before she began to laugh. “Just don’t tell my daughter that. I don’t think she could stand the shock.”

---

## **Hogwarts Kitchens...**

Dobby stood facing nearly eighty elves belonging to Hogwarts.

“Yous know me! Yous mostly think I be crazy, but I not back heres to talk ‘bout that.”

“Why then is yous here, Dobby,” said Pappy, the oldest house elf in the school and the most respected.

“Bad times coming,” cried Dobby, “Dark Lord coming! Hogwarts not win this time. Dobby is here to tell yous all, if bad things happens, then come to Dobby. Dobby’s friend, Harry Potter, will protect yous and lets yous work for the great Potter family.”

“We be bonded or we be frees?” asked Pappy with a frown. He tugged on his tea cozy nervously and the other house elves watched the conversation with great interest.

“The great Harry Potter says that there will be a schools you can work for, as bonded elves and a place of healers needing bonded elves. He won’t take a bonded elf himself for the Potter family, but he will allow you to choose. Be free, or be bonded.”



Every elf turned to look at Pappy. As the oldest and most respected house elf, his word was law. Pappy walked angrily up to Dobby until they were nearly nose to nose.

“Dobby better be telling truuf! I don’t likes Dobby, and thinks he’s bad house elf. But if bad times come to Hogwarts, we come to Dobby and see what he cans do.”

Dobby nodded and smiled weakly at Pappy.

---

## **The Great Hall, Breakfast...**

Something was clearly amiss. Word had filtered though all the houses that the morning that classes had been cancelled and everyone was asked to attend a late breakfast. Prefects ran around the school chasing down students who had started their days early, passing the message along. By nine o’clock, the whole school had assembled in the Great Hall and the room was buzzing with rumors.

Harry sat with Hermione and his friends. With classes cancelled he had left his school robes back up in his room and was wearing a pair of black jean and a shockingly yellow shirt that read, ‘Hey Voldemort, try not to let your mind wander. It is too small to be out by itself’.

Ginny had finally decided that Harry wasn’t the only one allowed to play with clothing. The interest she had been showing in his shirts had only grown, so it didn’t surprise Harry when she came down to breakfast wearing a shirt that read, ‘You can observe a lot by watching’.

Hermione took one look at Ginny, and the large grin on the younger girls face, and rolled her eyes. She turned to Harry, poked him in the chest and pointed at Ginny. “Do you see? Do you know what you’ve started?”

Harry shook his head grinning, and went back to reading the morning Quibbler that Luna had given him. He looked up again a moment later when Dumbledore entered the Great Hall, followed by Professor McGonagall, Esther Hampton, Amelia Bones and Mrs. Longbottom.

The group moved up to the Head table, but didn’t take seats. Dumbledore turned to face the student body and moved to stand in front of the women as the Hall quieted down. Luna snickered seeing Dumbledore still adorned as a sheep.

“As many of you are now aware, last night five students of this school were arrested for being marked Death Eaters. The Ministry’s Department of Magical Education and Certification has called for a formal investigation into the affair. As a result, the Hogwarts Baaaa B-B-Board of Governors has had to place me on administrative suspension for sixty days.”

Dumbledore paused and there was total silence in the hall.

“Assuming the investigation goes as expected, I will return to the school sometime between April Fifteenth and April Twentieth. In the meantime, Professor McGonagall will assume the duties of Headmistress. Professor Flitwick will assume duties of Deputy Headmaster, and Madam Hooch will act as a substitute teacher for potions, with help from Madam Pomfrey.

“I expect every one of you to provide your complete and total cooperation to Professor McGonagall. I may be visiting the school occasionally during the next sixty days, baaa b-b-but I will not be living on the campus.”

“It’s about bloody time,” shouted Hermione Granger, leaping from her chair.

Harry and his friends stared at the girl in amazement, while it slowly dawned on her what she had just done. Abashed, she slunk back into her chair and pretended to be invisible.

Dumbledore, up at the front of the Great Hall frowned at Hermione. “Hmmm...yes, well despite Miss Granger’s opinion, I do expect to return to the school once this is all done.”

Dumbledore tried to maintain his dignity as he walked from the Great Hall. He nearly succeeded until Ginny let out with a loud bleat that caused him to reply in kind. At that point, the hall broke up in laughter.

Professor McGonagall followed Dumbledore and the others as they left the Great Hall. But she stopped when she reached Harry and his friends.

“Miss Granger, ten points from Gryffindor for your unseemly and unladylike outburst,” said the stern Headmistress, then she turned to Harry. “Mr. Potter, fifty points for Gryffindor for your novel solution to removing a known menace.”

Hermione looked crushed. McGonagall had rarely taken points from her. But the slight smile in McGonagall’s expression told the young woman that her Head of House really wasn’t that upset.

There was a popping noise from behind Harry. He turned to see Dobby waiting patiently to be noticed. “Dobby? Is everything alright?” he asked, turning on the bench to talk to the little elf. Hermione, noticing Dobby also turned to listen.

“Master Harry Potter Sir! I dids like yous asked and I talked wif Hogwarts house elves. They not be liking Dobby very much, but they willing to listen. Pappy says, if Bad Mans come, they come find Dobby.”

Harry grinned broadly. Rescuing the Hogwarts house elves was a breakthrough! They would be invaluable at Padfoot.

Hermione frowned at the two of them. “Harry, I hope you plan on paying those elves,” she said with a scowl. Harry glanced at Dobby who, in turn, dug his hands into the pillowcase he was wearing today, both looked slightly sheepish with each other.

“Hermione, I think it’s time someone educated you about the facts of house elves,” drawled

Draco.

Hermione's head whipped around and she glared instant death in his direction. Unfortunately for her, he was immune to her glare.

"The house elves are magical creatures that need to be bonded to a family or house. If you don't bond them, they will slowly go insane. I'm sorry Harry, but I have to tell her. She could kill them with her ignorance," Draco said with a shrug.

Harry grimaced and nodded in reply.

"Dobby is slightly different than a normal house elf. His ancestry isn't pure elf. Somewhere in the past, his family interbred with Goblins, or perhaps Gnomes. His ears are a little more pointed than a regular house elf, his eyes more round. This change in his ancestry allows him to survive as a free elf. But if you ask me, I still think he's a nutter.

"Dobby, free or not, would give every sock he owned to be bonded to Harry. Not only would Dobby's magic be stronger, but he'd be happier. Now Winky, the other house elf that Harry has? That's a more interesting case and I don't think even Harry understands what's going on.

"What Harry has done is just slightly crazy when you think about it. He's taken a house elf that didn't want to be free and insisted that he hire her to do work for him. So Harry pays her and tries to treat her like she's part of the family. Winky, on the other hand, has probably convinced herself that 'hire' is a fancy word for bonded and I'd be willing to bet the money Harry gives her gets slipped into his money pouch at night."

Harry looked startled. He turned to glance at Dobby who seemed to be very interested in a dirt spot on his pillowcase. Harry glanced up at Hermione. Her arms were crossed over her chest and she was making huffing noises. He knew from experience that it wasn't a good sign

He placed his head in his hands. "I'm so dead. Thanks Dray. Next time, just push me in front of the moving lorry, will ya?"

Hermione looked at Harry, annoyed. "Oh hush, Harry. You're not dead yet, but I'm seriously considering it," she snapped, then she turned to look at Draco. "So what you're saying is that, without a family or some entity to bond with, they will eventually go insane?"

Draco nodded. "It will eventually kill them, Hermione, but first it will drive them insane. A free house elf is truly unhappy, and your SPEW, while well meaning, is misguided. You should be working to improve their conditions without trying to free them.."

Draco leaned back and crossed his arms, staring at her. She was about to snap something at Draco when Harry sighed and put a hand on his girlfriend's arm.

"Well, it was a good idea, but I suppose we won't be able to save the elves," Harry murmured. Dobby whimpered.

Hermione turned to Harry startled. “What do you mean?”

“Come on, Hermione. The only way I can save them is if I promise them homes and families to bond with. You find that unacceptable, and they won’t come without that promise. So we can’t save them. It’s a harsh decision, but I can’t allow us to get bogged down by this when there is so much else to do.”

Hermione blinked in surprise. She was used to Harry making snap decisions, but this one was so arbitrary and cruel! She glanced up to find everyone, including Dobby, staring at her! It took her a moment to realize that the stumbling block to saving the elves wasn’t Harry and he wasn’t trying to be cruel. The stumbling block was herself.

With a great sigh, she finally gave in to the inevitable. “Oh, very well, then. But don’t think I’m going to give up on SPEW, Harry! I’ll just modify its aims like Draco suggested.”

Harry leaned over and kissed her on the cheek before replying. “I wouldn’t dream of it,” he murmured in her ear.

Dobby, who had been watching the entire exchange, grinned at Hermione and a great tear fell from one of his huge eyes. Harry winked at Dobby to let him know everything was all right again and Dobby relaxed. He’d be able to help save the elves after all.

---

### **Jedburgh, on the Scottish Border, Later That Evening...**

Davey Armes had been the caretaker of the Jedburgh Abbey for the past thirty-five years. Today had been especially difficult for him, as he had been run ragged trying to find out why Abbey, originally founded in 1138, was unnaturally cold. The old coal fired heater had been replaced twenty years ago with a more efficient oil heater and that seemed to be working just fine.

Finally, in an act of desperation, Armes decided to call in the heating company to look at the system before he went home for the night. Even now, approaching his sixtieth year of life, Armes prided himself on being fit enough to make the three-kilometer walk to his home.

Being a muggle, he never noticed the hundreds of dementors as they swarmed out of the nine hundred year old abbey and fell upon him from behind.

In a matter of hours, Jedburgh had become a ghost town. The population of some four thousand souls had been wiped out in what would turn out to be the first of many attacks.

The first sign that anything was wrong in the town came when the local police received a call from a delivery truck coming up on A68 from Langlee. By early morning, officials from the National Health Services had ordered police to cordon off the area and a strict news blackout was put into effect as they activated the Infectious Disease Response Plan.

Of course, the news blackout was only partially effective and the morning newspapers were awash with rumors of an outbreak of anthrax in some unnamed Scottish town.

By mid-morning, the government had issued a vague statement about an unknown number of people seriously ill in the town of Jedburgh. Privately, officials with the National Health Service and the Ministry of Defense were conferring with officials of both the World Health Organization in Berne and the Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta.

---

### **Grimmauld Place, late February...**

Dan arrived a little later than usual for dinner bearing a grim expression. For the past week he had been bothered by certain news reports that had appeared, then quickly vanished.

When he entered the kitchen of Grimmauld Place, Tonks, Narcissa, Emma and Remus all looked up and noted his pale expression. Everyone stopped eating as he sat in his chair.

Emma put a hand to her cheek, afraid of what news Dan had to bring to her tonight. “Dan, what is it?”

“I think Harry must have been a genius, Emma. How he knew I’d need to resort to outside new sources is beyond me, but I just heard a report over the Voice of America that the American State Department is issuing a travel advisory for the United Kingdom. This is just the tip of the iceberg, I’m afraid. According to what I’ve managed to pick up on the short wave radio, several towns along the English/Scottish border have been decimated in the past week. From what I could find out on a CDC bulletin board, using Hermione’s computer, the symptoms are identical to the effects of dementors.”

Narcissa and Remus were somewhat lost through most of Dan’s speech. Tonks, being a half blood, had more exposure to the muggle world and knew some of what he had been saying. But they all understood the last part. Dementors.

“Do you have any idea of the casualty count, Dan?” asked Emma in a hushed tone.

“Near as I can make, and that’s only because I’d looked up the census data, close to twenty thousand. And the Government is trying to cover it up as a outbreak of a mild form of anthrax,” Dan said in a snarl.

“Is there more?” Remus asked.

“Just this. I went into London today, I wanted to pick up copies of several international papers. People are scared, Remus. From what I can find out, outbound flights are booked solid. People have taken to wearing masks in the streets. Schools have been cancelled in some districts. Things are holding together for now, but unless they get a handle on it, it’s going to get a lot worse.”

“So, it’s finally begun then,” Remus said softly. “I think we need to get Harry and his friends here for a meeting, and as many others as we can manage.”

“I think the earliest we can get everyone together is this weekend. That’s still three days away,” offered Emma.

“I’ll owl Harry and Minerva about a meeting for the weekend. Harry’s friends will alert their parents,” Remus said.

---

## **Knockturn Alley...**

Of all the places in the Wizarding world, Knockturn Alley, and its even seedier Burial Lane, were two places that Mundungus Fletcher felt comfortable in. He didn’t mind performing jobs for the Order of the Phoenix. It was sometimes profitable and, in his mind, Dark Lords were good for business.

Fletcher grinned to himself as he walked Knockturn Alley. The area really had a reputation that was undeserved. Most of the businesses were perfectly legal and did not deal in any dark art merchandise at all. They were there, instead of up in Diagon Alley, because it was cheaper to rent a store in Knockturn. Now if you really wanted dark arts merchandise you went to the end of Knockturn Alley, which was exactly where Fletcher was heading now.

At the end of the dead end street, Fletcher entered a dingy pub called the Warlock’s Brew. It was, perhaps, the most dangerous business in Knockturn Alley. For a galleon Fletcher bought passage through a long sloping corridor that few Aurors learned about and fewer still lived to tell anyone about. The corridor sloped downwards for nearly five hundred meters before opening out in a large underground passage lined with businesses.

Fletcher made a beeline for one business sporting a mortar and pestle on a sign. The animated sign showed some human skulls dropping into the mortar and being ground to powder by the pestle.

Opening the door, a small bell chimed above his head. A short, balding, gnome-like man looked up from the counter. Spotting Fletcher, he smiled, showing a mouth full of blackened and missing teeth.

“Dung! I thought you might be by today. Yer shipment arrived yesterday,” said the man.

“Did it now, ‘arvey? Bloody good, I don’t reckon I enjoy making these trips too often,” said Mundungus.

The man placed a box on the counter and started checking off items from a list. “Let’s see ‘ere, ground vampire heart, unicorn horn, snorkack livers, ground basilisk heart, ground basilisk fangs, giant’s toenails and giant kneazle fur, blood from virgins. Sound ‘ight, eh?” asked the seedy little

man.

Fletcher had been consulting his list as well. “Aye, that be the lot.”

“As we talked Dung, that’ll be seventeen ‘undred fifty galleons.”

Fletcher tossed a coin bag on the counter, which the small man opened and began to count.

“I’ll tell ya Dung, I afeared we wouldn’t be fillin’ all of yer needs. Basilisk is nigh impossible to find. I was just about to give up when I ‘eard about a shop up in Knockturn finding some.”

Satisfied that the amount was correct, the man scooped up the coins and tossed them into a box under the counter, then he tied up the box of potion ingredients and handed it to Fletcher.

“Much obliged to yer, ‘arvey,” Fletcher said, taking the box and heading for the exit of the store with a smile. This little purchase had netted him two hundred fifty galleons for a few hours work. With that kind of money, he could buy himself a fancy dinner tonight and a polyjuiced prostitute and still have a lot left over.

---

## **The Shrieking Shack, Hogsmeade...**

Severus Snape, former Potions Professor of Hogwarts, looked up at the sound of someone apparating in. He quickly reached for his wand, but relaxed when he saw it was Dumbledore. Turning back to the simmering cauldron, he added a pinch of an ingredient and stirred gently.

“So, Potter has managed to do what the Dark Lord could not, then? He’s chased both of us out of Hogwarts?” asked Snape dryly.

Dumbledore placed some heavy tomes down on the table, well away from the simmering cauldron. “Yes, I fear I have greatly underestimated the boy this year. In fact, his behavior of late has been most Slytherin-like, if you ask me,” He replied with a grimace

Snape snorted in reply, then eyed the large books Dumbledore had brought.

“I see my offering has piqued your interest, eh Severus? I may be under an administrative suspension, but the Board has not formally removed me from my position as Headmaster. As such, I still have access to places like my office and the restricted section of the library,” he said with a frown. “It’s interesting, Hogwarts is telling me that large sections of the castle are shutting down for some reason. It refuses to explain why, but it’s happening.”

“And the books, Albus?”

“Oh, these. Well it occurred to me that Mister Potter must have resorted to some sort of power amplifying ritual. It is the only reason I can think of to account for his incredible power levels.

Most of those rituals are dark rituals, and require complex potions. I thought perhaps if we research them together, we might find what Mister Potter used. Perhaps even bring ourselves up to his level?”

Snape leaned back in surprise for a moment, staring at Dumbledore. That damned twinkle was back again, and he had to admit it did make sense. Find out which ritual Potter used, and then follow his steps. “I still say we should have been feeding the brat liquid Imperius since his first year.”

“Yes, yes, Severus. We’ve had this conversation many times since Harry has come to Hogwarts and nothing has come from it. Young Harry had to be nudged through his trials with a clear mind if he was to kill Voldemort. We both know that and controlling his mind would have caused him to fail.”

Snape snarled in frustration. Dumbledore was right about one thing. This *was* an old and useless argument. He reached for one of the books and started to thumb through the pages.

---

## **Gryffindor Head Suite...**

Harry sat in an armchair in front of the large fireplace in the common room, his leg propped up on a footstool. Hermione sat next to him reading a book and occasionally glancing up to check the time.

At exactly eight o’clock, the door to the room opened and Harry’s friends entered. He had expanded the room tonight and conjured an extra couch so that everyone would fit comfortably. The door opened again and Professors McGonagall and Flitwick joined them. With everyone present, Harry grabbed his cane and levered himself into a standing position.

“Thank you all for coming tonight. I have some news that needs to be covered and I’m afraid that only parts of it are good. First off, Remus is asking for an all hands meeting at Grimmauld Place Saturday evening.

“Mister Granger has detected signs of problems in the muggle community that can only be the result of Voldemort’s activities. He wants to tell us all about it. I should warn everyone, the news he has isn’t good. At this point, he’s talking about nearly twenty thousand muggles killed.”

A gasp echoed through the room. This group of wizards and witches might still think being magical was better than not, but they didn’t hate the muggles enough to want them dead.

“In addition to the meeting on Sunday, Remus has sent us another shipment of hula hoop portkeys, along with a couple special items I’ve ordered.”

Harry pulled out a small box from a pocket and placed it on the floor before enlarging it. Once



enlarged, everyone could see it was a heavy wooden crate. Harry limped over to the crate and pried up one side of the lid before Neville, Draco and Terry jumped to help him. He shot them appreciative glances.

Inside the box was a pile of packages wrapped in a plain brown paper. Harry took two of the packages out and handed one to Hermione. “Draco, would you give everyone a package, please?”

Hermione opened her package and withdrew what appeared to be a pair of pants and a shirt made from a reddish-gold and black iridescent material. One by one, everyone, including the Professors, opened their packages to reveal the same items.

“Harry, this isn’t!” exclaimed Flitwick.

“Yes, Professor, it is. And, I might add, getting your size was rather difficult,” he replied with a smile that Flitwick returned.

“It’s pretty I suppose, Mister Potter, but it’s not really my color. I don’t suppose you can clue the rest of us in about what you and Filius are discussing?” McGonagall asked, holding up the garments with something akin to distaste.

Harry chuckled. “What you’re holding is the best armor money can buy. It’s called second skin, made from the Basilisk hide we harvested, and is to be worn under your clothing. With it, it can reduce spell damage by as much as half. It’s sized, but will adjust accordingly. It is skin tight, but will stretch without feeling constricting. You can wear it all day long and not notice it’s there. But in a fight, you’ll be glad to have it. Normal second skin is made from Horntail hide, this is made from a one thousand year old Basilisk hide.”

“How effective is it, Harry?” asked Hermione.

Harry looked thoughtful for a moment before replying, “Some of the lesser spells will be absorbed and you’ll never know you got hit. A cutting hex could be reduced by as much as half, so could a stunner. This isn’t a magic shield, it’s an added edge that just may keep you alive.” The more he described the second skin, the more pleased people looked.

“Harry,” Draco said, rummaging through the box still, “there’s more stuff in here.” He pulled out two shafts of wood, several small boxes and a book.

Harry felt strangely attracted towards the objects Draco was piling on the table. Professor Flitwick started rooting through the objects in curiosity.

“Platinum and Crystal endcaps, two staves, one made of Heartwood and the other made of Yew, core materials, and what looks like a private book authored by Cyrus Ollivander more than six hundred years ago? Just what are you up to, Mr. Potter?” squeaked the little Professor.

Harry had the grace to look embarrassed when everyone turned to stare at him. Limping back to the table, he looked down at the materials there, some of which were pulling at him. “Professor,”

he said softly, “thanks to that spider attack, I’m crippled. I need to use a cane in the same hand that I use a wand. These are the materials needed to make a staff. If I had a staff, I could use it as a cane, and no one would be the wiser until I start casting.”

Hermione gasped and grabbed him by one arm. “You are not crippled, Harry!” she said, objecting to his statement.

Harry reached out and touched her cheek gently. “Ordinarily, you’d be right. But I don’t have the mobility I need for a fight. If I had a staff and it’s focusing powers, I might be able to offset that lack of mobility. I’m not crippled, but I’m not as agile as I once was,” he said softly.

“I thought you didn’t need a wand, Harry?” Flitwick asked intently.

“I don’t, Professor. Without a wand, my body provides the focus. With my wand, I can achieve a tighter control but I risk burning the wand out if I over power it. A staff isn’t as picky as a wand, but few wizards and witches have the power to use one. I thought I could make one, and use it as a walking stick, or as a staff when I needed it. Actually, this is something I wanted to talk to you about. I know you make your own wands Sir, and I was hoping I could get your help in making a staff for myself.”

Filius’ face lit up with excitement. “Oh, jolly good Harry! It would be an exciting project and a real thrill to work on!”

Not even Professor McGonagall could suppress a smile when the diminutive Professor got excited.

---

## **Grimmauld Place, Breakfast time...**

Remus sipped his morning coffee tiredly and waited patiently while Dobby cooked breakfast. Last night had been a full moon and he was exhausted and still in pain from his transformation.

Tonks entered the kitchen and, spotting him, she frowned at his appearance. His transformations were becoming more difficult and more painful for him each month. She was worried and more than a little frightened for him. She knew exactly what she’d do if the laws didn’t forbid it. She’d marry Remus tomorrow if she could.

There was little she could do to help him though his transformations and it tore at her heart to see him go through them every month. Each month he’d change, and each month he’d come out of the transformation a little weaker, a little more depressed.

There was a ray of hope, but it was only a ray. Over the Holiday she had overheard a conversation between Hermione and Emma about Remus and she had pinned Hermione down afterwards to get more information. It seems that Harry had hired three teams of researchers, one team in America,

one team in Germany and another in Australia. Two of the groups were to research cures into Lycanthropy, and the third was to research ways to improve the current Wolfsbane potion. Harry was keeping the effort secret because he didn't want to get Remus' hopes up.

She eyed her lover a moment longer. "Remus, when you're done with breakfast, I'm taking you upstairs for a long soak with some of those mineral salts that Harry uses. You've not tried using them to help ease the ache afterwards."

Remus nodded wearily. If they helped, even a little, it would be a welcome change.

A moment later, Narcissa walked into the kitchen. She carried a copy of The Quibbler under her arm and her expression was grave. Dan and Emma followed her into the kitchen.

"Cissy? What's wrong?" asked Tonks.

"It seems that the Wizengamot finally got off the fence last night. We have a lot of changes this morning," she replied, then she tossed the Quibbler onto the table.

*Archibald Richfield, Death Eater, Elected to Post  
of Interim Minister of Magic.*

*In a surprise vote late last night, Archibald Richfield was elevated to the post of Interim Minister of Magic until general elections can be held. The publishers of The Quibbler think the Wizengamot have performed a grave disservice to the Wizarding World by electing a known Death Eater as Minister of Magic. But the Wizengamot ignored our warning concerning Minister Fudge and his attempt to cross breed House Elves with Dragons.*

*After taking office last night, the new Minister began making sweeping departmental changes. Among those changes were a series of Ministerial pardons, which he claimed were based on 'secret' evidence he had been withholding from the Government. Among those pardoned and immediately given Ministerial positions were as follows. Lucius Malfoy, who received the newly created position of Vice Minister of Magic, Anton Dolohov who will be heading up the Department of Magical Law Enforcement...*

Dan frowned. "Dolohov? Isn't he that arse who nearly killed Hermione last year?" he asked angrily. Tonks and Remus both nodded in reply.

Narcissa sat heavily in a chair next to Emma and trembled.

Emma turned to the other woman in concern. "Cissy?"

"He'll be coming for me and Draco. He's free and has the Ministry behind him now," she whispered and then she trembled again, her fear clearly evident on her face.

Emma wrapped an arm about the other woman, then looked to Remus. "We need to get Cissy out of here and alert Harry. Draco is in a lot of danger."

“We can move her to Padfoot today, but I think she’ll be safe long enough to stay for the meeting we’ve called.

“But you’re right, I’ll floo Minerva immediately. I don’t think Lucius and his cronies will come looking for Draco just yet. They have to secure their power base first. That will take some time. Besides, Draco’s not the only one in danger now. They all are.”

Nodding, Emma turned to comfort her friend while Remus left the kitchen to use the floo in the living room.

---

## **Transfiguration Office, Hogwarts...**

Minerva was grading some papers when the fireplace in her office flared to life and Remus’ head appeared in the flames.

“Minerva, I’m sorry to bother you, but would you mind if I came through?”

“No, not at all, Remus.”

The fireplace grew to a much larger size as Remus stepped through.

“Good morning, Remus. I take it this visit is because of this morning’s headline?”

“I’m afraid so, Minerva. Normally we take The Quibbler articles with a grain of salt. However this article is spot on and Narcissa is convinced that Lucius will be coming after her and Draco. Part of that is still left over fears she harbors from his abuse, but a large part is a valid concern. Narcissa is focused on Draco mostly, but the fact is, nearly everyone in Harry’s group, including Harry himself, are in danger because of this.”

“I quite agree. Hang on a moment. Milly?”

A moment later a small female house elf appeared in the room. “Yous calling Milly, Mistress Professor M’Gonagall?” asked the little elf.

McGonagall scribbled a quick note and handed it to the elf. “Milly, find Harry Potter, and give that to him please. Then you may return to your duties.”

“I finds, Mistress Professor M’Gonagall,” the little elf replied before vanishing with a pop.

Seeing Remus’ questioning look, she chuckled. “I’ve sent for Harry and his friends.”

Nodding, Remus took a seat and waited. Five minutes later, the door opened and Harry and his friends entered.

“I thought you might visit today, Remus,” commented Harry. “I take it this is in relation to our new Minister?”

“Yes, Harry, we’re worried. Once tomorrow night’s meeting is over, we’re planning on moving Narcissa and Emma to Padfoot.”

Draco started at hearing his mother’s name. “Mum?” he asked.

Remus nodded. “Yes, Draco. She’s very upset and is convinced that Lucius will get to you and her.”

Harry turned to his friends. “All right, listen up, and this goes for you, too, Professor. I want everyone to be wearing their second skin if you aren’t already. I also want everyone to meet Hermione and I in the Gryffindor Head Suite. If you still have the Grimmauld portkey I gave you before Christmas, bring it. Otherwise, bring an item of jewelry that you won’t mind wearing. I’ll create emergency portkeys for everyone tonight. And from here on, no one wanders around the castle alone, at any time.”

“I’ll speak with Filius at lunch, Mr. Potter,” offered McGonagall.

---

## **Gryffindor Head Suite...**

Harry stood looking out the bedroom window, but his mind was a thousand miles away from the snowy winter wonderland below. Their meeting that evening had been noisy. Several of his friends were justifiably scared. Richfield may or may not be a marked Death Eater. No one knew for sure, although one thing was certain. He did support policies designed to enhance the full blood position over half bloods and muggle born. Lucius was clearly a known Death Eater. So was Dolohov, the incoming Director of Magical Law Enforcement.

Draco was worried about his mother and Hermione seemed to be sure that Dolohov was going to personally come and finish the job he started on her in the Department of Mysteries. Privately, he admitted her fear was irrational, and even if Dolohov did harbor a personal grudge against her, she was far more powerful than he was. He wasn’t going to belittle her fear in any way, however. If there was one thing he had come to know all too well, it was fear. He had his own fears to deal with and they made him sensitive to the fears of others.

Now he stood, gazing out the window unseeingly and wondering. Hogwarts, without Dumbledore and Snape, had become much safer. Now if they could only avoid the outside threats for another two or three months...Harry pounded a fist on the windowsill. Threats were cropping up all around them and he had to figure out a way of holding them off long enough to get the job done.

Behind him came a small noise and he turned to see Hermione whimper in the throes of her own nightmares. Climbing back into bed, he pulled her into his arms.

“Shhh... you’re alright love, I’m here for you,” he whispered, suddenly feeling very protective towards the young woman in his arms. Hermione stiffened once as he grabbed her, then relaxed in her sleep. For the moment, he had chased her nightmares away.

---

### **Author’s Notes:**

Once again we come to the end of a chapter and another visit to the dreaded author’s notes where, we, the authors, mock and cast dead fish upon our faithful readers.

Occasionally Harry will misread all the clues. He’s Harry, not God. He can’t be right one hundred percent of the time.

As to the POV changes Nicholas, there are plenty of stories in which POV’s change even more frequently. Hell I’ve seen stories jump from third person to first and back. Annoying? Yep! Thanks for your concern Nicholas, but don’t expect us to change a format for the one person that’s complained about it in the past 600,000+ words of stories.

OK for all you folks out there sending us death threats. We get the picture... No more cliffies, for now.

According to FAS.ORG and the Royal Navy Website, the UK still retains its submarine based nuclear launch capability. As of 1998, four trident class submarines (Built by General Dynamic’s Electric Boat division in Groton Co.) remain as the only nuclear launch platform in service. The four boats, Vanguard, Victorious, Vigilant and Vengeance are equipped with a complement of torpedoes and 16 D5 SLBMs (Estimated nominal yield in the range of 100 to 140kt). The D5 missile system contains 12 warheads in a MIRV format and has an estimated range of 4000 nautical miles.

For more information, I’d suggest checking the source.

<http://www.royal-navy.mod.uk/static/pages/146.html>

For all those people betting on it being Ron or Snape on the tower, we’re sorry to disappoint you. No, we’re not really, but it sounds good.

For the reviewer that thought the attack on the Prophet was far too voldy-ish. We’re so sorry. Please forgive us? Next time we’ll have Harry wait ‘til noon or so, set the building on fire and pick off anyone that tries to escape the building with a reducto to the head. Now that would be voldy-ish.

M.R. Moore. Grumpy aren’t we? Yes we have occasionally used Old Crow, Kinsfire and Abraxan’s name in the story. That started out as a bit of joke and a nod to what we think are fine authors. I’m sorry if this annoys you. No. I take that back. I don’t care if it annoys you. Your complaint is petty an undeserving of comment, which is why I’m commenting on it. Don’t you

find that annoying? Here's another WIP you can quit reading.

### **Pet Peeves:**

Updates so far apart you don't even remember what the story was about when learn about its update. I can understand that if you were writing huge chapters like Jeconais does. Or even modest sized chapters like ours. But waiting two months for a 3K word chapter and being stuck rereading the story just to catch up with the new chapter is annoying.

## **Sunset Over Britain**

### **Storm Surges at Dusk**

#### **Standard Disclaimer.**

Harry and Hermione walked through the darkened forest with Ron following a few feet behind them muttering to himself.

“Why aren’t you guys afraid? I’m terrified!” whispered Ron.

“We’ve said the magic words that protect us Ron,” Replied Hermione smugly. “We’ve told the readers that the authors don’t own the Potterverse and they should know that.”

Harry looked up watching a shooting star for a moment.

“Can I say those words Hermione?” whined Ron.

“No Ronald, this is the part of the disclaimer where you must die.”

“Hermione dear?” said Harry calmly. “It’s time for us to toddle off, that asteroid looks to be aimed at Ron”

“Yes dear, I know.”

Harry grabbed Hermione and apparated away.

“What’s an asteroid?” asked the perplexed Ron.

---

Sunset Over Britain  
**Chapter 20**

---

#### **Breakfast, Great Hall...**

Harry seemed preoccupied as he sat with his friends at breakfast. To his right, Hermione was still in a bit of a state of shock from yesterday’s news. The fact that later today she’d be seeing her parents did little to allay her fears. She was convinced that Dolohov would be storming through



the front gate of Hogwarts any moment. Harry tried talking to her about it before breakfast, but he didn't seem to make much headway.

Now Hermione sat nervously and her eyes kept darting to the entrance of the Great Hall. Harry sat staring at his plate, not saying a word. Draco watched the two for most of breakfast without saying anything before he decided to intervene.

"You know, Granger," he drawled in a snide tone, "I can't quite recall a time when I've ever seen you do something dumb... until today that is."

Everyone except Harry turned to stare at Draco. Hermione expression grew angry and she glared at him.

"Oh come on, Granger. Think!" Draco snapped.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Hermione asked in an icy tone.

Draco rolled his eyes. "Alright, you want it spelled out, here it is. Dolohov is now the head of the MLE. First thing he needs to do is consolidate his power base both within his department and within the Ministry. That means he's going to put out arrest orders for anyone who's a threat to his power base, and fire those people he can't arrest. As far as Dolohov is concerned, you are a low priority mudblood. And no, I won't apologize for using the term. Think Granger! You've got one of the best minds in this school! What would you do if you were now in control and part of a group that looked at its allies as suspiciously as it looked at its enemies?"

Hermione frowned in thought. "So you're saying that I'm not important enough for Dolohov to bother with?" she asked hesitantly.

"Exactly! He's got more important things to worry about. First, he needs to set up a spy network, both inside and outside of the Ministry. He needs to make sure my father won't stab him in the back. Then, he has clean up the department of those people he can't trust. It's going to take him weeks or more to accomplish all that," Draco replied.

The tenseness seemed to ebb away from Hermione and she shot the blond a grateful smile. "I can understand what you were trying to do, Draco, but do you have to be so insulting when you do it?"

"I had to get your attention first. You're almost as bad as Harry when he gets involved in something... like he is right now. He hasn't a clue what's going on,"

Hermione blinked and glanced at her boyfriend. Harry had gotten rid of his plate and sat in front of what appeared to be a map of Hogwarts and the surrounding area. His eyes were blazing with power and he was carefully tracing a line around the castle with his wand. The wand left a small golden wall on the map a few inches high.

As he completed the circuit on the map, the wall became a golden dome over the castle. His actions were attracting a number of interested onlookers, including several of the staff.

“Aegis circum-saepio interiora,” he intoned softly over the golden dome. His wand flared and crackled and began to smoke from the power pouring through it. The dome flared from gold to a pure white before it faded, leaving just a line around the castle on the parchment.

Harry hissed in pain and dropped his smoking wand. He gripped one hand in the other as the exhaustion hit him and he sagged in his seat. Hermione and Ginny grabbed him to keep him from sliding to the floor.

Harry reconnected with the world a few minutes later as an anxious Madam Pomfrey waved something vile smelling under his nose. Behind her stood Professors McGonagall and Flitwick.

Madam Pomfrey corked the bottle and straightened up. “Well, I don’t pretend to know what you’ve done to yourself this time, Mr. Potter. However, except for being exhausted, you’re fine. Your magical core is at full strength, as far as I can tell. The only thing I could offer you by taking you to the infirmary is a bed to sleep on, and you have one of those in your own quarters.”

Harry tried to sit up, but he was leaning against Hermione and she held him fast to herself.

Professor McGonagall looked at the curious faces watching everything and made her decision. “Mr. Longbottom, Mr. Black, why don’t you two help Mr. Potter to his quarters? We’ll be able to discuss this better there, I think.”

Neville and Draco stood and went to help Harry. “The map. Don’t forget the map,” Harry murmured with a gesture towards the parchment.

A few short minutes later Harry found himself sitting in the Gryffindor Head Suite, sipping a cup of hot chocolate and facing a very curious group of friends and teachers. On the table was his map, which Hermione had placed there for everyone to see.

“Now then, Mr. Potter, would you kindly explain exactly what you thought you were doing in the Great Hall? I shouldn’t have to remind you that your display of power was fairly intimidating,” McGonagall said sternly.

Harry took a sip of his drink, then placed his cup on an end table. “Things got a little out of hand, Professor. I was experimenting with an idea and had no idea the final incantation would require that much power,” he replied. He gestured then and his wand appeared. It was still functional, but he had come close to burning it out, as the scorch marks showed.

Frowning he placed his wand down next to the map for everyone to see.

“Just what did you do, Harry?” asked Professor Flitwick.

“Tell me, sir, have you ever looked into magics from other cultures?” Harry asked.

“Not much, Harry. Charms seem to be charms, no matter what the originating culture,” replied Flitwick.

Harry looked thoughtful for a moment, almost as if he wanted to debate the statement, then he shook his head and smiled gently at the little Professor. “I guess I should start at the beginning, then. In reading a book about muggle sciences, I came across an idea that interested me. The muggles called it the principles of similarity and, put into its simplest form, it means that if two objects are similar in appearance, then the objects are from the same group. What affected one object of this group, would affect another. This sounds crazy, but it really makes sense if you think about it.

“Anyway, the idea reminded me of something I had heard about, so I started looking for a magic based on this idea and found it in a magic practiced in the southern United States and the Caribbean. The Haitians called it voodoo. Voodoo isn’t a form of magic like charms or transfiguration. It’s mostly curses and hexes. But the adherents of Voodoo have a particularly nasty hex using a doll. They consider it dark magic and, to the extent that they use it, it is dark magic. But the underlying idea isn’t dark at all.

“The map,” Harry said, pointing to the parchment, “represents Hogwarts. By drawing a line around the image of the castle on the page, I’ve placed a real ward around the castle. As long as the parchment exists undamaged, the ward remains safe and strong...unbreakable.”

The group stood, stunned for a moment. Flitwick’s legs collapsed under him and he sat with his head barely visible over the edge of the table.

“An unbreakable ward? And he did it without help?” squeaked the little Professor, staring at McGonagall.

Harry looked sadly at his scorched wand on the table. “I’m not sure I want to try that again using my wand though.”

Flitwick reached up and grabbed Harry’s wand, examining it carefully. “Quite so, Harry. I think we best get a start on your staff project.”

Harry yawned, his eyes drooping. He looked over at Flitwick and nodded, too tired to care that his Professor couldn’t see him through the table.

“What kind of ward did you place on the school, Mr. Potter?” Asked McGonagall.

Harry sat back in his chair, his eyes half closed. “You know,” he murmured, “that’s the really interesting part. I placed a detection ward, Professor, but I could have placed anything from an anti-muggle notice-me-not ward to a line of death and it wouldn’t have used any extra power. The type of ward isn’t what uses the power, it’s the laying down of the ward itself.”

Hermione eyed Harry before turning back to the others. “We leave for Grimmauld in a few hours and I think Harry should try to catch a nap before we go.”

“I think you’re too late, Hermione,” Ginny said with a soft snicker. She pointed to Harry, who had fallen asleep in his chair.

---

## Grimmauld Place (First Weekend in March)...

It was still early morning when Tonks portkeyed back to Grimmauld with company. Remus was at the top of the stairs when Tonks and Amelia appeared. Seeing them carrying a large box between them, he hurried to help.

“Tonks? Amelia? Why are you home early?”

The two women moved the box to one corner of the foyer, out of the way of anyone else portkeying in. Amelia looked up at Remus, who stood a few steps up on the stairs. Her robe was disheveled and scorched in places. Remus examined her appearance with surprise and concern.

“Remy, call the others down and we’ll talk about this in the kitchen. No sense explaining it multiple times,” Tonks replied evenly.

Nodding, Remus went to collect everyone, while Tonks and Amelia went into the kitchen.

A few minutes later, Dan, Emma, Remus and Narcissa joined them. Tonks and Amelia sat at the table, between them was a bottle of Ogdens, used to add a bit of a kick to their tea.

Amelia looked up as everyone sat down and shook herself slightly. “I have been in law enforcement for over sixty years and I have never, not once, considered the possibility that I would become a wanted criminal...until today that is,” she said softly.

Startled, everyone, except Tonks, stared at her. “When I heard that Dolohov was being put in charge of the MLE, I knew I had to get to everyone who worked on Harry’s case, and I had to hide his files. That’s what is in the crate in the foyer. I got out of the Ministry about five minutes before a warrant was issued for my arrest on the suspicion of treason!”

Remus shared a look with Tonks. Harry’s files were important, but as far as Harry was concerned, the people meant more.

“Amelia,” Remus said, “Harry and his friends will be here in a few hours for a meeting. I think he’ll be very happy to find out you’re safe, even if you are wanted by the so-called government. You won’t be the first person he’s cared about who’s been on the run.”

Amelia nodded and sighed heavily. “I’ll probably lose everything. The home where Susan I live, all our possessions... Merlin how many times have I confiscated someone else’s home in the name of justice? And now it will happen to me...”

“Actually, that won’t happen, Amelia,” Tonks offered the older woman.

Amelia turned to stare at Tonks, confused.

“Harry took some steps over the holiday. The homes of certain friends of his are now under the protection of Gringotts. He placed a bond on your home so that, should the home ownership ever become contested, he would purchase it and have it interdicted. Your home will be protected and preserved,” Remus said softly.

Amelia slumped back in her chair in relief, a single tear rolled down her cheek.

Tonks was topping off Amelia’s cup with a shot of Ogdens when the door to the kitchen opened and Bill and Arthur Weasley walked in. Arthur’s forehead was cut and he was leaning heavily against Bill. Had anyone stopped to think on it, they would have realized that it was the first time since the Order had been evicted that Arthur Weasley had stepped foot in Grimmauld Place.

Tonks and Emma jumped from their seats and rushed to help Bill steer Arthur into a seat. Amelia and Arthur exchanged rueful glances.

“What happened to you, Arthur?” asked Tonks.

“I found him wandering in front of Gringotts this morning. He’d been roughed up before he even got to work. He wasn’t too coherent with his explanation either,” Bill said.

Narcissa ran a few diagnostic spells on Arthur. “He’s got a concussion and more than a few bruises and cuts. He’ll need to see a real healer, but I can deal with his cuts and bruises at least.”

Narcissa healed the cut on his forehead and cast a spell to reduce the bruising as well as the pain. Then she glanced at Tonks, who nodded. Tonks would contact Danni shortly.

“Arthur’s department has been taken over by one of Lucius’ cronies. Thomas Crabbe, I think. If I know Crabbe, he probably had Arthur beaten before throwing him out of the Ministry building.

“Arthur has been added to the wanted list,” Amelia said. “All the Department Heads have been, and so have key members of the Wizengamot. Within a few days, a week at the most, they’ll control the entire Ministry. Miles Pickerton was arrested this morning and sent to a holding cell at Azkaban. And rumor has it that some of the dementors have returned to Azkaban also.”

Remus looked at Tonks, his expression concerned. “Tonks, you better think about resigning. And I think we need to start shuttling people to Padfoot.” When she nodded, he turned to Amelia. “What about the people you’ve co-opted? Can you reach them without risking getting arrested yourself?”

Amelia frowned and nodded slowly. “I think so. We’d set up a dead drop for such a contingency when it looked like the Wizengamot might choose Richfield.”

“How many people do you have, Amelia?”

“Twenty nine Aurors, not counting Tonks. Another dozen or so promising Auror cadets and their families. Figure less than one hundred total. Only myself and three others are privy to Harry’s plan for the Ministry, but Miles Pickerton was also in on that part of the plan. Is there anything we can do to help him?”

Remus ran a hand through his graying hair. “I’m not really sure. I don’t think Harry will be willing to let Miles rot in that place, but I don’t know what he can do about it and we certainly do not have the people to storm Azkaban,” he replied with a heavy sigh. “Harry and his friends will be here in a few hours. Let’s talk to him about it then. In the meantime, let’s get Arthur into bed.”

“Looks like our meeting will be bigger than we expected. I’ll talk to Dobby about making extra food,” offered Emma.

---

### **Grimmauld Place, Later That Day...**

Remus looked up from his seat in the living room when he heard the loud thump of noise from the foyer. He stood and walked from the room in time to see Hermione helping Harry, who was sprawled on the floor, stand up.

“I don’t understand this, Harry. You can blow through anti-apparation wards, you can tandem apparate, but you can’t use a simple portkey?” He said with a laugh.

Harry looked up at Remus, still on one knee. “I can’t help it, Remus. And it doesn’t help that one leg isn’t what it used to be.”

Remus couldn’t help but notice the trace of bitterness in the comment. He walked over and easily lifted Harry to his feet. “Don’t worry about it, Cub. We have more important things to worry about,” he murmured to Harry, who nodded grimly.

Remus turned to everyone. “We’re setting up in the kitchen for this meeting.” His eyes sought out the young redhead in the group. “Ginny, your dad is upstairs. He got roughed up pretty good this morning when he was... fired from his job and replaced with Crabbe. Danni McNeil has seen him and he’ll be fine, but you might want to stop in and say hello to him. Second Floor, third bedroom on the right.”

As Ginny bolted up the stairs, the rest of the group moved towards the kitchen. Remus grasped Harry’s arm, holding him back. Harry looked at him in curiosity, Remus waited until they had all left the foyer before he began to speak.

“Harry, Miles Pickerton was picked up this morning and thrown into a holding cell at Azkaban. So far, he’s the only person caught who was in on part of the plan. Amelia had briefed him on the Ministry operation,” Remus said quietly.

Harry sighed and rubbed his face with a hand. “We can’t leave him in there. I won’t let that happen to him. His knowledge and abilities could be useful to us.”

“We don’t have the people to stage a breakout of Azkaban. And rumor has it that some of the dementors have returned to the prison,” Remus said worriedly.

Harry placed a hand on the older man's shoulders. "I need you to stall the meeting. If Danni is still here, don't let her leave. Miles may need her."

"What are you going to do?" asked Remus, alarmed at the idea of Harry attempting to get to Miles alone.

"What I should have done with the Grangers when they were captured," Harry replied grimly, then he gestured as if reaching for something. In his hand appeared his father's invisibility cloak. Remus blinked in surprise and then followed as Harry walked into the first floor study.

Harry sat on a footstool, breathing deeply for a moment. His eyes flared bright green as he reached out with his senses, trying to find the aura that belonged to his friend and teacher.

---

### **Azkaban Prison, Prisoner Holding Area...**

To call them holding cells would be a compliment. They were little more than cages and they were rapidly filling up with unlucky inhabitants. They weren't inside the prison walls, but outside, exposed to the elements. Set in neat rows of ten cages each with an aisle between them, there were nearly one hundred of these new holding cells. Each cell held between four and six unfortunate victims. Above the cells and in the aisles floated several dozen dementors.

The wind ripped through the holding cells, adding to the cold caused by the dementors and a chilled drizzle fell on the island. The only sounds came from the screams of the newly imprisoned, and the moans of those that had been here for a few hours.

It was into this hell that Harry apparated. With the invisibility cloak around him, no one noticed when he landed in a cage that contained six people. It was uncomfortably crowded and the effects of the dementors hit Harry like an onrushing train. Despite his skill with Occulmency, which lessened the effects of the dementors, the presence of so many of the creatures in close quarters made it difficult for anyone to hold onto their thoughts.

Harry nearly pitched to his knees as he heard the scream of his mother and a great wave of sadness and depression swept over him. The Dementors, spotting him through his invisibility cloak, converged on the cage. They could not get to him because of the bars, but the power brought to bare by several dozen dementors nearly overwhelmed him.

Struggling to stay on his feet, Harry stuffed his invisibility cloak in a pocket and started to search the faces of his fellow cellmates. The dementors had affected his ability to see auras. After checking three people, he found Miles, unconscious. Grabbing him firmly by the hand, Harry threw every last bit of his energy into escaping.

He began to glow bright silver. As he did, the light moved quickly to surround Miles as well. There was a bright flash like that of a flashbulb before Harry and Miles vanished. Into the

cacophony they'd left behind, a new sound now intruded as the dementors began to screech as if in pain. One by one, Miles' former cellmates looked up in wonder, the dementors continued to screech and wail. Whatever Harry had done, he somehow removed the dementor's ability to hurt anyone.

Into the hell of Azkaban, someone had just introduced hope.

---

## **Grimmauld Place...**

Remus paced the study worriedly, wondering how he was going to explain to everyone that Harry had gone off to Azkaban. He glanced up like a deer caught in headlights when the door to the study opened to admit Tonks and Hermione.

"Remus, what is going on? And where is my ward?" asked Tonks. Hermione stood behind her, frowning.

Remus started to stammer an explanation when the room turned blindingly bright. The light lasted only a second or two, but it left everyone blinking away tears as their eyes tried to cope with the onslaught.

Once their vision had cleared, they saw Harry and Miles standing next to Remus. Both were swaying dangerously on their feet. Harry managed to push Miles over into a chair, before he stumbled over to the couch, where he collapsed.

"Danni!" Tonks shouted and Hermione sprinted from the room to seek out the healer.

Less than a minute later, Danni rushed into the room with Hermione, Dan, Emma and Narcissa close on her heels.

When Harry finally realized where he was, he was leaning against Hermione and she was slipping little slivers of chocolate into his mouth. He sat up and she handed him a much larger piece of the sweet before scowling at him. He mentally cringed and waited, knowing what was coming.

"Harry, I love you dearly, but have you lost your mind? You can't just pop into Azkaban Prison and start breaking people out of there! And if you think that not telling me you were going was smart idea, you've got another thing coming!" Hermione said angrily.

Harry sighed and glanced at her for a moment before looking over at Miles. "Danni? Will Miles be alright?" he asked, reminding Hermione that he hadn't gone off on some fun excursion just to annoy her.

Danni looked up from her patient. "Yes, I think he will. His Occulmency shields protected his mind enough. If it's all right with you, I'll get him to a bed upstairs and give him a dreamless



sleep potion. He should be better by morning.”

Tonks offered to show Danni to a room they could put Miles in. He was exhausted and barely awake, a condition Harry could sympathize with. He watched Danni and Tonks get Miles up and move him out of the room with Remus following. He tried to stand up then, but Hermione pushed him back on the couch and glared at him.

“We’re not done talking about this, Harry. You took a big risk tonight and got lucky. The next time you go off without consulting anyone, I’ll make you wish I were a muggle!”

He looked up into her eyes and could see the anger and, more importantly, the fear, burning behind those soft brown eyes of hers. He pulled her into a gentle embrace.

“You’re right, Hermione. I should have talked to about it first. I’m sorry, I jumped without thinking. You and I both know I had to do it, but I should have talked to you first,” he whispered to her.

She relaxed into his arms. “You promise you won’t run off like that again?”

There was a moment of silence before he replied. “No, but I will promise that, from here on, I will ask for your opinion whenever possible before I run off again. I can’t see the future Hermione and something similar might happen again. But I promise I’ll talk to you before rushing out again if I can.”

Dan looked up as the kitchen door opened and Emma walked in, looking smug. “Are Harry and Hermione alright?” he asked his wife.

“They’re negotiating,” replied Emma with a smile.

“Negotiating what?”

“I think one of your movies says it best, Dan. ‘Learn balance, Daniel-san!’ and that’s what they are doing. She tried to lay down the law and he offered a counter position. They are both very strong willed people and they need to learn to compromise with each other...to find a balance they can both live with.”

“They’re more mature than any other Hogwarts couple I’ve seen,” McGonagall offered quietly. “Harry’s more like his mother than his father, and Hermione...” she stopped as the door opened to admit Harry, Hermione, Tonks and Remus. On their heels came Danni and Ginny.

Remus did a quick head count. “It looks like everyone’s here now, except for Arthur and Miles, who are recovering upstairs. With Richfield taking control of the Ministry, we’ve had some drastic changes in the twenty-four hours. Amelia, Arthur and Miles are all wanted by the MLE. More than twenty five Wizengamot members have disappeared. On top of all that, Dan has some information he needs to share. It’s what we originally set this meeting up for in the first place.” Remus helped Dan unroll a map of Britain on the table, and then nodded for him to begin.

“Before I begin, let me state that most of my information comes from sources that the Wizarding world is unfamiliar with. But I can assure you that they are valid and reliable sources.

“First off, the towns that I’ve circled in black have been attacked by dementors,” he said, gesturing at the map, which contained about thirty large black circles on it.

“At this point, I’m estimating nearly forty thousand victims,” he added, then pulled out a notebook. “At first, the muggle Government was using a cover story of airborne anthrax, but now both the CDC and the WHO are pushing NHS to declare this a virulent strain of African trypanosomiasis, or sleeping sickness. Now we all know it isn’t that at all. But it shows the muggle medical establishment is trying to cope with a problem by borrowing from what they do know.”

Dan gestured to the map again. “Why these particular towns were attacked, I am not sure. There is some sort of pattern, but I can’t recognize it. Mind you, most of this information is not coming from the Government, which has imposed a total news blackout. What else I can tell you is just as frightening. The American State Department has issued a Travel Advisory for American Citizens in the U.K. In addition, the American Military seem to be evacuating dependants of service personnel and relocating units to NATO installations on the continent. Holy Loch, for example, has been completely emptied.

“The quarantine imposed by the towns has broken some major overland arteries, which has resulted in shortages of food and supplies in some areas. On the streets of London people are frightened. The best I can describe it is as very tense.”

Dan leaned back in his chair and watched as the group digested his information. Remus coughed lightly, catching everyone’s attention.

“Before we discuss what Dan had to report, I think it may be important to hear what Harry saw at Azkaban today,”

Harry sighed and looked down at his hands for a moment, then he shivered. “I don’t know what Azkaban was like, but they have hundreds of cages out in the open and they were shoving four, sometimes six people to a cage. It was terrible. There was no shelter and the wind added to the chill of the dementors that patrolled above the cages. There were six people in a steel cage barely big enough for three. I found Miles and got out of there as fast as I could,” he said in a low monotone. He shivered again, even though the room was warm and comfortable.

McGonagall conjured a blanket and wrapped it around his shoulders. Danni handed him another piece of chocolate.

Harry was sure one or more of the adults would start tearing into him for his rescue of Miles, but he was saved by a popping sound from behind him. Turning, he saw Dobby looking up at him in obvious distress.

“Dobby? What’s wrong?”

“Master Harry, Dobby is sorry for bothering you. But Dobby has a problem. Many elves come to Dobby today. They lost families or been unbonded, Master Harry. They have nowhere to go,” Dobby said softly, looking up at Harry hopefully.

Harry glanced over at Hermione. She was biting her lip and listening. When she met his eyes, he raised an eyebrow and she understood. He was leaving it up to her.

“Dobby, how many elves need help?” Hermione asked softly.

Dobby scratched his head for a moment. “More than twenty, Miss Hermione.”

She closed her eyes and nodded, whether in acknowledgment of Dobby’s answer, or to Harry’s unanswered question wasn’t clear, but Harry ran with it anyway.

He turned in his chair. “Remus, talk to the construction people at Padfoot. I want to make sure we have a building capable of housing at least a hundred elves,” he said, and then he turned to Dobby. “Dobby, take your friends to Padfoot for now. Tell them that families will soon be available for them and, in the meantime, they can consider themselves bonded to the house of Potter-Black.”

Dobby beamed at Harry and vanished with a pop. Hermione smiled weakly. He looked at her, well aware of how repugnant she found the house elf slavery. “First we get them used to being treated right. Then we’ll start making them think for themselves,” he told her quietly.

She nodded. “Between Hogwarts and Dobby’s friends that’s over sixty elves so far.”

“You’re stealing Hogwarts’ elves?” McGonagall exclaimed.

Harry reached for a biscuit on the table and chuckled. “No Professor, we’re not. What we’ve done is tell them that, if the castle falls, then they can come to Dobby to find new homes.”

McGonagall relaxed and sipped her tea thoughtfully.

Remus coughed again. “I hate to bring us back to the subject at hand, but we need to start moving up our plans. I’d like to move Narcissa into Padfoot tomorrow and have her start to oversee the stocking of the hospital. She has the basic training even if she isn’t a healer. Emma could join her as well,” Remus offered.

“Arthur should stay here,” Harry said thoughtfully. “We’re going to need him on team Weasley. We need Amelia here as well, to coordinate our Ministry Team. Miles should go to Padfoot though. He can get a start on putting together the Operations center.”

“Operations center? Would you explain that, Mr. Potter?” asked Professor Flitwick.

Harry looked up at the ceiling for a moment, debating with himself. “It’s like this, Professor. The area around Padfoot has been broken up into three sections. There’s the town, which includes a modest fifty bed hospital, a primary and intermediate school, the manor house and the Operations center, which will include training areas as well as other features.”

“But what’s the purpose of this Operations center?” asked the small Professor again.

“It’s the place that we’ll use to take back our country, Professor. It’s going to be where we make plans to bring the war back to Voldemort,” Amelia answered for Harry. He nodded gratefully to her.

“Professor, you, Professor McGonagall and quite a few others will be in on many aspects of what we’re doing. But some things must be kept secret, if for no other reason than protecting the people involved. Surely you didn’t think we were all going to just run away from what’s happening here? That’s why Harry turned the Chamber of Secrets into a private place that only we can reach...a headquarters here in Britain and another in Ireland,” replied Hermione.

“What we’re doing, Professor, is planning ahead. We may have to run from this fight now, but that doesn’t mean we’ll keep running. Now, unless anyone has any further suggestions, I think we should turn in. Winky and Dobby have prepared rooms for everyone. We’ll be able to return to Hogwarts first thing tomorrow.”

“Actually, I have a comment I’d like to make, Harry,” Dan said softly.

At Harry’s nod, Dan glanced at the others around him. “None of us know what it’s like to live under a totalitarian society. With Voldemort now running the Ministry, we have to expect certain behaviors from the government and take steps accordingly.”

“What do you mean by ‘behaviors’?” asked Remus intently.

“Once Voldemort’s consolidated his hold on the Ministry, which we’re seeing right now with what’s happened to Amelia, Arthur and Miles, he’ll branch out. He’ll look outside the Ministry for groups of people that he thinks will be a danger to his power. That means media outlets like the Quibbler and the Wizarding Wireless Network and organizations like the Order of the Phoenix. And don’t expect just the individuals to be swept up. He’ll eventually start sweeping up whole families.”

Expressions around the table turned grim as everyone contemplated what Dan told them. “Alright then,” Harry said, breaking the silence at last, “if we can intervene and prevent someone from going to Azkaban, we do so. I’m not saying we expose ourselves needlessly, though. Hermione, can you come up with a loyalty oath like you did with the DA? Only this time, make the punishment suitable? If we’re going to have to offer a safe haven for the likes of some of the Order members, I want their loyalty guaranteed.”

Hermione nibbled on her lip for a moment before nodding.

McGonagall glanced at Flitwick. “Harry, I think it would be best if Filius and I return to school tonight. Tomorrow’s Sunday, so I expect to see everyone back in school before dinner tomorrow.”

Harry nodded. Grabbing a teacup, he murmured, “Portus,” and passed it to McGonagall. Flitwick walked around the table to grasp one edge of the cup. In a second, they were gone.

Amelia pulled out a small cell phone from her pocket and began to type in a text message. Curious, Hermione watched her enter ‘regnum est deficio’ and press send.

“Madam Bones? The kingdom is failing?”

Amelia looked up at Hermione and smiled at her. “It’s a code message. Someone I trust in MI5 will pick it up. That person will, in turn, forward it to a new destination. The same person will then send a double E message to a central distribution point, where it will be forwarded to a bunch of people.”

As Amelia spoke, both Harry and Dan’s eyes lit up. Dan had managed to transfer his love for the James Bond series of books and movies to Harry over the summer, and this was pure spy stuff!

Hermione looked even more confused with Amelia’s explanation. “Double E message?”

“Escape and Evade,” Harry murmured, his eyes shining. Dan nodded approvingly, his eyes also shining.

“She sent a double message, Hermione,” said her father. “The first message obviously had two meanings.”

Amelia chuckled at Dan’s expression. “Boys. They never really grow up. To be specific then, the message is a prearranged phrase that will tell the muggles that the Ministry of Magic can no longer be trusted. The message will also be sent to Ministry Aurors and operatives whom I trust. It tells them to go to ground, not to contact the Ministry, to hide.”

---

## **Across the United Kingdom...**

About the time Harry and Hermione climbed into the bed in his room and went to sleep, Amelia’s message was waking people up all over the country. Within hours, nearly one hundred wizards and witches and their families had vanished, gone into hiding. The next stop would be making it to known safe houses where they would hopefully find instructions on the next step...escape.

The first recipient for Amelia’s message had some additional duties to perform based on the message content. Amelia hadn’t been quite honest with Harry and Dan. The message didn’t just mean the Magical Ministry couldn’t be trusted. It meant the Ministry had fallen to a hostile force.

Her message generated a series of prearranged actions on the part of the Muggle Government. Her four aging Polaris class ballistic submarines would be preparing to put to sea by noon the next day. At the same time, the Queen would announce an extended trip to Balmoral Castle.

---

## **Grimmauld Place, the next morning...**

It was the coughing that finally nudged Harry into consciousness. He was laying in bed, naked and quite comfortable with Hermione, also naked, draped over him. He blinked again and the room swam into focus. Harry looked around for a moment in that strange, uncomprehending state people have between wakefulness and sleep. Then he stiffened in surprise.

Hermione, her head on his shoulder, could feel the tenseness suddenly flow into him. She lifted her head to look at him curiously.

Harry wasn't looking at her. No, he was looking at the door and making a strange strangling sound. She looked towards the door and then buried her head in Harry's shoulder while frantically trying to pull the blanket over the both of them.

"So, you're sleeping with my daughter, eh Harry?" asked Dan in an icy tone.

Harry looked down to see Hermione pull the covers up over her head and realized that he'd get no help from that quarter. Steeling his resolve, he looked at Dan. "Yes, I am, Dan. We're both of age in the muggle world and will be considered adults in less than a year in the magical one as well," Harry replied firmly.

Dan made a move to speak, but Harry waved him to be quiet.

"I don't want us to be enemies over this and I don't want to fight you. I have a great deal of respect and no small amount of love for both you and Emma. But understand this. I love your daughter and, if I survive Voldemort, I intend to spend the rest of my life making her the happiest witch on the planet. No one, not Voldemort, and not you, is going to come between me and the woman I love."

As Harry spoke, his magic began radiating off him in waves. Hermione lifted her head and stared at him as he spoke to her father.

"It's entirely up to you, of course. You know I'll never hurt her deliberately and you know I'd give my life to keep her safe," Harry said quietly.

Dan's shoulders sagged and he rubbed his face tiredly with one hand. "She's my little girl, Harry."

"She always will be, Dan," Harry replied. "But she's grown up into a fine, strong woman who will someday give you grandchildren to love and cherish. She's so special I haven't the words to describe it, but I shouldn't have to. You know how special she is. She loves me, and I love her," Harry said a little defiantly.

"And well you should, Harry," said Emma, who appeared behind Dan in the doorway. She then looked up at her husband with a mixed expression of love and annoyance. With a sigh, she reached up and grabbed Dan by the ear. "Now if you'll excuse me, I want to have a few words with my husband," she said firmly, dragging Dan out of the doorway.

Harry sighed and waved his hand shutting the door and placing the strongest locking charm he could think of on it before he turned to look at Hermione. She had her head propped up by a hand and was staring at him with a look of wonder.

“I can’t believe you just did that,” she whispered.

Harry brushed her hair out of her eyes and looked at her. She was beautiful! “Did what?” he murmured distractedly.

“You stood up to my father.”

He wrapped both arms around her and held her tightly to him. “I’ll stand up to anyone who tries to come between us,” he said simply.

They both laughed as they heard Emma berating her husband through the walls. Deciding they were up, they dressed and went downstairs to the kitchen.

Once there, they found most everyone up and having breakfast. Arthur, sitting with Ginny, shot Harry a profoundly grateful look.

“Harry, I…”

“It’s alright, Mr. Weasley. You get yourself better so when the time comes you can help your sons with their jobs,” Harry said, cutting the older man off gently.

Ginny leaned into her father and hugged him. Harry and Arthur were developing a bit of a friendship, but it was unlike what they had once had. Now it was more a friendship between equals.

Harry sat down and was reaching for a platter of eggs when a large Eurasian Eagle Owl flew in a window and landed in front of him, offering him a leg. Taking the parchment, he absently reached for a sausage and offered it to the large bird. The bird stared at the morsel for a moment before snatching it from his fingers. It quickly swallowed the sausage and then sprang for the window, unobserved by Harry who was busy reading.

Everyone sat watching Harry. The last few days had been nothing but bad news and they figured this was just more of the same. After five minutes of silence, Hermione broke down. “Harry! What is it?” she asked in exasperation.

Harry glanced up from the parchment. “Hmmm? Oh this! It’s from Ragnok at Gringotts,” he replied absently.

“Well? What does he say?”

Harry glanced at the parchment again. “He’s thanking me for the tip we gave him at Christmas time. He goes on to say that, because of the advance warning, he was able to save Gringotts nearly one billion galleons and he wants to give me a one percent ‘consultation’ fee for ‘services

rendered'. He also says that the money has already been deposited in my primary account at Stonewall Lane. Finally he says that the Ministry has been acting like they own everything and he's seriously considering declaring the Treaty of Kent null and void, but that I won't have to worry about that because of my 'special relationship with the goblins'."

Harry reached for a slice of toast, ignoring the fact that a shocked silence reigned in the kitchen. He stopped when Hermione gripped his arm painfully.

"He's thinking of doing what, Harry?" she whispered, her face pale.

"Declaring the Treaty of Kent null and void. What's the big deal about the treaty?"

"Don't you ever listen to Professor Binns? The Treaty of Kent, signed in 1785, specifically ended the last Goblin war with our Ministry. If the Goblins void the treaty, they'll close all the Gringotts branches in the country."

"I don't see why you're surprised, Hermione. You heard Ragnok at Christmas. If they were going to move all their hard cash asset accounts to another country, then they obviously planned on eventually closing Gringotts here in Britain," Harry replied. To him it was a logical move on the part of the Goblins.

"Harry, don't you see? Closing Gringotts could start another Goblin/Wizard war!" Hermione exclaimed.

Harry leaned back and sipped at his tea for a moment, frowning. "I don't think it'll come to that. If I understand this right, Gringotts will close down here in the U.K., but will remain open in the other countries, doing business as usual. If the British Ministry complains to the other Ministries, the Goblins can claim it's strictly a local matter and they have no wish to begin another war. The other Ministries will do anything to avoid another Goblin rebellion."

"I think Harry has the right of it. As long as the Goblins go out of their way to tell the other Ministries that this is not a reflection of the global wizard/goblin relationship, there should be no problem," Dan said. He and Emma had entered the kitchen during Harry's reading of the parchment and Dan's comment, while correct, was also obviously a peace offering to Harry.

Harry shot Dan a grateful look while Hermione looked thoughtful.

"I think I'll owl Ragnok and suggest that to him, just in case. I'm sure he's already considered it. But I'd like to stay on his good side," Harry offered.

---

## **The Shrieking Shack...**

The sound of someone apparating into the shack caused Snape to look up from the book he had



been studying.

“Severus?” called a voice.

“I’m upstairs, Headmaster,” Snape called back in annoyance. The old man wasn’t supposed to show up today!

Closing the book, he looked up as Dumbledore stepped into the living room area of the shack. Snape blinked in surprise, as the normally meticulously dressed Dumbledore appeared disheveled and only partially clothed.

“Headmaster?” he asked in alarm, starting to rise.

“Be at ease, my boy. I am fine and will be better once I speak to Minerva.”

“But Headmaster, your appearance...”

“Yes, yes, I know. It seems that the new Minister of Magic is consolidating his power base by arresting members of the Wizengamot. I awoke this morning to find a number of Aurors at my house, seeking to place me into custody,” Dumbledore said, then he sighed. “I’m afraid that once again I am a fugitive, like last year.”

“There are several unused rooms here, Headmaster. I don’t see why you can’t use one of them,” Snape offered, despite the pain it caused him.

“Thank you, my boy! Now, if you will excuse me, I will pop into one of those rooms, clean it up, then send a message to Minerva. The Order must be warned,” Dumbledore said walking into an unused room.

Snape watched the older man leave and he resisted the urge to hurl the heavy book he held against a wall. The last thing he wanted was Albus Dumbledore as a roommate!

Sighing, Snape opened the volume again and went back to reading about power amplification rituals.

---

## **Hogwarts Charms office...**

As promised, the Outcasts had returned to the school before dinner. Now that dinner was over, Harry joined Professor Flitwick in his office to discuss the staff they were going to make. Hermione, ever curious, decided to accompany him.

The components were laid out on a long table as Flitwick dashed from one end of the room to the other, muttering to himself. Both Harry and Hermione smiled at the antics of their little Professor.

Finally, Flitwick turned to Harry. “Now Harry, with a wand, we have a single core and, because of the single core, the wand must select a wizard most compatible with the core’s magic. The core of your wand is a phoenix feather, a most powerful talisman, capable of channeling large amounts of magical energy. But it’s not enough in your case.

“In a staff, we have more than one core. Multiple cores enable the staff to channel more energy than a wand is capable of channeling and still provide the focus that the wand provides.

“Not much is known about staves anymore. There hasn’t been a wizard needing one in hundreds of years. Legend says the staff should be as tall as you are, but the lengths of wood we have fall far short of that mark. I don’t think it will be a problem, but at some point in your life you will probably need to make a full sized staff.

“According to Ollivander’s book, the user of the staff must be involved in it’s making. I have taken the liberty of preparing as much as I can, but at this point we need to select the core materials.”

Harry looked at the table, feeling the same pulling he felt the other day. “Professor, I do feel some sort of attraction to some of these core materials,” he offered.

The little Professor beamed. “Wonderful! That will make it much simpler, Harry! We can use the core materials that you feel the attraction for.”

“Professor, can anyone use a staff? I know Harry needs to use one, but can a regular wizard or witch use one? And would it provide any benefits over a regular wand?” Hermione asked. The whole idea of a staff intrigued her greatly.

“That’s hard to say, Hermione,” said the little Professor. “It should be easy enough to find out though. A staff isn’t as keyed to a person as a wand is. Once we’re done here, we can run a few comparative tests and see if there’s a difference.”

Harry walked over to the table and eyed the core materials carefully. He could feel some of them pulling at him. The question was, which ones?

“Hermione?”

“Hmmm?” she said looking up from Ollivanders book.

“Could you help me a moment? Some of these materials are calling me, but I can’t figure out which ones.”

Hermione conjured a box and walked over to the table. There, she placed all of the core items into the box and moved it to the far end of the room. “Can you still feel the attraction, Harry?” she called.

“Yes, but its less now.”

“Good. Wait there a moment,” she replied, then she put the box on the floor and pulled out of the box one of the core items. She carried the core back to the table, placing it in front of him.

“Anything?”

He shook his head.

She nodded and put that core to the side, then went back and retrieved another core.

“That’s one,” he said softly with a slight smile. “I can feel it coming closer.”

Nodding she placed the core next to the box and picked up another. When they were done, Harry had selected three cores, which were now lined up in front of him on the table. Strangely, Hermione had pulled two others out and set them aside as well.

Flitwick watched them separate the core materials out with a smile. Harry had chosen a vial of ground Basilisk fang, Dragon heartstring and hair from the mane of a Sphinx.

“Miss Granger, can you tell me why you set aside two of the cores Harry rejected?”

Hermione looked somewhat self-conscious. “Well Professor, I don’t know exactly what Harry means by being attracted, but these two cores,” she said pointing at them, “pulled at me. The Unicorn hair and Griffin feather seemed right. I could feel them vibrate in my hand.”

Harry looked very interested. “You should have enough power to use a staff, Hermione. I think it’s a brilliant idea!”

Flitwick beamed at the two of them. “I don’t mind helping make two Harry, but can you be sure she has the power needed?”

“Yes Professor, I think I can. She’s probably one of the strongest witches in the school,” Harry replied with confidence.

Under Professor Flitwick’s direction, each began work on their staff. Harry chose the Heartwood shaft and Hermione chose the Yew. Using a spell, they split the shaft lengthwise into two pieces. Then the core materials were levitated into depressions carved from the shaft half. With the cores carefully positioned, the two halves were rejoined and magically sealed.

Hermione chose a plain platinum end cap for the top of her staff, while Harry selected a more ornate crystal orb. Harry’s staff was further enhanced at the bottom to keep the wood from being damaged as he leaned on it.

Creating the basic staff had been the easy part. The hard part would take them several weeks, as they both had to inscribe runes on the staff, runes they would need to select and carve themselves. Even though each staff was fully functional at this point, the runes would further enhance and strengthen it.

Hermione looked at her staff critically for a moment, then she lifted it, murmuring, “*Lumos !*”

The end cap of her staff flared to life and she grinned broadly. The end cap cast a powerfully bright light, far brighter than her wand could do.

“Oh marvelous, Miss Granger! Simply marvelous! Twenty five points to Gryffindor for a job well done!” said Flitwick, positively dancing with glee.

Harry grinned at her as she put out the light and looked at him expectantly. Harry frowned for a moment, considering what spell to cast. “Better be ready to cover your eyes,” he warned them. Taking a deep breath, he whispered, “*Lumos .*”

The crystal orb at the end of his staff flared with an eye blinding brilliance. Harry shut his eyes and cried, “NOX!” The light was extinguished instantly.

All three stood blinking away tears and waiting for their vision to return to normal. Finally Harry broke the silence. “You know, if I could cast that light in a beam, I’d have a non-lethal weapon.”

“My word! If that was a whispered light spell, I’d hate to see what a shouted one would do, Mr. Potter. Excellent work! Another twenty five points to Gryffindor!”

Harry smiled and tested the balance of his staff. When the door to the office opened admitting Professor McGonagall, they all turned towards her.

Her serious expression was enough to interrupt their activities. “I had a visit from Professor Dumbledore who, it seems, is now wanted by the authorities. He told me he is staying nearby, and asked that I send word to the Order to maintain a low profile. He fears that the government will soon begin to go after the Order membership.”

Harry sighed. “We’re not ready to offer the Order safe haven, Professor. Maybe in a few days, if Hermione can get that loyalty oath done. But even then, I’m reluctant to let them have the run of Padfoot without any supervision. No, I’m afraid the Order is going to be on their own for a while.”

McGonagall nodded. “I agree, Mr. Potter, I just wanted you to be aware that Dumbledore is somewhere in the vicinity of Hogsmeade, and what his fear is. Now, if you and Miss Granger are done for the evening, I’ll escort you both back to your house.”

---

## **Hogsmeade (Second weekend in March)...**

Susan Bones and Terry Boot walked down the road from Hogwarts to Hogsmeade. Like so many other students on this blustery Saturday, they needed to escape the tense atmosphere that had become Hogwarts. The Aurors who had been providing additional security at the school had vanished without a word early in the week. And the news being reported spoke of arrests of long

time government officials and families going into hiding. Several new laws restricting non-humans had been passed and another law was already introduced that would classify Muggles as non-human.

The Wizarding Wireless Network had also reported a number of attacks by Death Eaters scattered around the United Kingdom. Strangely enough, there were no reports of any arrests.

Tension in the school was rising as muggle born and half blood banded together to defend themselves from the pure blood racists who were suddenly making their views known. Long time friendships and more than a few romances were broken as full bloods turned on their friends in an effort to appear to agree with the government.

The Outcasts were targeted by both groups since they contained Muggle born, half and full bloods, but few people wanted to tangle with Harry Potter and his friends.

Terry and Susan needed a break from the castle. As enjoyable as it was to be with their friends, their relationship was reaching a point where it demanded a little privacy now and then. Susan didn't know it, but Terry was intending to take her to Madam Puddifoots.

Madam Pomfrey also walked down the road towards Hogsmeade on this early morning. She had an appointment with Healer Symthe to pick up a new spell book and she needed to restock some of the supplies and potion ingredients for the infirmary. She sighed and wished she'd managed to convince Minerva to join her today. But with things being what they were, Minerva felt she couldn't leave the school. Privately, she admitted that Minerva was probably correct, but she was worried about her friend. The woman hadn't had a single day's break since the Headmaster had been suspended!

It was a quiet time in The Three Broomsticks. Madam Rosemerta was cleaning up and getting the large pub area ready for the days trade. It was nearly noon before the first customers started to trickle in for a hot-spiced butterbeer and some lunch.

The first sign of trouble came from the direction of the train station.

Rosemerta looked up curiously. She could have sworn she'd heard a scream come from outside, but it was hard to say for sure over the noise in the pub. Two of her customers were arguing over the prospects of England attending the Quidditch World Cup this year and their conversation was quite loud. She moved closer to one of the front windows to see if there was anything going on.

Poppy Pomfrey paused coming out of the apothecary and wondered if that was a scream she had heard. She nodded pleasantly to several people passing her, including a couple of students. Then she turned and stared intently in the direction of the train station. The ground under her feet shook slightly and she could have sworn someone screamed again.

She moved down the street towards the station. There. A motion caught her eye and she spotted what looked like a person flying through the air. The ground shook again and she clearly heard someone scream this time. Several people came running up the road from the direction she was

heading.

She checked to make sure she still had her medical bag with her and strode purposefully down the street. If people were hurt, they'd need her.

---

### **Madam Puddifoots with Terry and Susan...**

Susan was a bit shocked. She and Terry had tried on several occasions to arrange for a romantic interlude and each time something had happened to prevent it. Susan was afraid. She didn't consider herself to be pretty and smart like Hermione, or having that wholesome look like Ginny. Even Luna had an odd sort of beauty that made the Hufflepuff feel less than adequate.

What Susan didn't know was that those same women she envied, envied her for her long hair and hourglass figure. All Susan knew was that every time she tried to take her relationship with Terry further, something had happened to interfere and it had shaken her confidence.

Thanking Madam Puddifoot when she delivered the platter of cookies and steaming mugs of hot chocolate, Terry reached over and gripped one of the Susan's hands in his own. Susan was a childhood friend of his and, in his opinion, the most beautiful girl in the school. Susan's Aunt had been key to helping his muggle family understand what the Wizarding world was like.

"Susan," Terry began, really wishing he had a Gryffindor's courage. "I wanted to tell you how pretty I think you look today. I'm glad you agreed to come with me."

Susan blushed and stared down at her plate for a moment. "I'm glad I came too. I wasn't sure you'd want to continue going out with me," she said in a whisper.

Terry frowned, upset by her words. "Why wouldn't I? Don't you know how I feel about you?"

"I know, Terry, but I thought you'd be angry with me. Every time we try to arrange for some time for ourselves, something happens."

"But that isn't your fault, Susan. You have to know that. Besides, we'll have time for ourselves," he replied, then he suddenly turned shy, "Would you like me to ask Harry for those portkeys?" he asked, his voice tinged with both hope and fear.

She nodded and smiled softly. Glancing down she frowned when she noticed the liquid in her cup was rippling. Terry followed her gaze and frowned, and then he stood up and walked to the window. His actions caught the attention of several other patrons and Madam Puddifoot. Every few seconds they could feel the ground shake.

"Giants!" Terry exclaimed loudly, the shock he felt evident in his voice.

He looked at the people in the small teashop and performed a quick head count. Eight students, Madam Puddifoot and her helper, not counting himself and Susan. He rushed back over to the table. “We need to get everyone out of here. Do you think you can make a portkey like Harry showed us, Susan?” he asked desperately.

“I think so,” she said nervously.

“Good, use the tablecloth and get everyone in here to Hogwarts, then alert Harry and Professor McGonagall. I’ll see if I can find any more students and use my portkey to Harry’s place,” he said.

From outside, screams and the sounds of breaking wood could be heard. Susan nodded reluctantly and pulled out her wand. As Terry left Madam Puddifoots, he heard her instructing everyone to grab hold of the tablecloth.

---

### **Hogsmeade, near The Three Broomsticks...**

Rosemerta peered out the window, looking for the source of the disturbance. Several people had run by the building and the building continued to shake, but she still couldn’t see anything. She was about to open the front door and go out into the street when a corner of the pub exploded inward.

A large shard of wood impaled Rosemerta’s leg and she collapsed against the wall. Helplessly, she watched as a giant reached into the gaping hole in the building and lifted out one of her customers, still screaming.

The giant looked at the man curiously for a moment, then hurled him out of the way. With another swing of his club, the giant hit the building again. Rosemerta gasped as the building tilted. She tried to get up, but her injury prevented it. Another blow came crashing down on the building and it slowly and inexorably collapsed, burying Rosemerta and several of her customers under the wreckage.

Poppy Pomfrey watched in horror from the street, then dashed sideways to avoid the slow moving giant as it walked away from the collapsed building. Giants were incredibly dangerous, but were slow and lumbering. Poppy was easily able to avoid the giant as she ran to The Three Broomsticks. She fingered her emergency Infirmary Portkey for a moment, and then started pulling pieces out of the pile of wood, searching for a way to get to the people trapped within. She never noticed the shadow that fell over her.

---

### **Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry...**

Susan Bones arrived in the front courtyard of the school with Madam Puddifoot and nine other people. Turning to the group, she instructed them to get everyone inside the school, then she sprinted on ahead, heading for the Gryffindor Head Suite.

Susan burst into the little common room to find Harry and Hermione, both studying. They looked up, startled at her arrival. Seeing her expression, Harry stood up and faced her, the concern written on his face.

“Harry,” she panted, “there are giants in Hogsmeade! Terry sent me back to the school with some students. I don’t know where he is!”

Harry turned and held out a hand. His staff flew from the corner, coming to his hand like a tame bird. He nodded to Hermione then, saying, “Take care of Susan. There’ll be more students in town and I have to find Terry.”

Susan stumbled over to Hermione, who grabbed the girl, as Harry vanished from sight.

---

## **12 Grimmauld Place...**

Alarms screamed in the building to announce an emergency portkey arrival. Tonks, Amelia and Remus bolted from various parts of the house to the foyer, wands drawn. Remus skidded to a halt, spotting several former students of his. It was a small group, only five people. All were covered in dust and several were bleeding. Terry Boot stumbled to the front of the group.

He was bleeding heavily from a cut on his forehead. “Giants, Mr. Lupin...giants in Hogsmeade. I just had time to grab these four from Honeydukes and portkey away,” he said, swaying.

Remus looked over the group. “You did the right thing, Terry. Amelia, Tonks, help me get these kids into the living room and we’ll floo them to the school. Tonks, I think you might want to see if we can get a hold of Danni. They are going to need as many healers as possible, I think.”

They moved everyone into the living room where Remus opened up a floo connection to the Headmaster’s office at Hogwarts.

---

## **Hogwarts, Headmaster’s Office...**

Minerva McGonagall looked up from the desk of the Headmaster’s office to see Madam Puddifoot and her assistant enter. She had not yet adjusted to sitting behind this particular desk, but the Board of Governors expected her to use the office. She frowned and shuddered to think what would bring Madam Puddifoot to Hogwarts. The last time the woman had shown up it was to complain about the Weasley twins, Fred and George, who had turned her shop into a gingerbread house.



“Madeline,” Minerva said with a smile, “won’t you come in? A cup of tea, perhaps?”

The stout woman shook her head. “Minerva, there is no time for...”

The woman paused in mid-comment when Minerva’s floo flared to life and a pair of students stepped through, followed by another pair, then Remus Lupin, helping Terry Boot.

Minerva stood in alarm. Some of her students had been injured!

“Giants are attacking Hogsmeade, Minerva. Terry grabbed these four and portkeyed to Harry’s house,” Remus said urgently.

“Susan, she went to get Harry Potter,” whispered a pale Madam Puddifoot.

Remus and Minerva exchanged a look. Minerva turned to Madam Puddifoot. “Madeline, would you be a dear and escort these students to the infirmary? I’m sure you remember where it is. Mr. Lupin and I need to get down to Hogsmeade to help out.”

Numbly Madam Puddifoot nodded as Minerva and Remus used the floo to return to Grimmauld.

---

## **Hogsmeade...**

Harry Potter appeared on the outskirts of Hogsmeade, not far from the Shrieking Shack and The Three Broomsticks.

Moving in a loping trot, he headed south towards the popular pub and the main road. He could feel the ground shaking and the sound of screams and breaking wood. He slid to a halt in the middle of the road and looked east. He could clearly see one giant not too far away, facing away from him, and another coming towards him from the far edge of town. The closer of the two giants had a small child in his hand and the child was crying hysterically.

Harry scowled and raised his staff. He would have to time this carefully. The giant raised his arm and hurled the child to the ground.

“ACCIO CHILD!” Harry shouted.

The small girl hurtled downward at a frightening pace, then suddenly shot off perpendicular to the ground into Harry’s arms. The force of her speed was enough to spin Harry around several times before he was able to put her down. The giant never noticed that the girl never hit the ground.

Harry put the girl down, then knelt by the crying child. “Stay behind me, do you understand?” he said intently.

Sniffling back tears, she could only nod at him. He smiled gently, then stood and turned to face the giant again.

His mind raced. Giants were magic resistant. What could he use against it? Most likely an explosive hex or cutting curse would bounce off or just irritate it. Thinking back to his third year and what Remus had taught them about magical creatures, he considered his options, and then he glanced at the wreckage of The Three Broomsticks. Several still forms lay in the dirt near the building, but he refused to think about them.

He levitated a large wooden beam out of the wreckage. It had broken in half and was only about twelve feet long with one jagged end. Turning to face the Giant, he took a deep breath and concentrated. Then, in a quick move, he sent the beam hurling towards the hulking creature.

The twelve foot long missile hit the giant with an explosive force, plunged through his back and burst out from the giant's ribcage with a spray of gore.

The giant paused and looked down at the four feet of wooden beam sticking out of his chest. The giant roared in agony for a moment, then blood burst from his mouth. He teetered for a moment, then slowly pitched to his knees and collapsed.

Harry sighed in relief at the death of the giant, but looked up in surprise a moment later when the giant at the far end of the town bellowed in anger and started a lumbering run up the street, straight at him! He looked around frantically and the little girl gripped his pant leg, making whimpering sounds as the other giant drew closer and closer.

He couldn't spot a suitable beam to use and there was no time to make one. The giant was nearly upon them when he panicked. Pointing his staff he shouted, "Wingardium Leviosa!"

The giant suddenly hurtled upwards at an incredible velocity. It was barely a speck in the sky before Harry regained control of his spell and halted the giant's upward flight. Aiming carefully, he moved the giant slightly, and then cancelled the spell.

He smiled. With a little luck and if he aimed properly, the giant should land between the Shrieking Shack and the Whomping Willow.

Harry watched as the huge figure hurtled earthward and was glad he wouldn't be anywhere near the impact zone. He and the little girl watched as the giant impacted and the ground shook. Then he took the girl's hand and walked towards The Three Broomsticks, looking for injured.

---

## **Hogsmeade, near Madam Puddifoots...**

Remus, Tonks, Danni and Minerva apparated to the front door of what used to be Madam Puddifoots, but now was a splintered wreck. Bewildered, the four looked around at the devastation. Hogsmeade looked like it had been hit by a tornado. Here and there, people could be seen combing through the wreckage, looking for survivors. They could clearly see the damage the giants caused. Of the creatures themselves, there was no sign, but they all felt a single massive ground tremor, then nothing.

Remus motioned for Danni and Tonks to pull up the hoods on their concealment cloaks, then they went about trying to help where they could. They were nearly an hour into organizing the townspeople to help each other when Ministry Aurors and Healers from St. Mungos finally began to arrive.

With help now pouring into the town, Remus and Tonks went in search of Harry, fearful of what they'd find.

Harry knelt in the dirt next to the body he had found near The Three Broomsticks, tears flowing freely down his cheeks. The little girl stood nearby watching the man who had saved her cry. Harry felt a hand on his shoulder. He looked up from that gentle touch to see Danni standing there, her own eyes misty from unshed tears.

Harry looked down again at the body and he straightened out her arm, and then brushed the hair away from her eyes. Minerva, spotting Danni and Harry, motioned to Remus to follow then rushed to the pair. She gasped when she saw the motionless form of Poppy Pomfrey.

Harry looked up at her, his face twisted in sorrow. "I didn't get here in time, Professor. I'm so sorry," he said with a whimper, and then his shoulders shook as sobs wracked his body.

Tonks scooped up the little girl and passed her to a member of the town council who'd been helping them. "Find her parents. We'll deal with Madam Pomfrey," she said huskily.

The townsman nodded and went off in search of the little girl's family. Minerva steeled her expression and walked to Harry. She gently helped him stand and turn away from the sight. Danni knelt down and double checked Poppy, but it was too late. She looked up and shook her head at Remus. Tonks buried her head into Remus' shoulder and wept. Poppy Pomfrey had been the healer at Hogwarts for nearly thirty years and she had touched many lives.

Remus conjured a stretcher and Danni levitated Poppy's body onto it. With the stretcher leading the way, Remus and Tonks fell in behind it, then Harry and Minerva, with Danni bringing up the rear. Harry placed an arm around his Professor's shoulders, giving and taking comfort. Minerva smiled gently up at her student. Slowly the group of them followed the stretcher up the road. They were taking Madam Pomfrey home to Hogwarts for the last time.

"Does she have family?" asked Harry quietly.

"She has a daughter now living in America, but no one local. Poppy's husband died in the sixties. She has no one else," Minerva said.

"She has us, Professor," Harry said softly. "Hogwarts is her family."

Minerva sniffed and wiped a tear away. "Aye Mr. Potter, then we'll take her home to her family."

Behind them, other students who'd survived the attack on Hogsmeade lined up, following on the walk back to school.

---

## **Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry...**

Hermione stood with some of the outcasts in the Entrance Hall. Madam Puddifoot was talking to Professor Flitwick. News of the attack had spread like wildfire throughout the school, but no one knew the extent of the attack.

“There’s someone coming up the road!” shouted a student standing in front of the school.

Professor Flitwick and everyone else surged out the great doors to look. Coming around the bend in the road was a small group of students and adults. They were following what appeared to be a levitated stretcher. It wasn’t until they got closer that a collective gasp rippled through the crowd. Several students started weeping.

Hermione, who was further back in the crowd, could see Harry, Remus and Tonks, but it wasn’t until the crowd parted and she was able to see the stretcher that she understood. Her hands flew to her mouth and her eyes widened.

Harry broke away from Minerva and he walked to her. She could see the sorrow etched on his face. He wrapped his arms around her and buried his head in the hollow between her neck and shoulder. She held him tightly and they both wept.

Later, in Great Hall, dinner was served to a very quiet student body. When dinner was complete, Professor McGonagall stood to catch everyone’s attention. The day had aged her more than even the attack at the end of Harry’s fifth year where she had been injured and sent to St. Mungos.

“By now you all know of the loss we have suffered this day. Classes will be cancelled on Monday and Tuesday. On Tuesday morning, after breakfast, there will be a memorial service for Madam Pomfrey.

“Healer Danni McNeil has agreed to help out here at Hogwarts until we can locate a permanent replacement for Madam Pomfrey. Healer McNeil asks me to tell everyone that she has calming draughts available, as well as sleeping potions, if necessary. The next few days will be difficult for all. I would ask that everyone do their best to help each other.”

---

## **Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry...**

Tuesday morning came with a bitter wind and a heavy overcast. After breakfast, Harry and the Outcasts, dressed in their finest school robes, walked with heavy hearts out to the Quidditch Pitch. The attack had shocked the Wizarding world to the core. Ministry spokesmen were spending most of their time trying to answer the question of why they had been so delayed responding to the disaster. The death of Madam Pomfrey and over one hundred residents of Hogsmeade had people screaming for answers.

On Sunday, the Wizarding Wireless Network had announced the memorial service for Madam Pomfrey and mourners had been arriving at the school since dawn.

Harry and his friends took seats in the section set aside for current students as the stands filled with mourners from elsewhere. On a small raised platform was a bier with Poppy and a small podium for the speakers.

Harry sat stoically. He and Hermione had cried themselves to sleep the night it happened. That night he had clung to her, crying and blaming himself for not getting to town in time. Now that blame was turning into a cold anger, another name to be added to Voldemort's bill, and Harry had every intention of collecting what was owed.

The crowd hushed and Harry turned to see Minerva McGonagall approach the podium. With a quick flick of her wand she performed the *Sonorus* spell, then turned to face the crowd.

"Students, teachers and friends, we are gathered here today to celebrate the life of Poppy Pomfrey. Many of us remember her as the gruff healer of Hogwarts. I can tell you now, she was anything but gruff. Poppy's life was dedicated to helping others and she died in pursuit of that goal.

"Many of you will remember your experiences with Poppy, and that is why we are here today, to remember. She came to work for Hogwarts shortly after her husband died, and for nearly thirty years she nursed homesick students, healed broken bones and fixed curse damage. For nearly thirty years she put the health and welfare of the students of this school above her own. I remember one year when we had a bad case of wizards flu sicken half the school, including Poppy. But she never once took to her bed. No, she worked, caring for her patients, until she was ready to collapse. Then she'd pick herself up and start over again.

"Poppy Pomfrey may be gone, but she lives on in the hearts and minds of everyone she has touched. And now we must go on without her. It will not be easy, but life is never easy. Join with me as we send our dear friend on to her reward."

Minerva turned and faced the bier. She bowed once and lifted her wand.

"Ut silenti etc nos narro bonus," she said, her voice carrying to the crowded pitch. From her wand shot a single pinprick of yellow light. The little orb sped out to the bier and started to slowly circle it.

Minerva turned to face the audience and she motioned with her hand. People in the stands stood and repeated the incantation. With each repetition the bier was slowly surrounded by a ring of light.

Hermione stood and added her farewell to Madam Pomfrey, then turned to see Harry still sitting. "Harry?"

"I'm not sure I should, Hermione. I didn't bring my wand, and wandless or with my staff, it might be overpowering," he murmured.

Hermione frowned for a moment, then she smiled softly. “I don’t think she’d mind, Harry. She knew how you felt about here.”

Harry nodded and stood. “Ut silenti etc nos narro bonus,” he said softly. The crystal at the end of his staff flared briefly and a blindingly white orb the size of his fist flew out to join the ring of circling lights around the bier. When it joined with the ring, the ring flared to white and thickened until the entire bier was hidden behind the curtain of light.

A house elf appeared near the bier and, facing it, he bowed low before raising his hands to ignite the pyre. As the fire burned, a line formed up and people came forward to toss a single flower into the flames.

With an arm wrapped around each other, Harry and Hermione turned away from the sad sight and walked towards the castle, their grief stricken friends following.

---

### **Author’s Notes:**

Yes it’s the author’s notes. It is that point in time were we warp space and twist time, coming up with lame excuses for perceived screw ups. We say perceived because we don’t see them as screw ups. We prefer to call them Literary Oopsies.

For all those reviewers telling us they just found the story. Welcome! Now, what took you so long?

Thank you for the suggestion about turning Snape into a snake and Dumbledore into a mongoose. It was a wonderful suggestion possibly caused by too much medication on your part. Cut your dosage and see your doctor.

What was the point of the comment: 'The students names are being withheld pending notification of the Nott, Goyle, Crabbe, Parkinson and Goldstein families.'? Simple, really. One, they're Death Eaters and, in the opinion of the Editor of the Quibbler, their identities shouldn't be protected. Second, the editor of the Quibbler is a Lovegood. Did you really expect him to do anything else? (Here’s a minor hint: Humor)

To our British readers that complimented us on keeping your roads correct. Unlike some authors, we’ve learned the value of Mapquest. But thanks for the compliment!

Draco was really the only one capable of explaining house elves to Hermione. He comes from that rarified part of Wizarding society and knows about that sort of stuff. Besides, it was his turn according to my notes to say something. (Just kidding)

Our two previous stories, Dumbledore’s Army and Spiritus Crystalus are still online at ff.net. While we do plan on putting them online here, we won’t put them online until AFTER this story is complete.

Yes folks, there is a Death Eater in charge of the Ministry and he's taking charge of things similar to what good ol' Adolf did to Germany after he was elected chancellor.

We tried to get Arthur and his twelve knight to help but they had already booked another engagement. I think they are assisting the Japanese in repelling another Godzilla attack.

### **Pet Peeves:**

I was reading a long story the other day, (greater than 200K words) and I was enjoying it, until I started to notice a definite pattern. The author was enamored with the idea of super powers and decided that EVERYONE deserved at least one super power and Harry got one every three chapters. Mindspeakers, beastspeakers, stereospeakers, empaths, soul readers, scanners blah blah blah. ENOUGH ALREADY!!! It was a decent story, but it quickly descended into the realm of stupidity.

Super powered Harry. In our book that means he has a few minor abilities, like lots of power and the ability to read and retain information better. Oh sure, we buffed him up and took away his glasses, but those aren't super powered things. Of course, this is our opinion. Your mileage may vary and we aren't paid to think your opinion is any good. If you want to pay us, we're willing to listen to your opinion.

It really peeves me off when you run across a Super Powered Harry story where the author isn't content to make Harry super powered, but also has to throw in every power of every comic book they have ever read. It's not necessary folks, really. Super Powered stories are hard enough to write and make believable without giving Harry laser beams for eyes, retractable claws and cat fur.

## **Sunset Over Britain**

### **Thievery, Surprises and Noodles**

#### **Standard Disclaimer:**

Hermione and Harry stood in front of the cave where they had trapped Ron.

“RON!” shouted Hermione. “Just say the words and we’ll leave you alone! I promise!”

“NO! You’re going to try to kill me again! And with Poppy dead, there’s no one to bring me back to life,” Ron replied from deep within the cave.

“There’s always Bob and Alyx, Ron. Now please say the words. I’ll let you see my nipples if you do.”

“Can I see Harry’s instead?” came the voice. Hermione turned to Harry and he nodded.

“Yes, Ron.”

“Oh, fine. The authors of this story want you to know that they own nothing from this universe. All this belongs to JK Rowling, not them,” Ron’s voice echoed through the cave.

Nodding, Harry and Hermione moved over to the detonator that Harry had been setting up. With a quick twist of the wrist, the mouth of the cave exploded in a shower of rock and dust.

“No one sees my nipples except, Hermione!” Harry growled as he and Hermione walked off.

“Really, Bob! Aren’t you making those two a bit too bloodthirsty?” asked Alyx in a huffy voice.

Bob looked up from roasting Snape over a slow fire. “No, I don’t think so. Now pass me the BBQ sauce please.”

“Fine, but be careful with it. You put too much on Dumbledore last time.”



## **Ministry of Magic, Office of Deputy Minister (Third week in March)...**

Lucius Malfoy leaned back in his chair and put his feet up on his desk. In just a short week and a half, he had gone from wanted criminal to the second most powerful political figure in the Wizarding world. It hadn't been easy. There had been a few unanticipated bumps in the road. Dolohov claimed that something had spooked the dementors. Over two dozen dementors had taken ill on Azkaban Island and died for no reason anyone could determine. As a result, they were unable to get any dementors to return to the island fortress to guard the prisoners, so they had to send their own guards, which resulted in a drain on manpower.

Dolohov thought that the dementors reaction could be related to a possible breakout. But the simple fact was, no one was keeping records of who got sent there, so a head count was a useless exercise. On the plus side, Dolohov had managed to replace or fire nearly the entire Auror force as well as most of the Unspeakables. The remaining members of the Wizengamot were either marked as Death Eaters, or firmly in the pure blood camp.

Lucius was busy shutting down department after department. The office of Centaur liaisons, the Office of Misuse of Muggle Artifacts, the office of Muggle Relations, all had been closed down.

And while things might be going well within the Ministry, even Lucius had to admit things were not going well outside of it. In an open letter sent to the Quibbler, as well as Wizarding Governments around the world, Gringotts formally voided the Treaty of Kent as far as the British Ministry was concerned. Ragnok announced that everyone's accounts would be held in suspension until such time as conditions once again permitted Gringotts to operate on British soil. The morning that letter was published, an unbreakable shield descended in front of every Gringotts branch in the country. After three days of trying, the Government had given up trying to break it down.

The Wizarding public had a more violent reaction to the closing of Gringotts. They blamed the Ministry and if any uniformed Ministry employees appeared in public, they were often attacked. The closing of Gringotts had thrown the Wizarding economy into complete turmoil. All of this kept Lucius busy, with most of his days spent scrambling to use the muggle banking establishments, but the turmoil in the muggle world had disrupted many of those as well.

The only real ray of good news as far as Lucius was concerned was that the Ministry was finally cleaned out of unreliable elements and they could finally start working on the general population, weeding out those people and groups who were a threat to their way. Soon, very soon, they would start that process.

---

## **The Shrieking Shack...**

Dumbledore and Snape returned on Tuesday from an excursion to the seedier side of the Wizarding world on the continent. Dumbledore had gotten wind of an ancient Babylonian text that was dedicated exclusively to power amplification rituals and they both went to track it down. The

text had ended up costing Dumbledore a considerable amount of the ready cash he had available. Fortunately, he was able to tap a continental Order account he had set up several years back to refill his money bag.

The news coming out of Britain was not good at all. They had learned about the giant attack on Hogsmeade and of the casualties, although not what had happened to Madam Pomfrey. The foreign media services were busy calling on their governments to break off relations with the British Ministry of Magic over their lack of action. Not a single Government had done so as of yet, but the British Ministry was becoming increasingly isolated and unpopular.

Dumbledore and Snape apparated to a small clearing not far from the Shrieking Shack. It was one of the closest spots to the Shack one could to apparate to and still remain unobserved.

Approaching the Shack, it was obvious to the two men that something was seriously wrong. Most of the windows in the rear of the building were broken and the ground near the back was torn up.

Snape stopped for a moment in shock, and then darted to the Shack. He had left several key experiments cooking and whatever happened to the shack could have disrupted those experiments. Dumbledore followed him at a more sedate pace.

Snape looked up from the three cauldrons as Dumbledore entered the shack, his expression a mixture of rage and despair. "They're all ruined!"

"I thought that might be the case when we first heard about the attack, Severus. Frankly, I think we should consider ourselves lucky that we still have an abode to live in."

Snape snarled at the older man. He'd now have to waste several days to restart the experiments!

"Tell me, Severus, did you happen to see why all the windows are broken and why the ground is torn up out back?" asked Dumbledore in that annoyingly mild manner of his.

Snape shook his head and continued to survey the damage.

"My boy, you must learn to look for causes. Some fifty yards up the path towards the school lies the corpse of a giant. Presumably one of the two giants that attacked Hogsmeade this past weekend."

Snape whipped his head up to stare at the older man for a moment, then he started to pull down jars and tools.

"We must harvest the parts tonight, Headmaster," Snape said fervently.

"Oh. I quite agree. Severus. But for now, let's put this place back into one piece, shall we? Reparo!" Dumbledore muttered, his wand pointed at the window. The shards of glass flew back into place.

---

## **Grimmald Place...**

Dan looked up from his tea as Emma walked into the study. She had been spending her days at Padfoot, helping Narcissa, then returning in the evenings to rejoin her husband. Today she was early.

Dan started to stand when Emma waved him back to his seat. "Emma? Is something wrong?"

"Not really. I guess I just missed my husband," she replied pensively.

Dan looked at her thoughtfully. They had been together over twenty years and he had become adept at reading her moods. He stood and wrapped an arm around her shoulders, steering her to a nearby chair.

"What's bothering you, Em?" he asked gently.

"I had finished sending off the last of our letters to the families, so I decided to take a walk through the town that Harry's built," she said quietly. "Did you know we actually have nearly seventy people living there now? Most of them are Aurors and their families who Amelia got out. I saw this one woman, she couldn't have been more than a year or two older than Hermione, and she had a tot at her knee and another in her arms. Her husband worked for the Ministry as some sort of clerk.

"She was crying, so I went over to comfort her before she upset her babies. These people, they may be wizards and witches, but they are our people, Dan. They aren't African refugees we see on the telly, they aren't Bosnian refugees. They are our people. The girl was from Manchester, her husband from Cornwall.

"After she calmed down, I left her and continued to wandered around for a bit before coming back here. Soon we'll leave this little haven for another country, leaving so many behind!" she exclaimed, biting back a sob.

Dan leaned over her chair and pulled Emma into a tight hug. "Sweetheart, we knew this was going to happen. If there's one thing I don't envy Harry for, it's how he feels about this. Hermione tells me this gnaws at him. He wants to save everyone, he wants to face down Voldemort and kill him so that no one else has to die. We do all we can Em, that's what Harry is struggling to do, that's what we're going to keep doing. But I am glad that Harry advanced the portkey date on those letters. The way things are going, April first seems better to my mind."

Emma nodded into his shoulder in agreement, but it didn't really make her feel much better.

---

## **Team Weasley, later that evening...**

The museum had been closed for hours when four pops were heard in the Great Court.

Arthur Weasley looked around from under his invisibility cloak and pointed to Bill. Bill nodded and pointed his wand at the cameras that were mounted on the walls. Within a few minutes all of the cameras in the Great Court were showing empty images and would continue to do so until dawn.

Bill moved into room #4, the Egyptian Center and disabled the security cameras in there as well. He then motioned to Arthur and the twins to enter the room. Once inside, they removed their invisibility cloaks and relaxed.

"Do you have the list, Bill?" asked Arthur.

"I've got it right here, Dad," said Bill patting a pocket in his robe.

"Well, brother mine, what's the first thing on the list?" asked George.

"Yes, do tell us. What shall we pilfer first?" quipped Fred.

Bill rummaged in his pocket and pulled out a multi-parchment list.

"I knew we should have gotten someone other than Hermione to make that list!" declared Fred.

George nodded in agreement.

"She wants us to find something called a Rosetta Stone," Bill said dubiously.

"A Rosetta Stone? Why didn't she just conjure one?" asked Fred curiously.

"Can you conjure a Rosetta Stone?" George asked his brother archly.

"Probably, if you show me what one looks like first," replied Fred smugly.

"So maybe Hermione doesn't know what a Rosetta looks like?" offered Arthur.

Both twins sighed and shook their heads. "No, if Hermione wants one, it's important and mustn't be conjurable," George mused.

Bill shook his head in exasperation. "If we'd just start looking instead of talking, I'm sure we'd find out why she wants it a lot sooner."

"Alright then, spread out and look for it. The muggles name things in here, so read the little cards next to each object," offered Arthur.

The four men fanned out, checking the exhibits for a few minutes before Fred spotted their target.

"OY! Over here. I've got it," he said standing in front of glass case.

The others joined him looking at the large stone tablet.

"It's busted," protested George.

"Well don't look at me! I didn't break it," proclaimed Fred.

"Don't worry about that now, boys. Let's get it out of the case and then we'll fix it. I've noticed a number of broken objects in this place. We'll fix what we can as we gather the stuff on our list," said Arthur. The others nodded in reply. Bill banished one face of the glass case and levitated the heavy stone out.

Fred expanded a large crate to put the stone in. Once the stone was in the box, Arthur pulled out his wand and pointed at the stone.

"Restituo is res," he intoned. There was a brief flash of orange light.

"Neat spell, Dad! That's much better than Reparo," George said in admiration.

"Yes, you don't need the original pieces like you do with Reparo. It's something we needed in the Misuse office in case all the pieces weren't available," Arthur explained with a grin.

"Right then, we have a bunch more stuff to collect from this room. Let's get cracking," Bill ordered, with a smile.

The four moved out. The list compiled by Hermione and her mother would take them a while to gather up. Though they hadn't discussed it, they fixed those broken exhibits they came across, even those they weren't taking with them.

---

## AP News Feed...

*Curators at the famed British Museum announced this morning that over four hundred priceless and rare one-of-a-kind objects were stolen last night. Scotland Yard is investigating the theft of nearly four tons of objects and a spokesperson for Scotland Yard said this couldn't have been done without help from the night security and custodial staff.*

*Among the objects missing are rare manuscripts and tapestries, Egyptian objects including jewelry and heavier objects like the Rosetta Stone. Strangely enough, nothing appears on the security cameras.*

*In other news related to the United Kingdom, Holland became the fifth country imposing a ban on all incoming travel from the British Isles. Holland's Health Secretary cites the strange sleeping sickness that has so far claimed over one hundred thousand victims.*

*Britain's Prime Minister is planning to meet with select members of Parliament tonight, and then*

*with the Queen tomorrow. There are unconfirmed rumors that the subject of the meeting will be the implementing of martial law on a countrywide scale.*

*The Government announced that the fires are finally under control in Newcastle. While aid is still pouring into that city, more is desperately needed as over fifty thousand have been made homeless in the disaster.*

*Finally, the American State Department has upped its concern about Americans in Britain today, issuing the first ever Travel Warning. Americans are urged not to travel to Britain and those already in Britain are urged to leave as soon as possible.*

---

## **Padfoot Manor and Haven...**

Narcissa woke to the sound of a soft cough and a gentle prodding. Opening one eye, she spotted Winky, Harry's house elf, looking at her with a worried expression.

"Winky, what's wrong?" asked Narcissa. Although she had been raised to treat house elves as little more than bound servants, Harry's treatment of the house elves had worn off on many of the adults around him.

"Winky is sorry to be waking Mistress, but we's had some families show up last night. They be scared and uncertain of what they's be doing. Winky thinks that if yous talk to them...?" the little elf asked hopefully.

Narcissa bolted upright in her bed and could have smacked herself for not thinking about this! This should have been obvious, but we completely overlooked it, she thought angrily to herself. We need to set up some sort of procedure for handling people as they arrive here.

She moved from her bed to her dresser and immediately started pulling out clothing. Then she paused and looked at the little elf. "Winky, go get a few of the elves and start up the kitchen. I want you to set up some tables and chairs in front of manor for now. Bring our new arrivals there and see they are all fed. Once they're eating, I'll come out to talk to them. After breakfast, please send a message to Remus to ask him to come see me today."

Winky, glad to have something to do, nodded gratefully. With a soft pop, she vanished.

Narcissa continued to dress, knowing that the elves would do their best for the families, while she thought about what she could and could not tell these newcomers. Mentally, she went over her checklist of things that had been discussed and slowly put together a short welcoming speech.

Smoothing her dress, she hurried from her room to the grand foyer of the manor house and exited the building. What she saw caught her up by surprise. The elves had placed nearly a dozen tables under a tarp. Near one edge of the tarp was a row of tables filled with food and a small crowd of

people lining up to fill their plates. A small group of children ran between the tables, their excited voices adding to the overall din.

Narcissa shook her head and marveled at how resilient small children were. Not for the first time, she wished she'd had more. Steeling her nerve, she stepped onto the small platform and waited for everyone to spot her.

It took a few minutes, and more than one parent to catch a squirming child, but ultimately all eyes were on her.

“Before I begin, I must ask if there are there any healers, matrons or medi-witches among you?” asked Narcissa. She smiled gratefully when she spotted two hands go up.

“Excellent, I'd like to speak with both of you once I'm done here. Now, let me start with an introduction. I am Narcissa Black and I represent Lord Potter-Black, your host here at Padfoot Manor.

“Lord Potter-Black knew that times would get very hard as Voldemort,” she paused as nearly everyone cringed at the name, “seized control of our country. Since he knew this time was coming, he took it upon himself to build this place for his friends, his family and his countrymen.”

“What we have here is the manor house, which you see before you. Down the road a bit is a town. The town is mostly empty, but there is room for a thousand families. The people who are living there now have taken to calling the town Haven. There's a primary and an intermediary school, although right now they are just empty buildings. There's a hospital, which desperately needs staff. The town hall has been turned into a community kitchen, in which you and your families can meet and share meals with your neighbors.

“The purpose of all this is twofold, and where you fit into the grand scheme of things is entirely your choice. The first purpose is to make homes for those who wish to stay, hence the empty shops, schools and hospital. There is everything here to make this a permanent home. The second purpose is more serious. It is from here that we will go about the business of rescuing our countrymen and, ultimately, taking back our country.

“You are more than guests here. This is a safe place for you to make a home for yourselves and your families, but we need your help. We need teachers for our schools, shopkeepers and craftsmen, and trained medical personnel for the hospital.

Nothing need happen today, however. Today you will all be fed and taken to places to stay. If you need medial assistance, just call for a Padfoot elf and they will show you where the hospital is. I also ask that, sometime within the next two days, you sign the registry in the town hall. Please indicate what your job was and what skills you might possess, as well as listing all of your family members on the registry. Now, if you have any questions, I'll be available to answer them for you.”

A tall man stood in the back of the crowd and quickly doffed off his hat. “John Comber, my lady.

This Lord Potter-Black, you aren't by any chance referring to Harry Potter are you?"

Narcissa nodded. "Yes Mr. Comber, Harry Potter is Lord Potter-Black, your host, if you will. I can assure you that all of the news in the papers about Harry Potter being another Dark Lord are completely false."

"Does Lord Potter-Black claim lordship over us?" asked Comber seriously.

Narcissa bit back a small chuckle and shook her head. "No, Mr. Comber, Harry Potter wants only a few things from you. He wants you to be safe, he wants you to be happy, and he asks that you live as you have been living, guided by the principles of both English and Wizarding law. But he does not want your oath of fealty. He lays no claim to lordship over you, or anyone here. For those of you who decide to leave this place and move on, you will be asked to sign a binding contract of secrecy to safeguard this place and those who live here. But make no mistake. Harry Potter does not ask for your loyalty. Nor will he force it upon you," she said in a loud voice, staring at the crowd.

John Comber nodded thoughtfully, then placed a hand on the shoulder of a young woman who looked like she hadn't slept in the last few days. In her arms was an infant and next to her sat another small child, drinking from a cup. The woman looked up at her husband, a tear streaming down her eye and she clutched at her child.

"Me and my family have been running for three days now, ever since they closed the office of International Commerce. I was the only one to get out of the office that morning. They killed my boss outright, those 'Aurors'," he said with loathing. "I got home and got Janie and little Mike and little Janie and we ran with just the clothes on our back.

"An ex-Auror I knew told us how to make our way here. And now you say our host is the same boy the press says is a Dark Lord. Well, I'll say this, to hell with the press. We've eaten for the first time in three days. The first thing that happened on our arrival was a matron checked little Mike and gave him a potion. We're warm again and you say we're safe. I don't know how we can help with your purposes, but Merlin bless you, my lady and Merlin bless Mr. Harry Potter!"

Narcissa smiled in relief. Harry's reputation would probably not always be so well received, but at least with this group it had been. A number of the people surrounding Mr. Comber nodded in agreement. There were a number of popping sounds from outside the tarp as house elves appeared to show people to the town and their new homes.

---

## **Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry...**

Lucius Malfoy walked up the road from Hogsmeade to Hogwarts. He had been looking forward to this day for some time now and it was his turn to get revenge. He smiled as the school came into view and he quickened his pace, making the men following him increase their own.



Harry sat with his friends at lunch when the Great Hall rang with bell like tone. He glanced at the open doors to the Great Hall and waved a hand shutting them. Then he stood and approached the Head table.

Minerva McGonagall looked up as her student approached and wondered what news he brought this time. The bell tone was unknown to her.

"Professor, we have four men who have the Dark Mark approaching the castle right now. That sound was my detection ward being triggering," Harry said in an urgent whisper.

Minerva looked at the closed doors worriedly, and then at the smirking young man before her. "Just what are you planning, Mister Potter?"

Harry's grin broadened in reply and he turned as the doors to the Great Hall shot open with a bang, startling most of the students in the hall.

Lucius Malfoy stood in the entrance and scanned the crowd looking for Draco. Harry concentrated for a moment and then released one of the spells he planned to use. Draco stood up and started to move away from the table when Lucius caught the movement. He spun quickly and nodded to one of his three companions.

"Draco Black-Malfoy, you are placed under arrest. Surrender your wand and come with us peacefully," ordered the man. Clearly he was one of the new breed of Aurors.

The man lifted his wand. Luna and the rest of the Outcasts struggled to get up from their seats, but some force held them stuck fast. Hermione shot Harry a distraught look. He nodded reassuringly at her.

"I'll not go with you, Father. If you want to bow and kiss the testicles of that mongrel half blood, Voldemort, that's your choice. But then you always were into deviant sexual behavior," Draco shot back defiantly.

The students gasped in surprise at Draco's pronouncement. Lucius stepped back as if he'd been slapped. "So you've finally gained a bit of a back bone, eh boy? A bit late, if you ask me," Lucius replied, then turned to one his men. "Make him feel pain, but don't damage him. We need him breathing to find Narcissa and for their trial."

The man nodded and smiled evilly in Draco's direction. Then he lifted his wand and fired off a bone breaking hex in one fluid motion. Luna screamed and the hex hit Draco squarely in the chest. Depending on the strength of the hex, that location could result in broken ribs or a broken back.

Draco appeared to cringe, and then he straightened up to stare the Auror in the eye, saying nothing. The Auror growled at the lack of response. "Crucio," cried the man. The spell leapt from the Auror's wand tip, speeding across the dozen or so feet separating the two.

Suddenly a blue translucent shield snapped into being between Draco and the oncoming spell. The

spell hit the shield and ricocheted up to the ceiling The Auror turned to Lucius with an expression of astonishment on his face. No one could block an Unforgivable!

Lucius snarled and was about to order all of them to fire on his son when he was distracted by movement at the entrance to the Great Hall. A single figure walked into the hall wearing a concealment cloak. The figure stopped near the entrance and threw back his cloak. He was a very tall man, and quite old looking. In one hand he held a staff that he appeared to lean upon heavily.

"Lucius Malfoy, you and your Lord hold no authority over Hogwarts, nor it's students while they reside here," intoned the man.

"Stay out of this, old man, or we'll take you in as well. We're on official Government business," said one of the Aurors.

"A rude adult is a result of not being taught manners as a child, " said the figure. "Repeat your childhood and try to do better next time."

The figure gestured with his staff and the Auror flinched, looking terrified. The man screamed once then quickly regressed in age to that of a toddler. Lucius paused to consider what had happened. There was no visible spell, no incantation, and no beam of energy. Just a slight gesture on the part of the figure and even that gesture seemed unnecessary. The display of power was formidable.

The figure turned to Lucius again. "Lucius Malfoy, as per the Hogwarts Charter of 983, signed by the four founders and the Ministry of Magic, Hogwarts and its environs are exempt from the Ministry's laws and influences. You have no authority within these walls to arrest anyone. Do not force me to remind you of what happened in our last encounter," said the figure ominously.

Lucius gaped at the old man for a moment before spinning on his heel and marching towards the doors. "We'll be back!" he snarled over his shoulder. "Count on it, old man!"

The cloaked figure watched Lucius for a moment longer, then he too walked out of the Great Hall. As soon as he disappeared, the hall erupted in noise. The toddler looked around in fear and started to cry.

Minerva stood from her seat and fired off a spell that made a loud noise, designed to catch everyone's attention. "Prefects, escort the students to their houses. This morning's classes are cancelled. The afternoon's classes will probably be held as scheduled," she said sternly.

Harry leaned up against the Head table, his complexion had gone pale and he was panting slightly. He pulled his staff out of his pocket and expanded it to normal size, then he hobbled over to the nearby Hufflepuff table and sat heavily. His friends cautiously joined him as Minerva and the rest of the faculty walked around the Head Table, approaching him.

Harry spotted Luna's distraught look. When the Brotherhood member had vanished, he had dispelled the illusion of Draco as well. He murmured a quick spell, then turned to look at Terry.

“Terry, would you run up to the Head Suite and ask Draco to join us, please? I’ve released the barrier on the door,” he said tiredly.

“Mr. Potter, would you kindly explain what is going on?” asked Professor McGonagall.

“It was an illusion, Professor. As soon as I saw Lucius Malfoy come in, I knew he was after Draco. I sent Draco to the Head Suite and locked him in, replacing him with an illusion,” Harry replied.

McGonagall paled and her hands shook slightly. “You sent Draco to the Head Suite? Might I ask how you accomplished that?”

Hermione sat down on the bench next to Harry and poured him a cup of hot chocolate. He sipped it, and then smiled gratefully at her. He furrowed his brow together for a moment in concentration.

“It’s a lot like when I tandem apparate, Professor. I extend the apparation field over the person I’m moving. This time I just excluded myself from the field.”

“Harry, you can’t just apparate people by themselves,” Hermione said breathlessly.

Harry looked at her for a long moment as she blushed. Her comment was silly and she knew it.

“It’s not something I plan on doing often, Hermione. That apparation and what followed took a lot of power to accomplish.”

“POTTER!” yelled an irate blond Slytherin. He was unable to say anything else however, as he was immediately assaulted by a blond Ravenclaw.

Harry snickered at Draco’s dilemma, and then turned back to Professor McGonagall. “What I had my illusion tell Malfoy was accurate, up to a point. The charter does say the Ministry has no jurisdiction here in the school. But that is a tactic that will, at best, only buy us a week, maybe a little longer. The charter also states that, in times of emergency, the Ministry can assume jurisdiction. Meaning if the Ministry wants to declare a state of emergency, then they can come in here without Hogwarts interfering.”

“Aye Mister Potter, I’m aware of what the charter says. And next time, Malfoy will return with a lot more people at his disposal.”

The implications were clear and they all knew it. They would have to find some way of stalling the Ministry for a few weeks longer.

---

### **Malfoy Manor, that evening...**

Archibald Richfield leaned back in the plush ottoman and puffed on his cigar. “An excellent dinner, Lucius! Most excellent! Your house elves have considerable talent.”

“Yes, we’ve trained them well over the years,” replied Lucius.

Richfield eyed Malfoy thoughtfully. News of his humiliating retreat from Hogwarts this morning had spread like wildfire in the halls of the Ministry of Magic. Lucius had suffered a blow to his reputation and Richfield was sure this dinner was Lucius’ way of trying to rebuild it, by obtaining the good will of the Minister himself. Richfield grinned smugly to himself. Having Lucius in his back pocket would be a nice change for once.

“Walk with me, Archie. There’s someone I’d like you to meet,” said Lucius.

Richfield rose, thinking Lucius was about to introduce him to some entertainment of the female kind, and grinned at him. Yes, owning Malfoy and having Malfoy owing him would make for a very nice change.

The two walked into the depths of Malfoy Manor. Lucius led Richfield into a large chamber where a figure sat on a great throne. Lucius bowed before the figure and Richfield gasped at the red glowing eyes.

“My lord, the Minister of Magic.” said Lucius.

“B-B-But you’re a myth! You can’t exist!” gasped Richfield.

Voldemort turned cold eyes on the Minister of Magic. “Of course I exist. Without me, you never would have been elected. Now it’s time for you to accept your mark, Richfield.”

“But... but... but...”

“Come Richfield, did you really think you won your position based on your policies? Of course you didn’t. Fool! You won your position because I allowed it, because I had your opposition eliminated, because I had the position opened in the first place by killing Fudge.

“Now you will accept your mark, and your orders from Lucius here, or I will have you eliminated and Lucius will assume your position. And by morning your daughters will be whoring for my men.”

Richfield stood trembling. A dark spot appeared and then grew on his trousers and he nodded tearfully.

“Excellent. Kneel, Mr. Richfield, and swear fealty to me. Swear your oath of obedience on your very life and the lives of your family,” Voldemort said, his eyes smoldering with disdain at the man’s cowardice.

Lucius watched without flinching as the mark was burned into the Minister’s arm. Richfield writhed and cried on the floor, submitting to the fate he thought he could avoid simply by denying the reality of his rise to power.

When Voldemort was finally done, he turned to Lucius. “Lucius, my newest servant still needs to

be taught a lesson tonight. When he awakens, take him home and show him what happens to servants who displease me. Use his youngest daughter,” Voldemort said with a sneer.

Lucius bowed low in acknowledgement and turned to Richfield when Voldemort stopped him again.

“Lucius... I have heard the rumors about what happened at Hogwarts today. Do not let your anticipation of vengeance on your son rush you into a foolish move. Leave Hogwarts alone for now. When the time is ripe, you will return with an overwhelming force and take it for my new home. Yes... I think using Hogwarts as my new home would suit me well, wouldn't you agree?”

“Yes, my Lord. Hogwarts would make an excellent palace for you,” Lucius said with a smile.

Voldemort shifted in his seat and grinned evilly. “Go then, Lucius, and enjoy your evening. I hope to hear her screams from here.”

Lucius bowed again and lifted Richfield up by the back of his shirt. “Come Archie, we are to pay a visit on your daughter,” he sneered.

---

### **Grimmauld place, the next day...**

Nymphadora Tonks walked around the room she shared with Remus. She was barefoot at the moment, and very angry. Since the Sunday following Richfield's election to the post of Minister, she had been cooped up in Grimmauld Place with little to do. Remus was spending most of his days at Padfoot. She'd gone over there the first few days, but there really wasn't anything she could do there yet. Miles was working on the Operations Center, and the Aurors who had escaped were being formed up into units.

The problem was that Harry had forbidden her to join a unit and that left her with nothing to do. Remus explained that Harry was forming what he called his Inner Council and that included her. No one on the Inner Council would be included in the operational units as regulars. She supposed it was an honor to be included, but at the moment she didn't feel particularly honored.

She kicked a pillow across the room and sat heavily in a chair waiting for the time when Remus would return for dinner.

Tonks looked up when Remus walked into the room an hour later. He had established very early in their relationship that he did not want her assuming new forms for him. It was one of the reasons she loved both him and Harry. They were more interested in knowing Nymphadora Tonks for who she was rather than whom she could look like. That didn't mean that she wasn't above using her skills on a more subtle scale with her man, however.

A slight softening of her features, a little added luster to her hair and a little more fullness to her

lips. She used her abilities the way a normal woman used makeup. She quickly assumed her most appealing regular face and smiled brightly when Remus entered. “Remy?” she asked.

“Hmmm?” Remus sat down tiredly on edge of the bed and looked at her.

“Remy, do you think we can go out for dinner tonight? I’ve been cooped up in here practically since I resigned and it’s beginning to drive me bug shit,” she said softly, then she pulled out her big gun. “Now I know what Sirius felt like cooped up in this house.”

Remus wiped his face tiredly. “Maybe going out to eat would be a good idea, Tonks. Do you have any idea where you want to go?”

Tonks paused for a moment, this was going to be easier than she thought. “I know a good Chinese place near Hyde Park.

“Do you want to invite the Grangers?”

She smiled demurely at him and shook her head, then stood and walked to the closet and pulled out a fairly revealing dress. Remus’ eyes lit up.

“Right. I’ll go let the Grangers know they’re on their own tonight,” he said, smiling.

---

### **Ministry of Magic, Department of Magical Law Enforcement...**

Marcus Flint stepped out of his office and headed towards the lifts. He had spent the day processing prisoners to be sent to the holding pens in Azkaban and he was tired. He planned on getting a quick bite to eat and then going home to the three imperious controlled girls he kept for his entertainment.

He sighed as he pressed the button for the lift and waited. He hated his job. Not because he was doing anything wrong, but because there was no room for advancement. Short of killing his supervisor or doing something spectacular, he was stuck in this dead end position. And unless he got lucky, he was there to stay.

He smiled evilly as he saw several of the Aurors dragging in some new prisoners. Then he snorted. Let the night crew handle them, he thought.

---

### **Wong’s Noodle Emporium...**

Flint stepped into Wong’s Noodle Emporium in a really foul mood. He had spotted several pretty

girls who he could have added to his collection, but there had been too many muggles present to do anything.

Wong's was a cozy little restaurant, with mostly local clientele. The walls were decorated in alternating panels of mirrors and Oriental motif carvings. Despite the troubles plaguing the country, Wong's was doing a brisk business. That business caused Flint to pause and look around trying to find a seat.

A moment later he gaped in surprise when he spotted a familiar face sitting at a table facing away from the door. It was Remus Lupin, the werewolf who had taught Defense Against the Dark Arts in his seventh year. Lupin's name was on the wanted list, both as a former Professor of Hogwarts and as a member of Dumbledore's Order of the Phoenix.

Flint hesitated for a moment. The new Ministry wasn't afraid of exposing themselves to muggles, but Wong's was a favorite haunt of Flint's. In fact, one of the girls in his collection was the owner's daughter. If he exposed himself here, he'd probably have to end up burning the place down after locking most of the witnesses in. Casting a locking charm on the door, he turned and aimed his wand at Remus' back.

"Filiolus pango frendo," he said loudly.

Before Remus could react to the casting, he was hit in the shoulder and it shattered, sending bone fragments shooting down into his chest cavity. He swayed for a moment, and then collapsed face down against the table.

There was a moment of silence in the restaurant and then people started screaming. Flint cast a locking charm on the fire exit and the door to the kitchen, then slowly approached Remus' still figure. The other patrons were clustering around the exits trying to get out. No one wanted to approach the man with the strange stick that shot a beam of light.

Flint edged up to Remus and prodded him with his wand. The werewolf moved slightly and Flint relaxed. He was worth more to Flint alive than he was dead. Maybe that promotion was closer than he had thought!

"STUPEFY!" shouted Tonks from the doorway to the ladies room.

Flint looked up in surprise. Tonks' shot caught him mid chest and sent him flying backwards into the buffet. Then, without another look in his direction, Tonks rushed over to Remus. She grabbed him by the hand and immediately activated her emergency portkey.

---

## **Infirmiry, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry...**

Danni McNeil rubbed her tired eyes. Finally, a moment a peace, she thought as she sat heavily in

her chair. She loved being a healer, but she had never known just how hard a school healer really worked. Between dealing with emotional problems of the smaller children, childhood illnesses, Quidditch injuries and spell injuries, being a healer at Hogwarts kept her on her feet from dawn until well past dusk.

Some of the visitors to the infirmary were more social than medical. Harry and Hermione had visited earlier. He had needed to pick up more of the bath salts he used. The pair stayed for nearly an hour, enjoying a conversation and a cup of tea. They would have stayed longer, but one of the prefects had brought in a suspected case of wizard's pox and she'd had to ask them to leave so she could work.

Danni sipped her tea. The student with wizard's pox had been sent back to her house after a quick potion and a few spells. Now she had an infirmary full of empty beds and it was a state she rather enjoyed.

She took another sip of tea, then jumped at the small popping sound behind her. Turning, she saw Dobby looking up at her.

“Hullo Dobby, what can I do for you tonight?”

“Mistress Danni, you is needed back at the city house. Master Remus is hurts very badly,” Dobby said, his hands twisting in his tea cozy.

Danni stood and started loading up her traveling kit. “Dobby, find Professor McGonagall and tell her where I am going to be and why. Then, find Harry and tell him the same thing. Tell them both to come to Grimmauld Place.”

Dobby nodded and vanished from sight while she continued to fill her kit. Two minutes later she activated her portkey to chaos.

---

## **Grimmauld Place...**

Danni appeared in the main foyer of Grimmauld Place to the sound of shouting and sobbing. Arthur was holding Tonks in his arms and was the one crying. Amelia knelt by Remus and was attempting to apply what little first aid she remembered from her training more than thirty years earlier. Dan and Emma stood off to one side, watching.

Danni took in the scene with a practiced eye and immediately took charge. “Dan, Emma, take Tonks into the kitchen and get her calmed down. Arthur, conjure a stretcher. Let's get him into bed where he'll be comfortable and I can work.”

Arthur nodded and passed the distraught Tonks to Emma before conjuring a stretcher. He then moved into the living room and transformed one of the couches into a bed.



Amelia expertly moved Remus onto the stretcher, then into the living room where she placed him on the bed. Danni came in behind her and started pulling potions from her bag. She took in his appearance and didn't like what she saw. Vanishing his shirt, she could see his shoulder was badly misshapen and massively bruised. She injected a blood-replenishing potion, then cast a spell that transfigured the shattered bone fragments into water.

"Danni?" asked a voice.

She looked up and spotted Harry, Hermione and Professor McGonagall. Harry looked as if he was ready to join Tonks and break down. Danni made a snap decision. She could use Harry and his abilities. "Good, Harry, I need your help," she said softly. "Come stand on the other side of the bed and hold your staff over Remus. Cast the suspensor spell. Do you remember the incantation?"

"I think so. That's the one that holds his life force in place by loaning him strength, right?"

"Yes, that's the one."

Harry moved to other side of the bed and held out his staff. "Suspensor Vitalus," he intoned. The crystal on his staff flared with a blue light, bathing Remus. Almost immediately Remus' breathing slowed down and his expression eased.

Danni nodded to Hermione and Professor McGonagall. "Everyone else is in the kitchen with Tonks, trying to find out what happened."

It was nearly three hours later when an exhausted Danni and Harry stumbled into the kitchen. All conversation stopped as everyone turned to look at the two of them.

Harry sat next to Hermione and closed his eyes, bowing his head. Danni took a chair next to him, only slightly less tired than Harry was. Emma poured them both a cup of tea.

"Danni?" whispered Tonks. "How is he? He's not..."

"No, Tonks, rest easy. He'll live," Danni said heavily. "I don't recognize the spell that was used on him, but the damage was extensive. I don't think I could have saved him without Harry's help. Twice he had to increase the rate of power to the suspensor spell. I've never seen anyone do that before."

"Perhaps, but I don't think I'd want to do it again," murmured Harry. He sat silently for a moment, and then looked at Tonks. "I want to know what happened." His voice was flat, his face expressionless.

"It's all my fault," Tonks whispered miserably.

Harry arched an eyebrow at her in response.

"I was bored. I have nothing to do now that I've resigned. There's no work for me at Padfoot, nothing to do here, you won't let me join one of the Auror units that Miles is forming..."

She paused looking at Harry.

“Go on,” he said coldly. Tonks flinched. Even Hermione and Professor McGonagall were surprised by his tone.

“I knew we shouldn’t have gone out, Harry, but it was just for a dinner...just one evening. I convinced him to agree against his better judgment,” she said softly. “I didn’t even see the attack. I was going to the ladies room when it happened. I came back out to find Remus slumped over in his chair and someone holding a wand on him. I didn’t even try to find out what was going on. I stunned the guy and portkeyed here with Remus straight away.”

The house groaned as Harry’s temper began to slip its leash and his magic flared outward. “Stupid woman,” he hissed at her, his eyes burning. Tonks flinched as if she’d been slapped. “Your boredom nearly killed the man you claim to love and the closest thing I have to a father.”

Harry stood suddenly and started pacing the kitchen, while Tonks broke out into fresh tears. Harry was so angry his aura turned visible. Everyone flinched back from the sparks arcing around him.

He stopped suddenly and faced Nymphadora. “Tonks, I didn’t let you join the Auror units because you are too important. To both Remus and me. If you had only told one of us how you felt, we would have found something for you to do...something you would have enjoyed. Stupid... Stupid... This is the kind of dumb stunt that people would expect from me, Tonks, not from you! Merlin! And you’re a trained Auror?”

Harry whirled to face Danni. “How long will it take Remus to recover and will he be able to be moved to Padfoot?”

Danni shuddered under Harry intent gaze. “He’s going to be bed ridden for at least a month, Harry. The spell shattered his shoulder sending dozens of bone fragments shooting into his chest cavity. He has damage to his lungs and his heart. In another ten days, he’ll undergo his monthly transformation but, unless I can get his organs repaired enough in time, he won’t survive it.”

Harry clenched his fists. “When can we move him to Padfoot?” he ground out between clenched teeth.

“A week at the earliest.” Danni squeaked.

Harry nodded, then turned back to Tonks. “You,” he said pointing a finger, “come here.”

Tonks meekly stood and walked over to stand in front of him. She refused to meet his gaze.

“From this point on, you are Remus’ personal assistant, until he or I say otherwise. For now, that means you’re his nurse. When he doesn’t need a nurse, you’re his research assistant. And if you ever do anything so stupid again, I won’t wait until he awakes to show you how angry I am!”

Tonks sobbed and tried to nod at him. Harry stared at her for a while longer, then he lifted her chin up so she could see him. He was still angry, and his magic was still flaring wildly, but he spoke in

a softer tone. “Tonks, you make mistakes, you learn from them. You owe Remus an apology and you know it, but I’ll leave that for you two to handle. Learn from this Nymphadora. I can’t say the next weeks will be easy for you. The guilt you feel for causing someone you love to be injured is terrible. I know,” he said, his own eyes clouded with remembered pain as he glanced towards Hermione for a moment.

He wrapped Tonks in a rough embrace and held her as she slowly regained her self-control. Finally, he stepped back from her. She smiled wanly at him, then meekly followed Danni out of the kitchen to go check on Remus.

Harry watched the two women leave for a moment before he collapsed in a chair at the table. Hermione moved from her chair to one next to him. Now that he’d had it out with Tonks, another truth hit him. He had nearly lost Remus!

“Harry,” Amelia said in a serious tone. “I know you’re worried about Remus, but you took exactly the right tone with Tonks. She may be your guardian, but we all know that’s a legal fiction. She screwed up and got a member of the team hurt. As leader of the team, it’s your job to reward good work and punish bad. You did the right thing.”

Harry could only nod in reply while his own emotions warred within him.

---

## **The Underground Railroad...**

Amelia leaned back in her chair and considered Harry. He was strong and would weather this crisis. These were the times that could make or break a leader and she firmly believed that this would make Harry. She suspected that he got a lot of that strength from the young muggle born witch, Hermione. Amelia had never fallen for the pure blood racist nonsense, but she did have to admit that Hermione surprised her. Not because she was muggle born, but because of her obvious intelligence and even more obvious devotion to Harry.

Amelia had been spending her days organizing safe houses and escape routes. Hermione had made some key suggestions when Amelia first started, and they had made life a lot easier. She had strongly suggested using the muggle internet to communicate with various people and showed her how the Americans had set up the pre-civil war underground railroad to sneak run away slaves to the free northern states.

Magic, technology, and knowledge of more than thirty years of law enforcement in the magical community enabled Amelia to quickly set up safe houses and escape routes. Word filtered out on the grapevine...if you were on the run from the Ministry, help was available.

*William Barratry peered through the cold rain and moved back into the shadows as he heard footsteps approaching. The alleyway was dark, making it hard to discern who was coming. He carefully fingered his wand in his pocket and prayed he wouldn’t need to use it. Behind him, his*

wife and daughter huddled in the doorway. He reached behind him and gripped Amy's hand. He could feel his ten year old daughter tremble. She squeezed his hand in return.

The two Ministry Aurors walked slowly up the alleyway, the rain and darkness muffling their conversation and their footsteps. William pushed his wife and daughter further back into the darkness and then stood in front of them. He was only partially concealed and knew it. If these Aurors were any good, he'd be spotted.

William drew his wand and prepared himself for a fight. The two Aurors stopped not ten feet from his location.

"See? I told ya. This be a dead end," said one Auror.

"Aye, there's nothing here. Let's head over to Murphy's and get a drink. I heard he's got some new girls...freshly caught," replied the other.

William nearly pitched to his knees in relief as the two Aurors turned and walked back into the night. After waiting a few more minutes, he pocketed his wand and grabbed his wife's hand. The three crossed the alleyway to another door where William knocked, and prayed that what he had been told was true.

There was a moment of silence, and then a voice could be heard. "Who knocks at this hour?"

"Three who are lost and looking for hope," William replied, giving the counter sign.

The door opened to reveal a dimly lit room and William led his family to safety.

Amelia sat back and sipped her tea. She waved to Harry, Hermione and Professor McGonagall when they stood and got ready to return to Hogwarts. Danni would be going back and forth for the next few days. She tried but failed to suppress a smile. Harry, whether he knew it or not, was becoming a hero all over again. He was a legend in the making, thanks to the tireless efforts of the people like herself.

Hundreds of miles away, three people appeared in a room. William and Mary Barratry looked around worriedly. Amy gripped her mother's hand tightly. A door opened and a man dressed in Healer green stepped in, smiling.

"Welcome," he said. "You folks are safe, so you can start relaxing. You're no longer in Britain."

A couple of house elves appeared holding trays with hot drinks and food on them.

"I'm Healer Anston. Tonight I'm going to check to make sure you're all well, and then we're going to feed you and get you into bed. Tomorrow, you'll go for orientation where all your questions will be answered, I promise."

Healer Anston knelt by Amy and smiled gently at her. "You're safe now, my dear and tonight you'll be warm and comfortable with your parents nearby."

*As he talked to her, distracting her, he ran a series of diagnostic spells.*

Amelia took off her robe and threw back the blankets on her bed. She slipped between them and settled in for the night, confident that the Underground Railroad was running like it should.

---

## **Hogwarts, Gryffindor Head Suite...**

Hermione woke up slowly. Something was amiss but she wasn't sure what. Harry had rolled away from her on the bed. He lay with his back facing her and listening for a moment, she figured out what was wrong. Harry was crying softly, trying not to wake her.

Hermione slid over and wrapped an arm around him.

"Harry?" she whispered.

"I nearly lost Remus tonight, Hermione... I don't think I'm strong enough sometimes. You nearly lost your parents. We lost Poppy and tonight... I just don't know."

"Look at me," she commanded softly.

He rolled in the bed until he faced her. She moved up on the bed so they were eye to eye. She reached up and brushed a tear off his cheek. "You are the strongest man I know, Harry. You've seen friends and family killed and you keep fighting. Your parents were killed and somehow you still managed to defend yourself. I couldn't have saved my parents, but you did. You saved hundreds in Hogsmeade and cried over those you couldn't save.

"I've watched you, you know. No matter how difficult things become, you keep fighting. If you get a little down now and then, well, that's part of my job, isn't it? To help you," she said gently.

"Is that fair to you though, Hermione? You make it sound like I keep you around only because I need you."

"You do need me, Harry Potter, and I need you. It's part of what being in love is all about. Discovering needs that only the one we love can fulfill. There is no shame in needing someone. We go through life needing people, it's only when we deny those needs that we start to lose our humanity. You need Remus, and you even need Tonks, despite what she did. Now sleep, Remus will be fine." She brushed the hair gently off his forehead.

He searched her face for a moment as if looking for an answer. Then he pulled her close to him, cradling her in his arms and burrowed his face into her hair. Within moments both were asleep again.

## **Grimmauld Place, the next morning...**

Tonks and Winky watched Remus carefully as he slept. Danni had finally returned to Hogwarts, but not before leaving Tonks with a bunch of potions and a list of written instructions. Winky's job was to help Tonks and, if necessary, get Danni from Hogwarts.

Remus slept fitfully, which meant he was fighting the sleeping potion Danni had given him and he'd awaken early.

The fact that Remus was a werewolf complicated matters. He would heal faster than a normal person would, but his pain would have him leaning towards violent reactions. He would have to work very hard to control his temper and baser impulses in the next few days.

Tonks leaned forward when Remus opened his eyes. She watched him carefully.

"What... where?... Tonks?" asked Remus groggily.

"Shhh... relax Remy. You were badly injured last night. You've got at least a few days bed rest ahead of you," Tonks said softly.

Remus widened his eyes in alarm and started to sit up, but Tonks stopped him. He hissed in pain and fell back to the bed. "What happened to me, Nymph?"

Tonks refused to look at him, instead her tears started again. "It was my fault, Remy," she said brokenly. "I was bored and talked you into going out for dinner when it wasn't safe."

Remus reached an arm out and snagged her hand in his own. "Sweetie, I agreed to go out with you. It wasn't like you pulled any tricks to convince me."

"But that's just it, Remy I did pull some tricks on you," she whispered. "I'm so sorry."

"You mean that trick you pull when you can't be bothered with putting on makeup? Softening your features, making your hair shinier?"

Tonks whipped her head around and stared at him in astonishment. "You know about those?"

Remus nodded at her. "Of course I do. Hello, werewolf here! Heightened senses remember? Besides, I love you. That means I pay extra attention to what you do."

"You're not mad at me?" she asked in a small voice.

"If I were mad at you, then I wouldn't want to marry you, would I?" he replied with a grin, and then held up his hand to prevent her from jumping on him in the bed. "I do want to marry you, Nymph, and I do want you to jump on me in bed, but right now, I don't think that would be a very good idea," he said, wincing slightly as he tried to make himself more comfortable.

Tonks grinned back. “Right, then. Well, Harry dressed me down last night and gave me the job of being your official nurse, as well as your research assistant, from here on. So any nurse things you need right now?”

Remus grinned at her, then shook his head regretfully. “I’m afraid not, but there are several volumes up in the bedroom you can bring down. Hermione and Harry both have me on research projects. I might as well get to reading since I’m stuck in bed.”

“Breakfast first, Remus, then you can read,” replied Tonks with a grin. Winky appeared, carrying a tray, and Tonks helped him sit up.

---

## **A Visit with Team Weasley...**

Four days after Remus’ attack, the Weasleys met for their next operation. Remus and Tonks had been moved to Padfoot, although the Grangers were still spending the nights at Grimmauld. It was generally felt that Grimmauld should be kept open as long as Harry and his friends were in school.

With March quickly coming to a close, the pressure was building on everyone. Amelia had learned that Kingsley Shacklebolt had been promoted to Auror Section Chief, which strongly pointed to him working for the other side. Amelia passed the information to Minerva as soon as she learned of it. Minerva managed to get the information out in time for most of the Order to go into hiding.

It was a subdued group of Weasleys who met that night. Their mother was wanted by the Aurors and had gone into hiding, but no one knew where.

“So, what’s on the list tonight?” Arthur asked Bill, who held the list.

This would be the fifth trip out for Team Weasley. So far, they have raided the British Museum, the National Archives, The Tower of London and two private dealer collections.

“You’re going to love this one, Dad. She wants us to pop on over to Portsmouth and visit something called the Royal Navy Museum. She’s quite specific with this list, and she also asks if we can figure out a way to pick up something called the HMS Victory.”

“Very well then, let’s get cracking,” Arthur said with a smile.

Bill, Fred and George exchanged grins amongst themselves. This was a side of their father they had never seen before.

“So what is the HMS Victory, Bill?” asked Fred.

“Damned if I know, Fred, but I’m sure we’ll find out. Knowing Hermione, it’s another broken rock,” he replied.

“Hey, it could be worse! Remember those moldy old books she had us get? If it weren’t for Dad’s repairing spell, they would have fallen apart on us!”

“Yeah, remember that silly Domesday book?” quipped George.

“Now boys, let’s not forget that Hermione says these things are important cultural treasures and are part of both Wizarding and Muggle Britain,” said Arthur, trying to be serious.

“Oh, bugger it all. The truth is, running around at night stealing this stuff is almost as much fun as pranking,” Fred said.

“Quite,” said Bill with a grin. “Now, shall we go find out what an HMS Victory is?”

---

## **AP News feed...**

### *Heritage Thieves Strike again!*

*For the sixth time in the past month, the so-called Heritage Thieves have struck again in Britain. This time they made off with treasures from the Royal Navy Museum and set a new record for themselves. The Heritage Thieves emptied out several galleries of priceless paintings and managed to make off with the HMS Victory, as well. Scotland Yard, with help from the Royal Navy and the Coast Guard, were unable to locate the 2196 metric ton sailing ship anywhere in the area.*

*Scotland Yard has asked Interpol and the FBI for help in solving these crimes, but both agencies have expressed reluctance to assist Scotland Yard, given the current state of affairs in the United Kingdom.*

*The Prime Minister has called for an emergency session of Parliament later this evening to address the state of the Kingdom. Meanwhile, the Queen and Prince Consort remain in Balmoral Castle, far from the disturbances.*

---

## **NY Daily News Headline...**

### *Mum Declares State of Emergency!*

*An emergency session of Parliament was unexpectedly thrown into confusion and panic last night as members started collapsing without warning. Although no one will admit it officially, anonymous sources in the National Health Service say the members of Parliament that were stricken ill all appear to be suffering from that strange sleeping sickness that is sweeping the nation. At least forty members of the House of Commons were stricken ill last night and all of*



*Parliament has been placed into protective quarantine until doctors can determine if they are infected.*

*The Prime Minister, Tony Blair, was spirited away from the scene by members of the Diplomatic Protection Group and is being carefully monitored by his own physician.. He later spoke to the nation from his office at number Ten Downing Street, where he declared that the country was in a state of emergency and outlined a series of measures the government was taking to ensure public safety. Such measures include:*

*Dawn to Dusk Curfew.*

*Activation of several reserve military police and hospital units.*

*A temporary ban on all large assemblies, including theater, movies and sporting events.*

*At the same time, a special session of the UN Security Council was voting to impose a medical quarantine on the United Kingdom. Such a quarantine would include a naval blockade, as well as stopping all aircraft from leaving or entering British airspace. Normally, a military blockade is considered an act of war, but the British Government acknowledges that they have been unable to contain the spread of the sleeping sickness.*

*The U.S. Seventh Fleet is already on station near Britain. France, Norway and several other countries have promised to send their own naval ships to support the blockade.*

*In related news, the Pound fell to its lowest point in nearly fifty years, while the Yen, Deutsche Mark and Dollar surged. Economists are warning that if measures aren't taken to strengthen local currencies, the fall of the British Pound could trigger a world wide financial collapse.*

---

## **Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry...**

“Potter! I want a word with you,” said a voice from behind.

Harry turned in the corridor and cringed to see Millicent Bulstrode bearing down on him like a small avalanche.

Millicent thundered up to Harry and glared at him. “I think you owe me an explanation, Potter.”

“Oh? In regard to what, Millicent?”

“You know damn well what, Potter! You slipped that love potion into my drink.”

Harry sighed and looked around. He then motioned for the large Slytherin girl to sit on a bench nearby, where he joined her.

“You’re right, Millicent, I do owe you an explanation...and an apology. Let me explain and, if

you're still mad at the end of the explanation, I'll think of a way of making it up to you. Alright?"

The large girl thought for a moment before nodding in agreement.

"Before the start of school, Hermione and I learned of a plot against me that was going to hurt her. Ron was going to slip her a potion. Before he could, I relocated the contents of her goblet to another goblet. Unfortunately, it was your goblet. That was an accident. It was supposed to go to Professor Snape's, but I suppose I missed in my aim. I was sort of rushed to remove it in time.

"I never meant for you to get the potion and I am truly sorry for what you went through. If all had gone according to my original intent, the brewer of the potion would have been the one chasing Ron Weasley, not you," he said with a sigh.

He felt a hand on his shoulder and looked up to see that Hermione had joined them. He glanced at her, then turned his attention back to Millicent.

Millicent was still frowning, and then she shrugged expressively. "I guess I can't fault your motives. I'm glad to know you didn't target me deliberately."

"I really didn't, Millicent. That happened by accident," he replied.

"And what about all those times you let me into the Gryffindor Common Room? You weren't trying to humiliate me?" she asked evenly.

"I'm sorry if that was embarrassing to you, but you weren't the one I was trying to humiliate. After what Ron tried to do..."

Millicent nodded. "Revenge. It's a concept we Slytherins are very familiar with."

Harry smiled in reply, then a thought occurred to him. "Millicent? Why now? You've had months after the potion wore off. Why come confront me with this now?"

"Well, for one thing, it wasn't quite as bad as most people thought it was. Ronald turned out to be rather cooperative when I got him alone. And I only became sure of my facts recently," said the Slytherin smugly, and then she chuckled at Harry's reaction to the revelation about Ron. "Too much information, Potter?" she asked sweetly.

"Way too much, Millicent... So do you accept my apology?" Harry asked with a grin.

"I do. Provisionally. You owe me a favor, Potter. And someday I may decide to collect on it," she said, then stood and walked off to her class.

Harry glanced up at Hermione standing beside him. "That was strange," he commented.

"It was, but I suppose we should have expected it. Now tell me why you let me believe you deliberately chose Millicent that night instead of admitting you missed?"

“Sometimes... not often mind you... but sometimes, when I admit I goofed, you yell at me. I don't like it when you're yelling at me,” Harry replied softly. He quickly looked down at his feet.

“Does it really bother you that much?” she asked in a small voice.

“Sometimes, Hermione, but then sometimes it makes me feel warm to know that there's someone looking out for me. It's hard to explain it properly. I know I'm not as smart as you are...”

“Harry, stop that right now! You are smarter than you think! Look at you, you passed both Arithmancy and Ancient Runes owls with Os less than a month after you cracked open the books for the first time. I only yell at you when you do something without thinking about it first,” she said, overriding him.

He grinned up at her and grabbed both her hands. “Well, I'll try to think before I leap. And you... never change Hermione,” he replied huskily, kissing the palms of her hands.

She moved closer to him and ruffled his hair affectionately. “I swear you're turning into a romantic.”

He stood and picked up his book bag, then he placed an arm around her waist. “Only where you're concerned. Now, I do believe Romany is waiting for us in Defense class.”

---

## **Headmasters Office, Hogwarts...**

“Come!” snapped Minerva. She hated using this office, but she had received a firecall from Esther Hampton of the Board of Governors, who told her she was the Headmistress of Hogwarts and to use the office.

The door cracked open and Romany Blackthorne entered, followed a moment later by Professor Flitwick.

“Filius, Romany, please come in and have a seat. Would either of you care for some tea?” Minerva asked.

Filius grinned. He'd known his friend and colleague long enough to know she covered her nervousness by offering to serve tea.

“Minerva, it's just an office, and it is yours now,” Filius said with a chuckle.

Romany looked between the two of them, then accepted the offered cup from Minerva.

“Professor, I do believe you asked for this meeting, so why don't you begin,” Minerva said, leaning back in the comfortable chair, eyeing the Defense Professor curiously, while ignoring Filius and his jabs.

Romany sipped her tea for a moment and ordered her thoughts. "I've asked for this meeting because I'm concerned about Ronald Weasley. Academically, he is third in the Defense class, behind Mister Potter and Miss Granger. He might actually have tied for second place with Miss Granger, were it not for his attitude."

"Oh?" prompted Professor McGonagall.

"To be blunt, the boy is hyper-aggressive. I've had to stop letting him participate in class duels because he tries to maim his opponents, rather than disarm them as he's been told to do."

Minerva frowned. "Yes, Poppy had mentioned that he'd caused several severe injuries that resulted in longer than usual hospital visits."

"Some of my Ravenclaws are afraid of him, Minerva," offered Professor Flitwick. "He's not doing well in my charms class at all. In fact, he's doing worse than he did during previous years."

"Yes, I noticed the same thing in transfiguration, Filius," replied Professor McGonagall.

"And yet, according to Madam Pince, he spends an inordinate amount of time in the library in the evenings, studying apparently. I asked Madam Pince to give me a list of the books he's checked out in the last month. All of them are Defense related books. The other strange thing is I performed a scan on him last week and detected a residual magic signature that reminded me a lot of Professor Dumbledore. I suspect someone has cast a long term charm on the boy," offered Romany.

Minerva narrowed her eyes at that revelation. "An enchantment? Filius, this is more your bailiwick than mine. Can you detect what type of enchantment has been placed on the boy?"

"I know a few tricks I can try that aren't generally well known, Minerva. The question is if he's been enchanted, what will we do about it?" Filius asked in reply.

Minerva shrugged. "That depends on what the enchantment is, I suppose. We'll cross that bridge when we come to it." She then turned to Romany. "Thank you for bringing this to my attention. Now, how are the rest of your classes, Professor?"

"I have two groups of students these days. The regular Hogwarts students, and Harry and his friends. 'The Outcasts', as they call themselves, are in a class by themselves. Harry's taught them some advanced techniques that they'd normally learn in Auror training, but not here in Hogwarts, and then some. All of them are capable of silent casting, and most of them are capable of wandless casting, although the power levels vary wildly. After Harry, I'd say Hermione, Ginny and Draco are the strongest. But Luna has some abilities that I think she's only starting to tap.

"I still can't let Harry duel another student. His power levels are just too high. He disarmed a dummy the other day in class and the dummy was thrown into the wall, cracking the stones," Romany said ruefully.

“Wandless magic? By Merlin, I must say Mister Potter has all the makings of a fine teacher to teach such a difficult subject,” Professor Flitwick offered.

“Yes, his group last year managed to achieve outstanding scores in their Defense OWLS and NEWTS. It was a shame we couldn’t continue it this year. But as Harry himself pointed out, the D.A. was in response to an incompetent Defense teacher, and that’s a problem we no longer have,” Minerva said thoughtfully, and then she shook herself. “Thank you both for coming. Filius, do let me know what you find out about Mr. Weasley. In the meantime, I have reports to file with the Board,” she said with a sigh.

Romany and Filius smiled and left her office. Minerva reached over to a large stack of parchments and pulled one down.

---

### **Author’s Notes:**

In case no one understands at this point, Yes Dumbledore is evil. So is Ron and Snape.

Widespread riots in the Wizarding world... they are coming.

Ron’s silence will soon be broken. Don’t worry about that.

Hermione will keep her staff primarily for ritual work and research work, otherwise she’ll use her wand. Unlike Harry who is also using the staff as a cane, Hermione has no need of a crutch.

This is a subject that just doesn’t want to die. Yes in 1996 three of the four Polaris class submarines were still in service. The Tridents didn’t come into service until 1998. Now for all the remaining nit pickers, I’ll leave a bowl of nits for you to pick at the bottom of this file. Enjoy!

For those wanting more Padfoot details, I think you’ll be pleased with what has been revealed here.

XL – No Comment, and stop peeking into my outline file!

Were the giants needed? Nope, I could have attacked Hogsmeade with overly large, magic resistant dwarfs.

As to the dragging out comment. Go back and reread the prophecies. The timeline to leave is quickly approaching and they can’t leave before that date.

The ward is a simple detection ward. Its impact will be minimal in the story.

For those that can’t tell, we finished his chapter at the end of March. Next stop April.

### **Pet Peeves:**

Authors that do not test their beta readers. Or perhaps they are just lying and say they have betas?

Here are some snippets from stories I've run across.

With sated apathies we will soon retire.

Further annocements can wait until latter.

Professor Dumbledore sat down as the students rose to there feat.

Ron, who had just wrestled his trunks to the bottom of the stairs, turned to see Harry effortlessly levitation his own trunk down to the living room.

He watch the emergency personal trying to put the fire.

Every one of these statements has stopped me and made me go HUH? Now this is really simple folks. And kids, if you're writing and think I'm complaining about you, well I am, but only a little. This isn't a case of the occasional error, but some of these files I've seen are rife with the buggers.

TEST YOUR BETA!!! Make a paragraph that would fit in your story. Like this.

Luna was stumped for the first time in her life. She knew she had to jump over the river to follow Ron, but she also knew she couldn't get her feet wet. She quickly searched the riverbank and was surprised to find a rope, tugging on the rope released a rowboat from the far shore. The row boat glided magically across the river. With a very un-ladylike leap, she jumped into the rowboat for the trip to the other side.

Now, make a bunch of errors in the paragraph and give them to the person who wants to beta for you. If they can't spot the errors, don't hire them.

**Sunset Over Britain**  
**Padfoot, Betrayals and Curses**

Standard Disclaimer:

Ron shook Snape's hand. "It's all yours now Professor. Try not to muck it up!"

Snap wrapped his cloak about him and tried to maintain his dignity as he walked out onto the stage. Once center stage he stopped and stood in all his snapish glory. His hooked nose held high.

"To be, or not to be, the authors of this story insist I waste my vast talent telling you that they own nothing of the Potterverse and all this belongs to JK Rowling. And I will take House points off anyone that claims otherwise," Snape claimed.

With a scream over a dozen girls flood the stage yelling and drooling over Snape. Suddenly a machine barks and killing all on the stage.

Hermione walks onto the stage followed by Harry who is carrying the machine gun. "Nice shot Harry," she murmurs.

"You know me Hermione, I can't stand people that think Snape is that actor Alan Rickman. Now can we get on with our story?" Harry replied walking off the stage looking smug.

"You just had to do that didn't you?" Alyx asked Bob disgustedly.

"Yep. Snape must die. And Alan Rickman lovers are next," Bob replied with a grin.

"You're twisted!" Alyx shouted.

"I know dear."

---

**Sunset Over Britain**  
**Chapter 22**

---

**Diagon Alley (April 2nd)...**

Bill Weasley walked purposefully past Gringotts and chuckled, shaking his head as he looked at the solid gray shield that now covered the building. The Goblins had closed up shop here in Britain and forced most of the Wizarding World into a bartering economy nearly overnight. Some shops still remained open, Weasley Wizarding Wheezes, Ollivanders, Magical Menagerie and the Leaky Cauldron. But the rest had quickly closed, unable to deal with the lack of a bank.

Bill passed Gringotts and made a beeline straight to Ollivanders. It was the last item on Team Weasley's list and this particular one required more finesse than either Fred or George possessed. He opened the door to the sound of a simple bell tinkling.

Mr. Ollivander popped up from behind the stacks of wand boxes and smiled.

"William Weasley! My word. I haven't seen you here since you had to replace your first wand. Twelve and a half inches of supple Yew, Unicorn hair core. Fine wand for charms, but not very good for curse breaking," said Ollivanders with a smile. "So William, what can I do for you today? Some wand polishing cream perhaps? Or maybe your wand needs some tuning to help with your latest endeavors?"

Bill smiled and bit back a comment about wand polishing. Now was not a time for Weasley humor! "Ah, no thank you, Mr. Ollivander. I have business with you tonight, but it's a business that only slightly involves wands," Bill replied.

Ollivander raised an eyebrow at him and motioned for him to continue.

"I'm here at the request of Harry Potter, sir. Undoubtedly you are aware of what the Ministry is up to, and who really controls what is going on within it," Bill said, then paused to see if Ollivander was still following him.

The older man nodded congenially. "I am not unaware of what is happening, Mr. Weasley. I do know who is controlling the Ministry, as I also know that you are now part of a organization led by Harry Potter that is helping people flee Britain."

Bill breathed a sigh of relief in hearing that. "Good, then perhaps this won't come as a surprise to you, sir, but Harry has asked me to personally extend an invitation to you to leave Britain. Harry considers you one of the mightiest wizards in the land after Voldemort and Dumbledore and he fears for your safety. He thinks that You-Know-Who may try forcing you to make wands for his people.

"Harry offers you safety, sir, and a new place to open your shop. He hopes you will accept it and feels that, when the time comes, your skill and knowledge will be crucial to helping us conquer You-Know-Who."

Ollivander blinked at him a few times, as if surprised by the offer. Then he sat down on a stool behind his counter.

"Goodness me. You do realize that there has been an Ollivanders here since 382 B.C.?"



“Yes, sir. I tried to explain to Harry that Ollivanders has weathered other dark lords in the past, and the Goblin rebellions as well as the muggle witch hunts,” replied Bill, then he frowned. “Sir, if I may, I think it’s admirable that you want to stay where your family built their business. But this is much more than a muggle witch hunt, or a Goblin rebellion. We have prophecy that states Voldemort will rule in Britain before he can be defeated.

“There are already rumors of people being sent to camps. The deaths among the muggles alone are already approaching half a million, but they don’t realize it because they think the soulless are sick. This will be no ordinary Dark Lord sir. Remember what Grindelwald managed to accomplish as the official ‘psychic advisor’ to Adolf Hitler? You-Know-Who will be much worse. He won’t be an advisor, he will be the leader.”

Ollivander stared at Bill for a moment then he shuffled a few papers on the counter in dismay. “Voldemort, my dear boy, will get what is coming to him. Make no mistake about that! Oh, dear me. Moving is such a bother. Turn around for a moment William. That’s it, look out the window, keep a look out for Aurors while I clean up here,” said Ollivander.

Bill smiled and turned around. As far as he knew, no one has ever seen Ollivander’s wand. The secrecy that surrounded his wand had already passed into legend. While Bill looked out a window, Ollivander pulled out a short yellow wand that seemed to pulsate with a magic of its own. From another pocket he pulled out a bottomless bag and held it open. A single flick of his wand had boxed wands flying off the shelves and into the bag.

“Keep looking, William,” Ollivander called as he walked to his workroom and performed the same packing.

“Mr. Ollivander? I know no one has ever seen your wand, and I’m not asking to see it, but to be honest, I am very curious as to why you don’t want people to see it?” asked Bill.

There was a moment of silence, then a soft sigh. “I’ll tell you William, but only because I am tired of the rumors and perhaps you can dispel some of the crazier tales people spread. You see me as many do, master wand maker from a long line of wand makers. During my family’s history, we have made wands, staffs, casting stones, cast-able weapons, enchanted amulets and talismans, even a few enchanted musical instruments. We excel at making things that allow wizards and witches to cast their spells. So imagine if you will, a young master wand maker, celebrating his new mastery by getting drunk and, while in that state, making a revolutionary new type of wand.

“Now imagine the embarrassment when you discover that you can’t make another wand like it? No matter how hard you try to remember what you did, you can’t make another like it? Even putting your memories in a Pensieve fails to help because you were too drunk to remember the details. Now imagine your wand looks unlike any other wand ever made, so much so that if people saw it, they’d want one and you’re the master wand maker.... You’d hide it as well young William,” said Ollivander softly.

Bill chuckled and shook his head. The tale was even more amusing than the legend.

“So how did our young Mister Potter fair with his staff, William? Do you know?”

“I haven’t seen his staff myself, sir, but I understand he used it to stop the attack in Hogsmeade. And apparently the materials they purchased from you were sufficient for the construction of two staffs. One for himself and another for Hermione Granger. Hermione says she intends to use hers for research and ritual use, unlike Harry who needs it as both a walking stick and a wand.”

“Miss Granger, you said? I always thought that young lady would make her mark on our world. Who would have thought she’d make it so soon. Fascinating, simply fascinating,” replied Ollivander.

“Yes, sir. You’ll be able to talk to Harry this weekend. He will be coming to where I’ll take you to see for himself how well people are doing.”

Ollivander straightened up as the last item in the shop flew into his bottomless bag and he carefully pocketed his wand. “Very well, William, I am all packed. Shall we be off?”

Bill Weasley turned from watching the empty Diagon Alley and reached into his pocket for his Padfoot portkey.

---

## **Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry (April 4th)...**

Harry limped up to the library where he was supposed to meet up with Hermione, Luna and Draco. He was coming to understand why so many people complained about the weather. The constant rain of spring had resulted in a low dull ache in his leg and left him fatigued and tired.

In a few days they would travel to Padfoot, where Harry could see for himself what had been accomplished. Remus said he had some information for Harry concerning a research project that Harry had put him on. Privately Harry admitted to himself that he really needed a weekend away, even if all he did was walk around talking to people. Things, at least according to the reports from Remus, were really coming together. Fred and George had moved into Haven a few days ago, bringing with them all the items they had stolen. Those items would be sent to the British Embassy in Canada, via the Canadian Ministry of Magic.

Harry limped into the library and paused when he spotted Hermione and the others. Hermione looked up and frowned. Harry wasn’t sure if her frown was due to the pained expression on his face, or the T-Shirt he wore that read, *‘Hey Voldemort, try not to let your mind wander. It is too small to be out by itself.’*

Limping up to the others, he sat heavily in the chair and leaned his staff up against the table. His hands automatically began to knead his leg.

“Hi guys. I’d have been here sooner, but Professor McGonagall stopped me. She wanted to talk to

me about that animagus lecture. It's looking more and more like I inherited my mum's animagus ability and not my Dad's," Harry said seriously.

"Harry," said Hermione, "your mum wasn't an Animagus."

Harry sighed and looked at her. She could make out a bittersweet sadness in his look. "I know that, Hermione. Mum wasn't an Animagus and neither am I."

"Does that bother you? Knowing you're not an animagus?" asked Draco in a curious tone.

Harry leaned back in his chair for a moment, his expression thoughtful. "I suppose not, Draco. Since I came to Hogwarts I've heard so often about how I look like my father. From the photos I've seen, I do look a lot like him, except for my eyes, which are the same color as my mother's. After hearing so often about how much like my father I am, it's nice to know that I got more of Mum than just her eyes."

"Harry, your Mum was one of the strongest witches Hogwarts has ever seen and one of the smartest," said Hermione.

Harry reached over and draped an arm around Hermione's shoulders. "See? I'm naturally attracted to very smart and strong witches like you, Hermione," he replied in a deep voice that caused Hermione's breath to catch in her throat. Harry had been doing things like this to her a lot lately. When she'd least expect it, he'd drop a compliment that would cause her a momentary flutter. She suspected he did it to allow him a chance to change the subject.

"So, what have you guys got for me?" Harry asked, changing the subject.

Hermione rolled her eyes.

"Not much, I'm afraid," started Draco. "We've been researching power sharing rituals like you asked and passed a couple off to Professor Lupin to research further. The most promising one we found was something called the Power of the Gens."

Before Harry could comment, Hermione stiffened in his arms and began to speak in an unnatural tone, her expression completely blank.

**"THE CHOSEN CHILD'S DUTY IS NOT COMPLETE... UNTIL HE GATHERS THE FAITHFUL IN THE SNAKE-LESS REALM... TO TRAIN AND BE TRAINED IN TURN BY THE GENS... AND SOUND THE TRUMPETS OF WAR UPON THE LAND..."**

Luna immediately started to write down what Hermione was saying. When she nodded to Harry, indicating she had it all down, he gently shook her from the trance. Hermione's eyes slowly focused on Harry and her lip trembled slightly. "Again?" she whispered.

Harry and the others could only nod as tears formed in her eyes. Harry wrapped his arms protectively around her and motioned to Luna and Draco.

“Why don’t you two get a copy of that off to Remus? I’ll take Hermione down to our rooms and see if I can calm her down. Draco, I think you triggered the prophecy with that comment about the ritual. Tell Remus to find out whatever he can about it.”

Harry quickly copied the parchment and pocketed a copy, then helped Hermione to her feet and led her from the library, while Draco and Luna left heading towards the owlery. Nearby, one of the shelves moved away from the wall and Dumbledore stepped out. In his hand was a copy of Hermione’s latest prophecy. He closed the passage door and quickly cast an invisibility charm on himself before leaving the library.

---

### **Greenhouse #6, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry (April 5th)...**

Ginny moaned and arched her back as Neville kissed her neck. His hand was under her shirt cupping her breast and gently teasing her nipple. The two sprang apart as someone stomped past the broom closet they were in, making a lot of noise, then stared at each other sheepishly, grinning.

Neville glanced at his watch and shook his head as Ginny tried to embrace him again.

“I can’t, Ginny. As much as I want to, Professor Sprout is expecting me to be at the Greenhouse.”

She pouted for a moment, then gave him a brilliant smile that made his knees go weak. “I’ve got the bedroom portkey, Nev. How about we use it tonight?”

Neville stopped and stared at her intently. This would be taking their relationship to a totally new level. Something he wanted, but not if he had to pressure her for it.

“Are you sure about this, Ginny?”

She stepped into his arms and gently cupped his throbbing erection. “I’m sure, Nev, and I think you are as well.”

Neville buried his head into her shoulder and moaned slightly, nodding his head. “As much as I want to stay, I can’t keep Sprout waiting.”

“I know, Nev. Go... I’ll see you later,” she said kissing him lightly on the cheek.

Neville slipped out of the door, while Ginny adjusted her blouse. Her relationship with Neville was proceeding along wonderfully. Neville was kind and considerate and just pliable enough that she could help him become the strong man he was meant to be, without seeming to push him. Harry had started the process last year with the DA, and this year continued it by including Neville into his group of close friends. Ginny saw in Neville what Harry saw. He was going to be a strong, fine man when he matured and Ginny wanted to help him get there.

She was still adjusting her skirt and her back was facing the door when she heard it open again.

“Back so soon, Nev? Couldn’t stand to be away from me?” she asked playfully while adjusting her skirt. Then her world exploded in a burst of pain and darkness. Soundlessly she collapsed to the floor.

“Slut,” snarled Ron and he kicked her a few times while she was on the floor.

Ron had spotted Neville leaving the broom closet and had come over to investigate. He was in a particularly foul mood, having come from a fight with Professor Flitwick. The Professor had wanted to run a few tests on him and he had refused. When the Professor pressed the issue, Ron had threatened to stun him, then ran from the charms office. Mad at Flitwick and then seeing Neville leave a broom closet where his sister stood fixing her clothing, he exploded.

Ron backed out the closet still enraged. Ginny moaned on the floor and tried to stand for a moment, before collapsing back down, unconscious. Ron closed the door and sealed it, then he went in search of Neville. First he dealt with the slut, now he’d deal with Longbottom!

Neville walked into the shack next to Greenhouse Number Six. There he donned the protective suit needed to enter the greenhouse. Greenhouse Number Six was perhaps the most dangerous building in Hogwarts. The back of the building extended into the Forbidden Forest itself. Few students were allowed in Greenhouse Number Six, and no class ever entered the building. Fewer still were allowed inside without supervision from an adult. This building contained some of the most dangerous plants known to Wizard-kind.

Neville left the shack and entered the building itself. He looked around and quickly spotted Millicent Bulstrode. She was working on another project for Professor Sprout. Neville waved at her and she waved back. There was something special between gardeners that transcended house boundaries. Neville checked the wall for the clipboard with his assignment and walked down the aisle carefully, making sure he never touched any of the plants.

Millicent turned away from Neville and went back to carefully tending the snapdragons. These were still young plants and their bite was only mildly venomous. Soon they’d be ready for milking. Their venom was a critical ingredient in the Cruciatus restorative potion.

Millicent looked up as she heard the door open again and froze in surprise. Ron Weasley entered the building and he wasn’t wearing a protective suit! He wore a dark expression and he looked around as if he were looking for someone. Millicent quickly realized that he had his wand out and was poised to use it. He was obviously looking for trouble.

He slowly moved down the center aisle of the large building, heading towards the back end. Once he had gone out of sight, Millicent moved to the nearest ladder and climbed quickly up to the catwalk above most of the plants. The catwalk was in place to allow the herbologists to examine the plants from above, and also to give them a means of getting away from some of the more dangerous plants.

From her vantage point, she could see Neville working on the eastern end of the building. He was tending the sunflowers. It was night and the light they were putting out was barely enough to see by. During the day, those same sunflowers would permanently blind people with their light.

Ron was approaching the southern end of the building and its copse of corpse trees. Between the copse and the rest of the building was a special wall that could be raised or lowered, depending on the state of the southern outer wall of the building. Corpse trees by themselves stank, but weren't dangerous. What was dangerous about them was that they attracted predators and scavengers. The corpse trees thrived on the rotting carcasses left behind by predators.

Ron hit the southern wall of the building and headed east. From the end of the far corridor, he spotted Neville. Millicent gasped as Ron dropped into a crouch and started to move up the corridor towards Neville with his wand pointed at him.

Ron took a few steps, then cast a spell which flew up the corridor and hit Neville square in the back. Millicent paled and quickly cast the spell to raise the inner wall while lowering the outer wall exposing the copse of corpse trees to the Forbidden Forest. Then she went to find Neville.

She found him bleeding from his nose, mouth and ears, sprawled in the corridor near the sunflowers. She levitated him and headed straight for the nearest exit with him in tow. She didn't know what curse he had been hit with, but bleeding from his ears wasn't a good sign.

At the southern end of the building, Ron was gagging on the stench. He looked at the strange wall that slid into place and never noticed the southern wall sinking into the floor. The trees around him hid most of the building from his sight.

Ron paused when he heard a clicking noise above him. He looked up but couldn't see anything in the deepening gloom. His anger was rapidly fading into anxiety as the clicking sound slowly moved until he was surrounded by it. He was sure he'd heard that sound once before, but he couldn't place it.

*"Lumos ,"* he said, then flinched and nearly dropped his wand. The corpse trees were filled with Acromantulas.

Millicent paused as she opened the door to Greenhouse Number Six. She listened carefully and was sure she heard someone shouting *"Reducto !"* over and over again before being cut off in a final scream. Maneuvering Neville through the doorway, she got him out of the building, and then broke into a trot, heading for the castle.

---

## Hogwarts Infirmary...

Danni McNeil looked up as the doors to the infirmary burst open. Millicent Bulstrode guided the unconscious Neville into the room.

“Put him on the bed, Miss Bulstrode,” said Danni.

Millicent lowered Neville to one of the beds and stepped back. “He was attacked from behind by Ron Weasley. I didn’t recognize the curse, but I knew bleeding from the ears was a very dangerous sign,” Millicent softly.

“Aye, it is at that. Would you please go get the Headmistress, Millicent?” Danni asked while running a series of diagnostic spells on Neville.

“No need, Healer McNeil. I am here,” said Minerva, stepping into the infirmary. Then she frowned. “Strange. The student ward informed me that Miss Weasley was the injured student.”

Minerva walked over to the fireplace and spoke briefly into it before turning back to Danni and Millicent.

“Miss Bulstrode, I’ll speak with you in a bit, but right now I…” she stopped when the doors to the infirmary opened again and Ginny walked in aided by Luna. Ginny held her arms tightly to her chest and she was walking erratically. If not for Luna, she would have fallen several times. Danni glanced up at Ginny and motioned Luna to put her in the bed next to Neville. Ginny’s already pale face grew paler when she noticed Neville lying face down in the bed, his back covered in blood.

“Neville?” asked Ginny weakly, her breath coming in short gasps.

Danni reached over and grabbed a potion, which she handed to Luna. “Miss Lovegood, help Miss Weasley drink that. I will be with her as soon as I can.” Then she conjured curtains around Neville’s bed.

Ginny drank the potion with Luna’s help, then she lay back in the bed and watched the shadows on the curtain next to her bed. Minerva watched passively for a moment before turning to Millicent.

“Miss Bulstrode? Did you see the attack against Mr. Longbottom? Did you see who did it?”

“Yes, Professor. Ron Weasley did it. He hit Neville from behind and without any warning. I think he would have done more if I hadn’t put a stop to it.”

“You put a stop to it? How did you manage that, Miss Bulstrode?”

“I raised the acromantula barrier Professor.”

Minerva blinked in surprise, then sat heavily on a nearby bed. “You were in Greenhouse #6?”

“Professor, I didn’t know what else to do! He was down at that end of the building and was looking to fire again. If he had hit one of the plants, like the Traveling Tanglers, they would have broken free and attacked us all. I raised the barrier, which blocked him in, then brought Neville here straight away,” Millicent said defensively.

Minerva nodded, her mind whirling. In all likelihood, Ronald Weasley was already dead. And with

two students injured, she'd have no choice but to report this. She could slow the process somewhat if she reported it through the Board of Governors, who would ponder it for a while before passing it on to the government, but the most it would buy was a week.

"You're not in trouble, Miss Bulstrode. It may be possible that some others may wish to question you, but for tonight, I think it's best if you return to your dorm. And I'll award fifty points to Slytherin House for your quick thinking actions which resulted in saving the life of another student."

Millicent smiled proudly and nodded to the Headmistress before leaving the infirmary. She passed Harry, Hermione and Draco, who were just entering. Before anyone could say anything, Danni emerged from behind the curtain.

"Mr. Longbottom will live. I'm not exactly sure what kind of curse he was hit with, but it seemed to have a heavy pressure wave accompanying it, which accounts for his bleeding from the ears. His shoulder's been badly damaged, but it will heal. My biggest concern right now is to his hearing, which may have suffered some damage. I won't know for sure until he wakes up and I'm able to test his hearing if he's had any loss there. Now to see about Miss Weasley here," Danni said turning to her next patient.

"Who did this to them?" asked Harry, his magic flaring ominously.

"You needn't worry, Harry. The person that did this to them has been punished for it already," said McGonagall quietly.

Harry turned to McGonagall. "You know who did this?"

"There was a witness to the attack on Mr. Longbottom, Harry. And that witness made a snap decision that saved Mr. Longbottom's life, at the expense of the life of the attacker."

"Who was the attacker, Professor?" Harry asked again. Hermione clutched at his arm and tried help him keep calm.

"It was Ronald Weasley, but I fear he has passed beyond any punishment we can deliver," McGonagall told them.

Hermione slowly sank down on a nearby bed and clutched Harry's hand tightly. Harry stood, trying to make sense of the Professor's comments. Ron was dead? He shook his head angrily. Despite Ron's behavior this past school year, Harry couldn't deny all the other years in which Harry thought Ron was his friend.

Hermione tugged hard on his hand, breaking his concentration. He glanced down at her and was startled to see the look of pain on her face. Then he noticed that her hand was slowly turning white in his grip. He immediately relaxed his fingers and sat next to her on the bed.

"I'm sorry, Hermione. I didn't mean to hurt you," he whispered.



She smiled at him and gently rubbed his hand with hers. "I know," she replied.

"Professor, how long before this attracts official attention?" Harry asked McGonagall as quietly as he could.

"I can hold off reporting this for a few days, but sooner or later I'll have to report a missing student. If I report it through the Board of Governors that will slow things down by another couple days. If I had to hazard a guess, I'd say seven days."

"Hmmm... today's the fifth, and a Friday. If you hold off reporting Ron missing until Monday, then we shouldn't see any official government reaction to this until mid month, if we're lucky. This is going to be close any way we look at it. Bloody damnation, this had to happen now!" Harry said, running a hand through his hair in exasperation.

"Harry," Hermione chided gently.

Harry glanced over at her and looked guilty for a moment. "I know, Hermione. Ron's gone and it's another blow to the Weasley family. But his loss is going to attract official attention a week sooner than I had hoped. And if that isn't enough, we have to go to Padfoot tonight. Which means one of us is going to have to break the news to Arthur."

"Harry..."

Harry glanced over to the bed with Ginny on it. Danni was still working on her, but she was gesturing for him to come closer. He stood and walked over to kneel by her bedside.

"Ginny?" he said, whispering her name.

"My family is strong and we talked about this possibility. We lost Ron, like we lost Percy. They will handle it as best as they can," she said, her own eyes filling with tears. Harry leaned over and brushed the hair out of her face, then kissed her forehead.

"If I can have a family half as strong as yours, Ginny Weasley, my family will be strong indeed. I'll..."

"You do have family that strong, Harry... you're an adopted Weasley, remember?" she said sleepily.

Danni glanced up at Harry. "She'll sleep now. She's going to be fine."

Harry nodded then stood to join Hermione who was talking softly to Professor McGonagall.

McGonagall dismissed the pair after warning them to behave themselves this weekend at Padfoot Manor. On impulse, Harry embraced the Headmistress and kissed her on the cheek. For the first time in living memory, Professor McGonagall blushed in front her students.

## The Shrieking Shack...

Albus Dumbledore paused just before entering the Shrieking Shack to consider his options. Severus was still researching power-enhancing rituals, trying to determine how Harry Potter had increased his power so dramatically. But Dumbledore was starting to think that it was a dead end.

Then there was the issue of the prophecy and Miss Granger. She was obviously far more talented than Sybil Trelawney. He carefully considered the two prophecies he had heard. Both pointed to Harry and his friends fleeing Hogwarts, and perhaps the United Kingdom, but nothing was said about where they were going.

Dumbledore moved a short distance away from the shack and sat on a large rock. Carefully controlling his breathing, he mentally reviewed every thing that had happened since the beginning of the term. This was one of Dumbledore's unknown abilities. He could recall events, even events where he wasn't paying attention the first time. It wasn't long until he found another clue, this time from a very surprising source: The Sorting Hat song.

Dumbledore shook his head and exited from his self induced trance several hours later. While not positive, he now had an inkling of where they would go. Standing, he stretched for a moment to work the kinks out of his body, then approached the shack again.

Entering the shack, Snape waved him over to a cauldron. Nearby the tome they had picked up in Germany lie open.

"Look! This could be exactly what he used! There's no limit to the number of times you can use this ritual to amplify your power," Snape said.

Dumbledore looked down at the tome and started to read. *Hmm*, he thought. *The ritual of Anthrokrak. Yes, this ritual is very dark magic, but is this what Harry used?*

"Severus, while this ritual is extremely interesting, it calls for the sacrifices of wizards and witches...Virgins, no less. For Harry to have used this ritual to enhance his ability, he'd had to have killed dozens of first year students."

"I know that, Headmaster, but he could have used Muggles. Even with their low power cores, enough of them would have made a difference. I've already brewed the necessary potion for this ritual," Snape offered eagerly.

Dumbledore shook his head slightly and smiled at his Potions Master. "Perhaps you are correct after all, Severus. I want you to continue investigating this. Tomorrow I am leaving for Ireland for a few days. I have heard of a another book, very old, which contains some power amplifying rituals we haven't looked at."

"Another book?" asked Snape incredulously.

“Yes, a compendium of Druid rituals, or so I’ve heard. The book seller wasn’t too specific, so I’ll have to see for myself.”

“Do you want me to accompany you again, Sir?”

Dumbledore looked skyward for a moment as if he were pondering the question. “I think not this time, Severus. You are undoubtedly getting close with this book, and we’re not sure that my contact has anything of real value. I will go see and, if necessary, retrieve the book.”

Snape nodded and turned back to his cauldron to add a few more ingredients.

*Yes Severus, it is time we part ways after all , thought Dumbledore. With you here in the shack, one word to a Ministry stooge I know and the Aurors will be all over you while I disappear.*

---

## **Padfoot Manor, Ireland...**

It was late when Harry and Hermione finally arrived at Padfoot. Originally they had planned to arrive around dinner, but the attack had delayed them by several hours.

Harry looked at Hermione and she returned his gaze somberly. She knew what he had to do and knew he wasn’t looking forward to it at all.

“Why don’t you put our stuff away, then go see if you can find your parents? I’ll be along as soon as I can,” he said softly, then kissed her cheek. She nodded and walked up the grand stairway in search of her parents.

“Dobby?” he said softly.

From behind him came a popping noise.

“Dobby, my friend, would you please find Bill, Arthur, Fred and George Weasley. Oh, and Remus Lupin as well. Ask them to meet me in the library. Then bring me a large bottle of fire whiskey and glasses, please?”

Dobby nodded and popped out of sight. Harry sighed and entered the library. He walked over to the large bay windows and gazed out, not really seeing anything. He clasped his hands behind his back and stood thinking about what he had to do.

The door to the library opened and closed several times. No one said a thing for a moment. There was a popping sound as Dobby reappeared, bringing the whiskey. Someone coughed and Harry turned around to stare at the Weasley men and Remus Lupin. Remus was still recovering from his wounds, but he was no longer completely bed ridden.

Harry quickly turned over the glasses and poured a generous amount in each. He then handed

everyone a glass. His own remained on the table, empty.

"Please have a seat gentlemen," he said softly, then glanced up as two more people entered the library. Dan Granger and Amelia Bones stepped into the room and Harry nodded to them both. Dobby appeared with some additional glasses and Dan poured a drink for himself and Amelia.

"Earlier today there was an attack on two students in Hogwarts," Harry started softly. "I'll try not to be too tactless here, but Ginny and Neville were kissing in a broom closet. Perhaps they were even doing more, I don't know. Neville had to leave to work on a project in the restricted Greenhouse Number Six. Sometime after Neville left Ginny, she was attacked..."

Noting the signs of alarm Harry held up his hand. "She's going to be fine, guys. A few busted ribs and a bad headache, but Healer McNeil says she'll recover."

Harry took a deep breath and wished for one of those drinks, but he knew he dare not touch alcohol again, not with his power levels.

"After Ginny was attacked, Neville was attacked and severely injured. Another student, seeing the attack, took a drastic step of raising a barrier in the greenhouse. The act of raising that barrier caused the outer wall to lower, allowing the predators of the Forbidden Forest entry into the sealed in section of the greenhouse. We know the attacker was Ron Weasley, and there is little hope that Ron survived the assault of so many Acromantulas. I'm sorry...", he said trailing off.

"Ron's dead?" Arthur said in a whisper.

Harry nodded, his own eyes filling with unshed tears.

"Serves the bastard right!" snarled Bill. "Is Neville going to be alright, Harry?"

Harry nodded again. "Danni said she will need to re-grow portions of his shoulder. The real issue is the damage done to his ears. We don't know what curse Ron used, but it apparently was accompanied by a wave of high pressure. He was hit from behind and bleeding freely from both ears. Danni is hopeful that they will be able to fix him up, but that's still an unknown."

"You know that Neville talked to me about marrying Ginny," offered Fred.

Arthur looked sharply. "I hadn't realized things had gone that far."

"He was sounding us out first, Dad. I don't think he wanted to ask you until he had talked to all of us first," George said.

"He does love her," Bill added. "Damn Ron... he was our brother!"

"Our brother," echoed Fred and George.

"He wasn't always a prat, guys. Remember him for that, instead of his later years," Harry offered, his eyes glistening with tears in the low light.

George stood and raised his glass. “To Ron. May you find the peace you couldn’t find in life!”

The other Weasley men stood and repeated the toast, then they all downed their drinks.

“Arthur, Dobby will bring you guys anything you need tonight,” Harry said, trying to fight back his own tears. “I can’t begin to tell you how sorry I am.”

Arthur placed a hand on Harry’s shoulder. “Like you said, remember him for the good times, Harry. Until he found out about the money, he thought he was just being asked to befriend a lonely orphan.”

Harry smiled weakly at the older man and nodded before walking out of the library.

Amelia and Dan followed him out. Harry stopped and looked at Amelia. “You’ve had to bring news like this before. Is it always this difficult?” he asked plaintively.

Amelia smiled sadly and nodded. “I’m afraid it is, Harry. It’s the worst job a commander can have. And the very last thing you want is to get used to giving that kind of news. But you impressed me in there tonight. You handled a shitty job with poise and tact.”

“I wish I could say that I feel better hearing that. Right now all I feel, is old, tired and worn down,” he replied in a murmur.

Amelia smiled and patted Harry on the back, then she turned and re-entered the library where it sounded more and more like a party was starting.

Dan walked over to Harry and placed an arm around his shoulders. “I know I haven’t taken my little girl growing up very well or your relationship with her. And for that I’m sorry. Hermione came to our room upstairs and told us what you were doing. I came down to hear it for myself. You made me proud, son. My daughter has picked herself a fine man and I think that when the day comes I’ll be proud to consider you my son-in-law.”

Harry ducked his head in embarrassment, not knowing how to reply. Dan steered Harry up the stairs and into the sitting room where Hermione and Emma were talking. Hermione bounced to her feet when Harry entered and walked over to him. Harry reached out and caressed her cheek, then leaned in close to lean his forehead against hers.

Emma stood and approached the two.

“When confronted with death, we often look to our loved ones for an affirmation of their feelings. It’s almost as if we try to chase death away by affirming our love. It’s a very human gesture, Harry,” Emma said as she leaned in and kissed him on the cheek.

“Good night, you two,” Emma said smiling for a moment before reaching for her husband.

Harry and Hermione watched the two exit the room, then they turned to look at each other again.

“Rough?” she asked

He nodded in reply.

“So what do you want to do?” Hermione asked, suddenly shy in front of him.

“I think that later, I’ll want to make love to the woman I love more than life itself. But for now, I want to hold you and be held. I just told a family that their daughter is injured, and their son is dead. And it makes me feel so old, and worn out. I need your strength now more than ever,” he said, there was a tinge of defeat in his voice.

Hermione smiled and gently took Harry by the hand, leading him to the master bedroom. Their bedroom.

---

### **Padfoot and the town of Haven, morning (April 6th)...**

Harry woke up to discover Hermione still draped on top of him. Neither of them were dressed and she was snoring gently with a slight smile on her face. Her expression was enough to catch at his heart. He carefully moved out from underneath her and she complained for a moment before falling back asleep. He slipped out of bed and threw on a robe. Looking back at the bed and seeing her sleeping he cast a spell showering the bed with a gentle cascade of rose petals, then he cast a spell which he thought she’d enjoy when she awoke.

Harry had to meet with Remus this morning, but first he wanted to spend a little time looking around the town they had built. He had heard about it, but hadn’t really seen it. He showered quickly, and then put on some muggle jeans, a shirt, jacket and a cap to cover his scar. Dressed, he stepped from the bedroom and headed downstairs.

Stepping out of Padfoot, he looked around curiously. He knew the town was beyond the grove of trees to the east, so he struck off across the eastern lawn, leaning lightly on his staff. Haven, it turned out, was about the same distance between it and the Manor as Hogwarts was to Hogsmeade.

Harry stepped out of the trees into the back yard of a small home that looked like it was occupied.

“Al! There’s a strange man in our backyard!” shouted a woman’s voice.

“Coming!” came a man’s voice.

Harry grinned and figured he’d better wait. He didn’t really want to alarm anyone.

A large burly man stepped out of the house and looked at Harry, glaring. He held his wand pointed at Harry’s chest.

“Hold it right there, stranger,” said the man.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to alarm you. I just came from the Manor and was looking for the town. I only knew it was in this general direction or I would have avoided coming out in your backyard,” Harry said with a smile.

“From the Manor, did yer say? We’re a might wary of strangers stumbling about, Mister. Next time, you wait for one of the Manor elves to bring you someplace instead of entering my backyard,” said the man in a serious tone.

“Oh, I promise I’ll remember that, sir. Now, with your permission, I’ll use your yard to reach the street?” Harry asked hopefully.

The burly man debated with himself for a moment, then slowly lowered his wand and pointed to the path along the side of the house. “That’ll take you to the street.”

He smiled at the man and walked past him out onto a small residential street. Once there, Harry looked around carefully. Many of the homes were still unoccupied. Those that weren’t were already showing the personal preferences of their owners as people started gardens, or changed the colors of the homes. The street itself consisted of a short straightaway lined with homes before the road ended in a cul de sac. The other end of the road terminated in the main street of Haven, where all the shops were located. That was where Harry wanted to go.

Setting off down the street towards the town Harry looked at the people. Many of them had a look he’d only seen on old television historical shows. They looked like people who had been through a disaster and couldn’t believe they were now safe.

Harry smiled spotting a group of young children running up the road shouting and laughing among themselves. The main street of the town was lined with shops. Most were still unused, but here and there someone had opened a shop. At one end of the town, just like the side roads, it ended in a huge cul de sac where a fountain splashed water in a small pool. In the center of the fountain was a statue that Harry found rather disturbing. Although the plaque under the statue read “Merlin”, the statue itself seemed to be of Harry, wearing a concealment cloak. Harry stared at the statue in dismay.

“I see you found our statue as disturbing as I did, young Mr. Potter?” asked a voice.

Harry spun, his staff at the ready, then relaxed and smiled. “Mr. Ollivander! I’m sorry. I didn’t hear you creeping up on me. Yes, I think the artist had a lapse in imagination if you ask me.”

Ollivander nodded and gestured to a nearby bench for them to sit. Once seated, the old man gazed around intently for a moment.

“I’ve only been here a few days, Mr. Potter,” Ollivander said softly, “but in that time I’ve seen whole families waking up from a nightmare and wondering how they got so lucky. If you remember, I once told you that you would do great things. Well you are doing great things Mr. Potter. Look around you and you’ll see people living again. Free from fear. This is your work as sure as any enchantment you could have cast.”

Harry ducked his head in embarrassment. “I just wanted to rescue what I could, Mr. Ollivander.”

“That you have, my boy, that you have. Now, let me see this staff of yours. Young William Weasley was most impressed with your handiwork.”

Harry handed the staff over to Ollivander who examined it with a critical eye. “Hmm... Basilisk Fang... Dragon Heartstring... and Hair of a Sphinx?” he asked.

Harry nodded, smiling at the old man’s abilities.

“You have an interesting and, I might add, comforting set of runes on your staff Harry. Runes for protection, love and even justice. This is fine work, young man, especially for a first attempt. If you ever want to consider an apprenticeship as a wand maker, come see me! You’ve got real skill.”

“Thank you, sir,” Harry replied, taking his staff as the old wand maker held it out to him. “I’m not sure what I’ll be doing, but I can tell you I found the process of making the staff both fascinating and intriguing. I do like the idea of being able to build something and enchanting it.”

Ollivander stood and looked down at Harry. “Consider it, young Harry Potter. It’s a rare talent to be an enchanter and few go into the field these days. I’d be pleased and proud to teach you what I know.” He bowed slightly to Harry and walked back to the shop he was still setting up.

Harry leaned back and watched people walking by. Most people seemed to head for the town hall that Harry had heard was set up as a community kitchen. Next to the town hall was an empty space that Harry hoped would one day hold a Gringotts branch office.

He stood and walked to the town hall. It was still early and he hoped to have breakfast there.

---

### **Meanwhile, back in Padfoot Manor...**

Hermione was dreaming. She was comfortably warm, snuggled in her blankets. There was an enticing aroma in the air of bacon cooking somewhere and also rose petals? Cracking open an eye she could see she was alone on the bed and Harry had covered the bed with a thin layer of faintly blushing rose petals. She smiled and stretched, unknowingly triggering Harry’s other spell. It reached out and connected to her aura, merging with it. For a brief moment, Hermione glowed as Harry’s feelings of love and gratitude flowed into her. Hermione shuddered with pleasure. As the pleasure increased, she gasped and melted back into the bedding. Her body then tensed as her orgasm washed over her.

It took her a few minutes to reconnect her brain to her body and, as she did, she vowed she would figure out an appropriate payback for Harry. At least this time he had confined it to the privacy of their bedroom. The last time she had been forced to explain to their friends that what he had done wasn’t something their boyfriends could easily learn. It was embarrassing, to say the least, even if it had been accidental.



Hermione had her own plans for today. She and her mother were to inspect all the items picked up by the Weasley's before they were labeled, crated and sent to the British Embassy in Canada. Pulling her clothes on, she mentally checked the list of items before going in search of her mother.

Emma looked up as Hermione entered the dining room. With so many people now using the Manor, the dining room had become the place where everyone met. With so many people trooping in and out of the room, Narcissa had instructed the house elves to remove the fancy dining room set and replace it with a more utilitarian set. It wasn't as elegant as the rest of the house, but it was rugged and sturdy.

Emma waved Hermione over to the table where she had parchments spread out before her. "Sit and have some breakfast, dear. I've been going over the lists that Fred and George gave back to me. Not only did they get stuff on our list, but they got stuff above and beyond our lists."

Hermione poured herself a cup of tea and took one of the parchments her mother offered her. *One copy of the Magna Carta, two first edition Miltons? A signed copy of Winnie the Pooh?*

Emma grinned at Hermione's questioning look. "According to Arthur, if the items they were collecting were small, like books and manuscripts, they took everything. In a few cases where they had to use more conventional transportation to reach a place, they often found museums along the way to hit as well. I don't recall putting anything down from the Tank Museum in Bovington, but they somehow managed to help themselves to their entire collection. Nearly three hundred tanks."

Hermione dropped her toast and looked at her mother in surprise. She grinned for a moment, then frowned. "If they took that much stuff, how will we be able to check it all? Honestly, from the sound of it, it could take weeks to verify everything they say they have."

"Dear, we can't possibly check it all. All we can hope to do is check a few boxes and hope everything else is in as good a shape," Emma replied.

"I suppose, Mum. They've been putting everything in one of the east wing bedrooms, haven't they?"

Emma nodded. "How about I ask Dobby to bring us each a crate to check. Pick your subject and we'll bring the museum to us," Emma offered hopefully.

"Very well, I'll take the box marked Egyptian Artifacts, box number one," Hermione replied.

"Dobby?" called Emma.

Dobby appeared with a pop, he wore a slight smile on his face.

"Good Morning, Misses Granger and Harry's Miss. What can Dobby do for you today?"

"Dobby, would you go to the east wing and bring the boxes marked Egyptian artifacts number one and English Heraldry number three to the study on this floor please?" asked Emma.

Dobby nodded and vanished with a pop.

Emma stood and looked at her daughter. “Well, shall we go take a peek at the past, dear?”

Hermione nodded and followed her mother from the dining room.

“Did you sleep well last night? I know Harry seemed quite upset.” Emma said softly.

Hermione blushed, not knowing what to say. Emma glanced over at her and snickered slightly. “I don’t mean to pry into your love life. While that does concern me, I was more interested in knowing if you managed to calm Harry down. I could tell he was quite unhappy about what he had to do last night.”

“Harry was fine by the time he fell asleep, Mum. But he’s not like most other boys I’ve heard about.” Hermione said, then placed a hand on her mother to halt her. Emma turned to look at her daughter.

“You know I used to listen to the other girls in my dorm complain about their boyfriends and how they seemed to have more hands than they could account for. And don’t get me wrong, there are times I could swear the same thing about Harry. But there are other times where he just wants to be held and to hold me in return. It’s all very romantic and I love him all the more for it. But I don’t think I quite understand it, either.”

“Dear, how many times do you think Harry was hugged by his aunt and uncle when he was growing up?” Emma asked in a serious tone.

Hermione frowned. “Are you saying he’s looking to me for motherly love?”

Emma shook her head emphatically. “Not at all. But you’re giving Harry something he never had growing up. Physical love as well as emotional love. Harry’s been denied the touching that we all take for granted when we’re growing up. Given his background, he could have been standoffish and had an aversion to being touched. Instead, he’s attached a greater importance to it. Your touch has a lot of meanings to Harry and only a small portion of it represents the small child who never received a hug before.

“If I had to say anything about it, I’d say he craves it because it makes him feel wanted and loved. Both feelings he’s never had before meeting you. He’s a very special man, Hermione. You can see just in his expression that he loves you very much and that you mean the world to him. But he’s also insecure and will always carry a bit of that with him in life. Remember how he was treated growing up. You can do wonders to diminish that voice in his head that says he’s worthless, but you can never silence it entirely. And neither can he.

“Harry needs you and wants to know you need him. I think if you can remember that, and remind him once in a while that you do need him, the two of you will be very happy together,” Emma concluded softly.

Hermione thought about what her mother said, then remembered the spell that Harry had left for her when she woke this morning and blushed again. Emma smiled at her daughter, then pushed open the door to the study.

Inside the study Dobby had delivered the two crates and had opened them after returning them to normal size.

Emma delved into the box containing manuscripts and books, checking them carefully. Hermione pushed aside the top of the crate for her box and levitated the stone out of the box. She frowned and looked at the stone again.

“This isn’t right,” she murmured. Then she called out for Dobby.

The little elf appeared with a pop and looked at Hermione hopefully.

“Dobby,” Hermione said with a smile. “Could you bring me my book bag that Harry gave me at Christmas please?”

Dobby nodded and vanished with another pop. A moment later he was back, holding the Book Bag of Requirement that Harry had given her. Thanking Dobby, she took the bag and concentrated for a moment. Reaching she pulled a book about the Rosetta Stone out of the bag.

She thumbed a few pages into the book and looked at the levitating stone carefully. “Mum?” she said.

Emma looked up from lovingly examining a Gutenberg Bible at Hermione’s alarmed tone.

“Yes, dear?”

“This isn’t right, Mum! Look at this! This is supposed to be the Rosetta stone, but it’s larger than it should be... and complete?”

Emma looked up at the stone and frowned for a moment, then the priceless Gutenberg slipped from her fingers and fell to the floor and she gasped.

“Could they? Is it possible? Can magic do that?” Emma said in confusion.

“Mum! Could they what?”

Emma shook her head and tried to collect her thoughts. “Could they have repaired the damage? Is it possible with magic, Hermione?” she blurted out.

Hermione paled and sat heavily in her chair. “They wouldn’t have... would they?”

Emma stood and grabbed the book she had dropped, then placed it carefully back into the crate.

“Dear, you continue checking the artifacts, while I hunt down Arthur and talk to him,” Emma

offered.

Hermione nodded absently and moved the Rosetta stone out of the way so she could look at the other objects in the crate.

An hour later, a stunned Hermione wandered out of the study. Dobby had told her that her mother, Arthur and Bill were not in the Mansion, but Fred and George were currently out around the pool, which was kept magically warm. Hermione wandered towards the back of the house in a bit of a daze.

In her head she was busy trying to figure out what was more important, the historical value of an object, or the implied age and its accompanying damage? Antiques were normally prized because they looked old, and repaired and restored antiques lost value. But did that hold true with historical objects? That was a question she didn't have an answer to.

Stepping out, she wandered over to the pool and gazed out upon a scene that stopped her in her tracks.

George was in the pool with the miniaturized HMS Victory, now roughly four feet long. Around the pool were the tanks stolen from the Tank Museum, carefully set up by Fred.

"KAPOW!" shouted Fred and a line of miniature tank cannons barked in smoke and flame.

Suddenly the water around George erupted in small splashes and he glared at his brother.

"OY! I'll get you for that!" he shouted, then he grabbed the Victory by the stern and aimed it carefully.

"Fire!" George yelled and the forty eight guns from a full broadside belched smoke and Fred ducked.

Hermione screeched and sunk to her knees clutching at her head. Then she whipped out her wand. "ACCIO HMS VICTORY!"

There was a sudden booming sound behind her and a golden shield snapped into place in front of her. The Victory sped from the pool to smash into the shield, snapping off the fore mast and the main mast as well as the rudder.

Hermione stared at the broken Victory lying on the ground in front of the golden shield and her eyes narrowed dangerously. She turned and faced Harry, who was looking at her in confusion. George climbed out of the pool and joined his brother watching the two of them.

Harry stood only a few feet behind her, his staff at the ready, the crystal at the end pulsating in response to his magic. His eyes glowed with power and he was looking at Hermione with a strange expression on his face.

"Just what the bloody hell do you think you were doing?" she asked between gritted teeth.

“Umm... saving you?” he answered, as if unsure of himself.

Hermione blinked in surprise. “Saving me?”

“I heard you scream. I was just entering the Manor when I head you and came as quickly as I could,” he said quietly.

Hermione glanced up at the back of the Manor and the large hole Harry had blasted where the door used to be and her expression softened. Harry dropped his shield and got his magic under control again, but he still looked around warily.

Hermione shook her head and turned again to face the twins, who by now were standing over the broken pieces of the HMS Victory.

“OY! Hermione, what did you do that for? You broke it!” George sputtered indignantly.

Fred nodded in agreement and the two stared at the totally flustered Hermione.

“You... You... I can’t... Why I ought to... You!” Hermione said with one hand yanking spasmodically in her hair.

“Not to worry, brother mine,” Fred said, and then he pulled out his wand and pointed it at the Victory. “Restituo is res,” he murmured and all the pieces flew back to the ship and reattached themselves.

“Now that’s a right useful spell,” Harry offered with a grin. Turning, he cast the spell on the Manor, repairing the hole he had made.

Hermione buried her face in both hands. “Not you too!” she moaned.

“I don’t think I can ever recall seeing this,” offered Fred.

“What’s that?” asked Harry curiously.

“A speechless Hermione,” said both twins simultaneously.

Harry coughed to cover his grin. Hermione’s head whipped up to glare at the two red heads and she reached to pull out her wand.

“Now?” asked George.

“Now!” replied Fred and with two loud cracks both of them apparated away.

“Dobby?” called Hermione as she stood up and brushed off the dirt from her skirt.

Dobby appeared again with a pop and looked expectantly at her. “Dobby, would you please see that all of this stuff,” she said, pointing to the HMS Victory, and the tanks surrounding the pool,

“is packed away, and that the Weasley twins can’t get their hands on it again?”

Dobby nodded vigorously and snapped his fingers. A moment later there were several pops as more elves appeared to help clean up the mess.

“Well, I’d better go see Remus,” Harry said in a neutral tone. He wasn’t sure if Hermione was angry with him or not for the shield.

He stopped when she grabbed him by the arm and spun him around. She reached up, pulled his head down and kissed him. Harry wrapped an arm around her, holding her to him.

When she finally broke the kiss he looked at her, surprised. “What was that for?” he asked.

“For this morning, and because I needed to kiss you,” she replied with a smile.

Harry released her from the embrace and stepped back slightly, then he bowed to her. “It was my pleasure to be of assistance, my lady,” he said grandly. Hermione giggled and curtsied in return. He turned back towards the Manor while she stayed and watched the elves clean up the mess left by Fred and George.

Harry left Hermione behind reluctantly and headed back into the Manor house to speak with Remus. Remus had wanted to talk to him about his plans, and Harry himself had some words he planned to have with his friend.

He knocked on the door to Remus’ bedroom and a moment later Tonks opened it, letting him in. Remus was getting better every day from his attack, but it was slow going at times. Harry sympathized with Remus. The muscular damage could be repaired, but it would still be up to Remus to rebuild the strength in his shoulder. Remus wasn’t fully bed ridden, but he tired easily so today he was having a lie in.

Remus lay in a large bed, nearby there was a table loaded with books and his notes, and next to the bed, where he could reach it, lay the Book Bag of Requirement that Harry had given him. His face lit when Harry entered. He struggled to get out of the bed and before he could throw a robe on, Harry engulfed him in a rough embrace.

Remus closed his eyes for a moment and tears leaked from his eyes. It took sniffing noises from Tonks to make the two men aware of what they were doing and they sprang apart, causing Tonks to choke back a laugh.

Remus motioned to the table and led Harry over to sit down. Tonks pulled up a chair next to Remus and he unconsciously reached out and took her hand in his own.

Remus rifled through some parchments. “Harry about this ritual, the Power of the Gens. From what I can see, it’s powerful and I think it will do what you want it to do. But there are some drawbacks to it. First off, we’ll need a full coven, thirteen people, not counting the focal point. They should be all either related or very close friends with each other, because trust is going to be

a key issue.

“I’ve found a talisman that will allow us to see if someone has enough trust, so that issue is somewhat addressed. The real problem is what will happen following the completion of the ritual. First off, this is a real power sharing. If you act as the focal point for the ritual, you will be giving everyone that participates a power increase. It won’t lessen your power but as the ritual progresses the participants should see a noticeable increase in power. Finally, every one in the coven will emerge from the ritual Magically exhausted once you cast the spell. As the focal point for the casting, you will also suffer the same exhaustion, but it will be thirteen times worse for you.

“There are no reports of anyone dying after this ritual, but you could end up unconscious for a week or more when this is done. The others may be out for a day or two,” Remus said softly.

Harry nodded, thinking. “Alright, we need to do this, but we can’t until we’ve all moved here. Besides, I still have to work on the ward. It’s going to be lethal and I need to make sure it’s keyed properly.”

Then Harry looked carefully at Remus and Tonks. “Remus, I’ve already yelled at Tonks for what she did the night you were injured. I don’t suppose I have to yell at you for agreeing to go out with her that night?”

Remus looked down at the table and managed to look ashamed with himself. “No Harry, you don’t need to yell at me. I know I made a mistake,” he muttered.

“Good. That’s one less thing I have to worry about then. Now onto to the next piece of business. I need some advice, Remus. I’m thinking of breaking up with Hermione,” Harry said seriously.

“You’re going to do what?” screeched Tonks, then she stood and glared at Harry.

“Sit down, Nymphadora. This is a conversation between Remus and myself.” Harry said in an odd tone. His voice carried more than a bit of power behind it, and a vague echo. Tonks immediately sat back down with a confused expression on her face.

“May I ask why you’re going to break up with her, Harry?” asked Remus once he got over his shock.

“Well, there’s the whole Voldemort-and-his-cronies-would-kill-her-at-the-drop-of-a-hat thing. Being with me makes her a target.”

“She’s already a target. Even if you broke up with her she’d still be a target. I thought you loved her,” Remus said.

“I do love her. I’d do anything for her, including break up with her to keep her safe,” Harry replied smugly.

“But Harry, if you love her, and she’s already a target, then all you’ll be doing is making both of you unhappy if you break up with her.”

“So you’re saying that, despite having hundreds of dark wizards out for her blood, and mine, that’s no reason for me to break up with her? Heck, but that logic, that isn’t even a reason to stop me from asking her to marry me,” Harry said thoughtfully.

“No Harry, it isn’t. In fact, you shouldn’t base the decisions you make in your life on the darker elements of your nature. If you do, then you’re letting them run and ruin your life,” Remus said seriously.

Harry grinned and pulled a small box out of his pocket. “I am so glad you said that, Remus. Now give me one reason why I can’t use the same logic against you in regard to Tonks here.”

Tonks sat up straight in her chair and stared at Harry in shock. Remus looked at him with his mouth wide open, not saying a word.

Harry started ticking off points on his fingers. “One, you’re a werewolf, which means that one day out of twenty eight, you get really grouchy and need a shave. Big deal. We have wolfsbane and a room that keeps us all safe during your transformations. Besides, you’re grumpy one day a month, Tonks is downright frightening for five days each month.

“Two, werewolves are considered dark creatures. Remus my friend, you’re about as dark as freshly fallen snow. Dark creatures are named Voldemort, Dumbledore and Dursley. You aren’t part of that list. If anything, you are a victim of a terrible illness, but you are not a dark creature.

“Three, the anti-werewolf laws prevent you from marrying, or holding a job capable of supporting yourself, let alone a family. Remus, the only reason why you aren’t rich is because you refused to let me share any of the money I have with you. Fine, you can be proud, but by Merlin I will see that you always have a job capable of supporting yourself and any family you might have. Finally, the laws against you marrying? Those are English laws, Remus. They don’t have those laws here.

“Now I’ll ask you again, why are you making poor Tonks here wait? You obviously love her and she obviously loves you. You seem perfectly willing to let her hang around and not do anything about it. Personally I don’t think that’s fair to either one of you and I think you need to fix that.

“I was going through some of the jewels from my family’s vault and I found an interesting thing, Remus. It seems that a long time ago both my father and Sirius thought you were getting serious about a girl and they wanted to help you along. They knew your financial problems and, like any good brothers, they wanted you to be happy. So they pitched in and bought this,” Harry said, sliding the small box across the table.

Remus took the box with a trembling hand and opened it. Inside the box were two simple gold wedding bands and a modest engagement ring.

Harry stood up. “According to the note that Sirius left, the girl fled with her parents during the first war, leaving you heart broken. My father and Sirius kept the rings in case you found someone to love again. I think you have and I think the engagement ring would look wonderful on Tonks’ finger, don’t you?” he asked with a smirk before walking from the room.



He hadn't gotten ten feet down the corridor when he heard a screech from Remus' room. Grinning, he started walking again and went in search of Hermione.

---

## **The Shrieking Shack...**

First the anti-apparation ward and anti-portkey wards were put into place. The team of Death Eaters turned Aurors slowly encircled the shack. From a nearby vantage point, Lucius Malfoy looked on and smiled happily. Tonight his master would be most pleased when Lucius presented him with the traitor.

Four Aurors moved up to the doorway and waited for a signal. Lucius looked at the team leader and nodded. The team leader turned and fired an explosive hex at the door. With the door in splinters, the four Aurors rushed into the shack. There was a moment of shouting, then silence. A moment later one of the Aurors appeared in the doorway and gave a thumbs up signal.

"It's a capture, sir," the team leader told Lucius.

Lucius nodded and showed a broad grin. "Excellent work, Captain. Have your men search the building thoroughly and bring me anything they find. Make sure you bind the prisoner well and take him to a Ministry holding cell. I think this will be one prisoner that will go to the master before heading to Azkaban."

The team leader nodded. "It will be as you command, Deputy Minister." Then he turned and left at a trot for the Shrieking Shack. A few moments later, two Aurors dragged Severus Snape out of the shack and tossed him to the ground before Lucius. He was bleeding from a cut on his forehead and he was bound hand and foot with anti-apparation manacles.

"So nice to see you again, Severus. Try not to get too comfortable down there. I'm sure the Master will be pleased to see you again this evening," Lucius said in a calm tone.

Snape paled, his brow beaded with sweat and he lowered his head back into the dirt in defeat.

---

## **Padfoot Manor...**

Dinner that evening was a noisy affair. Remus sat at one end of the table and occasionally shot glares at Harry. He really wasn't angry with him, but when Tonks told the story, the Twins and Bill started in on how Remus needed help from a teenager. Bill speculated that Remus might even need directions for their wedding night, but Tonks calmly interjected into the conversation that Remus had no need of help in that area. And that caused no end of additional ribbing for the happy couple.

Hermione grasped Harry's hand under the table. She had gasped in shock when Tonks told the story of how Harry had torn Remus' arguments to shreds. Especially the part about his breaking up with her. Harry leaned over at that moment and whispered, "Never in a million years." And that

caused her to blush all over again.

Later that evening Harry and Hermione settled in for the night. Harry seemed especially quiet tonight. Hermione, who had become adept at reading his moods, knew something was bothering him, but he'd talk about it when he was ready.

Harry wasn't the only one that was still pensive from the dinner earlier. Hermione was moved by Tonks' story and was still more than a little upset herself.

Harry had stripped down to just his boxers and he slid between the sheets next to Hermione. He gestured and all the lights except for one ever-lasting candle went out.

"What's bothering you, Hermione?" he asked placing a hand on her hip.

"It's nothing. I guess I just got a little jealous when I heard the story about how Remus proposed today. I know it's silly..."

"It's not silly," he said, overriding her. "I can promise you that someday soon I'll be asking you that same question. I just haven't found the right way of saying it yet," he said in a low tone.

"Any way you ask it would be the right way. You know that."

"No, I want it to be special. I want you to be able to look back on it a hundred years from now when you're telling our grandchildren or great-grandchildren about it and smile from the memory," Harry said seriously.

Hermione blushed in his arms and snuggled closer to him. Then she lifted her head and looked at the candle for a moment.

"Why do we always sleep with a lit candle?"

"Because I always want to see you?" offered Harry.

She smacked him lightly on the arm. "No, you prat, I'm serious. You used the candle long before we started sleeping together."

Harry's expression turned wooden and his voice flattened. His heart rate quickened, and so did his breathing before he replied. "The Dursleys. I had no light in my cupboard, and they wouldn't let me have a light in my bedroom. I'm not afraid of the dark, I just feel comfortable with a light at night."

"Oh, I'm sorry! I didn't mean to dredge up bad memories for you," she said, hugging him tightly.

Harry held her and, as usual, her presence calmed him. Slowly his breathing and heart rate returned to normal.

"What else is bothering you?"

Slowly he began to explain about his trip into Haven today and what happened when he went into the town hall to get something to eat.

“It was fine talking to Mr. Ollivander, but inside the town hall people seemed to think I was some sort of hero or something. People kept coming up to me trying to thank me, or touch me. I even had three fathers offer to let me marry their daughters like I was some sort of bloody caped hero from the comic books,” he said in a frustrated tone.

Hermione frowned. Somehow she had to reach him about this. “I want you to think carefully about something. All of those people, the men, women and children that you met today, everyone one of them would have been sent to Azkaban, or maybe one of those camps we’re now hearing about. While most of those people are strangers to you, you did save their lives and the lives of their families.

“I know you hate it when people seem to make a big deal about who you are. I know you hate it when they put you up on that pedestal. But Harry, don’t you see it? The Boy-Who-Lived was a hero, Harry Potter turned the Boy-Who-Lived into a legend. I see Harry Potter, moody, sometimes very annoying, he’s drop dead sexy with a bum to die for. But I also see the Harry Potter that cared enough to spend his fortune saving the lives of people he doesn’t know. You, Harry Potter, are a hero on so many different levels. It embarrasses you, you wish you were ordinary. But you’ve never been ordinary and never will be.

“Now I want you to do something for me. From here on, I want you to nod graciously when someone thanks you, smile for them. They will never learn to love you like I do Harry, but you are a public figure and that means you have a private face and a public face,” she said in conclusion.

Harry was silent through her short speech, watching her eyes carefully. It was one of the things she loved about him. Harry was all about eye contact, always. His eyes roamed her body now and then, but when they spoke like this, he gave her his undivided attention.

“In other words, get used to it, just don’t let it go to my head right?”

“Right!” she murmured against his chest.

There was a moment of more silence, then Harry had to ask. “Do you really think I’m sexy?”

They both started to laugh but Harry couldn’t help but grin wider as she slipped her hand into his boxers and gripped his bum tightly.

---

## **Malfoy Manor, that evening...**

Lucius was in one of his best moods since the takeover of the Government. As far as he was concerned, things were going wonderfully. They had expanded from Azkaban and were building

holding camps in two different locations to handle the overflow of people who needed to be locked up. That little endeavor was proceeding nicely. Then, to top off his day, there was the capture of Severus Snape.

He stepped into his master's chamber and bowed low before Voldemort.

"Lucius, my servant. I was beginning to think you were more fond of the halls of Government than you were of my presence," Voldemort said softly. He reached down and stroked Nagini's head as he watched Lucius.

"Never that, my lord. But your plans require meticulous attention to detail to ensure their success, otherwise I would be at your side constantly," Lucius replied in a worried tone.

Voldemort's eyes smoldered as he considered his servant for a moment longer, then he motioned to Lucius to come closer. "Very well, what news do you bring me this evening?"

Lucius smiled thinly, then he clapped his hands twice. Two Death Eaters entered, dragging a man between them, and dropped him face down on the floor. Lucius knelt by the prisoner and grabbed a handful of hair.

"My lord, might I present to you the spy, our former potions master, Severus Snape," Lucius said, tilting Snape's head so his face was visible.

Voldemort leaned back on his throne and smiled broadly. "You bring us a wonderful gift, Lucius. I am most pleased. Have you learned anything from him as yet?"

"Yes, my lord. According to Snape, Dumbledore had him researching Power Amplification Rituals in an attempt to figure out how Harry Potter became so powerful. Books and parchments taken from where he was hiding confirm he was researching those rituals. It seems he was concentrating on the ritual of Anthrokrak when we captured him."

"Anthrokrak? My Severus, you have delved deeper into the black magics than I would have expected. Perhaps this information will be useful to us. Secure him in the dungeon and make sure that someone reminds him of his pain at least once a day. But keep him sane. I think I want him to continue his research... under my supervision, of course."

"It will be as you command, my Lord," Lucius said bowing. Then he signaled to the two Death Eaters and they dragged the unconscious Snape from the room.

"What other news do you bring for me, Lucius?"

"Things are going well, my Lord. Anton is tracking down a rumor that a number of people we want locked up have somehow made it to Ireland, but that's unconfirmed. Anton asks for your permission to send a company of his Aurors undercover in Ireland to ferret out the truth."

"Yes, yes," Voldemort said, waving a hand. "this is really a minor affair, but go ahead. I know Anton likes to play with his people. Let him chase down these rumors."

“Very well, my lord.”

“Now, tell me what else is happening Lucius...”

---

## **Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry (April 14th)...**

Harry looked up in alarm as the Great Hall rang with a bell like tone. His ward had just been triggered. He had been studying while Hermione talked with Professor Sinistra about an extra credit project she had been working on. Packing his book bag he stood and left the Great Hall.

He didn't have far to go. Just outside the hall a small crowd was forming in the nearby Entrance Hall to the castle. He carefully threaded his way through the crowd to the front to see what was happening. Pushing past Romany, he was surprised at what he saw.

Coming to the edge of the crowd he paused and took in the sight. Professor McGonagall stood facing down Lucius Malfoy and nearly twenty Aurors. Delores Umbridge stood next to Lucius.

“Minerva McGonagall, Headmistress of Hogwarts, you are wanted for questioning in the disappearance of Ronald Weasley. Deputy Minister Umbridge here will assume your position during your absence. And before you question my authority on the subject, the Minister has declared a state of emergency,” Lucius said coldly.

Minerva frowned for a moment. “I always thought you should have been expelled, Lucius.”

Lucius sneered at the older witch and motioned for two of his men to snap the anti-apparation manacles on her.

Harry didn't stop to consider. He just moved forward. The two Aurors fell to their knees howling in pain and clutching their heads. Harry was in a difficult situation. He didn't want to reveal his staff, so he was using it like a wand in its shrunk down state.

He threw up a shield between Minerva and Lucius and his men, then cast another spell that knocked them off their feet and pushed them back down the stairs to the courtyard.

“I will not permit this,” Harry said coldly.

Minerva walked to Harry and put a hand on his arm. “Harry, we must observe the law.”

“Not when it's being run by a half blooded tyrant, Professor.”

Lucius stood and snarled. “Take them both!” he shouted.

The crowd that had been forming moved back away from Minerva and Harry, leaving them alone in the center of the entrance hall as a hail of spells rained down on his shield.

Harry started to return fire using simple stunners, but so powerful they blew right through the shields of the Aurors.

Some of the Aurors panicked and began casting Unforgiveables. Minerva quickly transfigured some pebbles into boulders they could hide behind. Harry stood up and fired a return volley of stunners. He was about to crouch back down when a voice behind him shouted, “*Avada Kedavra !*”

Harry spun in time to see Dean Thomas pointing his wand at him. The killing curse struck Harry square in the chest and he collapsed to the floor, motionless.

“Diffendo!” shouted Romany, slicing Dean right through his neck.

“*Avada Kedavra !*”

Romany turned and tried to dodge, but the Auror fired spell hit her in the side and she collapsed. Half a dozen students began firing spells at the Aurors.

At that point another spell caught Umbridge, tearing out her throat. She pitched to her knees trying to stem the blood flowing through her fingers. Other students joined the fray, casting cutting hexes, explosive hexes, even several bat bogey hexes.

Two Aurors slid forward under covering fire and grabbed Minerva and Harry, then activated Portkeys.

Lucius snarled as more students joined into the fire fight and he was forced back from the entrance. “Return to the Ministry! We’ll come back with more men!” he shouted.

One by one the Aurors activated portkeys and vanished from the courtyard, taking their injured with them. A deathly silence befell the entrance hall as students and teachers began to understand exactly what had just happened.

Ginny and Draco were the first to find Hermione. She had arrived late, but had witnessed the fight. She stood staring at the large doorway, numbed by the shock of what she had seen.

“Hermione?” Ginny asked in a gentle voice.

“Hermione, come away from here. Let’s get you upstairs. There’s nothing you can do here.”

She slowly focused on Draco. “He’s gone...” she whispered, then began to tremble violently.

Draco glanced at Ginny. “Help me get her up to her room. We’ll put her to bed, then we better contact Remus.”

With Ginny and Draco supporting her, Hermione let herself be led away from the scene that would haunt her dreams for the rest of her life.

---

## **Author's notes:**

This will be a short Author's Note. We've been experimenting with the reply to review feature and I replied to a fair number of people there. So lets have an informal poll. Do people want replies and comments to the reviews here? Or in the reviews themselves? All in favor say "*Avada Kedavra*".

Harry is not an animagus, nor will Fawkes return. Sorry. No, actually we're not sorry. Harry being an animagus is old hat, we even used it in our last two stories. Not going to happen in this story.

It's nice to know that we're not only entertaining people, but also educating them! Now, what is the square root of Pi?

Yes Arthur did disown Ron. The problem is that it takes time for a name change to sink in. It was easier with Draco because he was there to remind people about it. Ron was too pissed about the change and didn't want to remind people about it. But you know how Ron is. The Git.

Dumbledore is sliding down a slippery slope and will continue to slide down that slope.

Connie: We're glad you made it through the hurricane in one piece. And even happier that you're enjoying our stories.

## **Pet Peeves:**

Person switching!!!! I hate this, it's annoying, it's dumb and it's rare that you find a published book that uses more than one person's point of view. I ran across one story that insisted on starting every chapter with Harry's internal monologue before switching to a third person point of view. It was hard to read and even harder to understand. Very annoying and I really suggest people don't do it.

## **Sunset Over Britain**

### **The Breaking Storm**

#### **Standard Disclaimer:**

Severus Snape walked out to the center of the stage and stopped, glaring in the bright lights, his skin pasty white. With a flare he wrapped his cape around his body in dramatic fashion.

Then a giant hand holding pencil came down from above. The hand reversed the pencil and proceeded to erase Snape's body. Snape's eyes widened in shock and the hand reversed the pencil again and started to draw in a gorilla's body to his head. The gorilla was dressed in a French maid outfit.

Snape's lips trembled.

"Bob and Alyx insist I tell you that they do not own the potterverse in any way shape or form and that they think Snape is not Alan Rickman," Snape said angrily. "Now get me out of this stupid thing!"

The giant hand descended again and erased Snape from the stage entirely.

Hermione turned to look at Harry who was hastily erasing the parchment. "Magic Cartoons Harry?"

Harry managed to look embarrassed.

"Did you have to throw that bit in about Alan Rickman again?" complained Alyx.

"No, but since I knew it would annoy you, I did," replied Bob with a grin.

---

#### **Sunset Over Britain**

#### **Chapter 23**

---

**RAF Boscombe Down, south of Amesbury, Wiltshire (April 14th)...**

The RAF had been divesting itself of all of its nuclear armaments. It was expected that the RAF



would be without any nuclear armaments by 1998.

During the 1960's, the RAF developed the WE-177 nuclear gravity bomb. The design and configuration was considered to be modeled after the American B61 variable yield bomb.

RAF Boscombe Down had one unit on hand. The WE-177B was being used by part of the RAF Strike/Attack operational evaluation unit to compare to the American B61 bomb rack pylon connections.

The RAF had held this unit in reserve to ensure that, should it become necessary, they would be capable of quickly adapting their air fleet to carry B61's once they had destroyed all of the WE-177 stockpiles. This particular unit was scheduled to be among the last of the weapons to be destroyed. It had been defused, but the nuclear material was still inside it.

The WE-177 was what they called in the industry a variable yield device, meaning one could dial in the amount of destruction the bomb was capable of causing. In this particular case, the B model of the WE-177 had a maximum yield of four hundred kilotons, or roughly the equivalent of forty Hiroshima class bombs. This was a city killer, plain and simple.

The order came down via secure satellite communications that the bomb had to be sent to RAF Lyneham where it would board a Hercules aircraft for transshipment to a secure NATO facility on the continent. Conditions within the United Kingdom were rapidly deteriorating and RAF High Command wanted these weapons out of the country until things settled down.

The base commander was reluctant to release an aircraft to move the weapon since it would require attaching the unit to a bomb rack and then removing it at RAF Lyneham. So he opted for an overland route. RAF Boscombe Down had no transport aircraft on hand.

Convoy 626, as it was designated, consisted of two unit technicians who would accompany the unit in the specially reinforced lorry, and a company of military police who would provide convoy security, escorting the convoy to its destination.

It was mid afternoon before the convoy slipped past the gates of RAF Boscombe Down and headed west towards A345 before turning north for RAF Lyneham.

---

## **Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry...**

Following the battle a strange silence descended upon the school. People spoke in hushed tones if they spoke at all. Nearly one third of the school had seen two students and a teacher and a former teacher killed right in front of them and the shock was just setting in.

Unsure what to do, Filius Flitwick, as deputy Headmaster, had enough control of the wards to seal the castle. Then he ordered all the prefects to keep the students to their common rooms. Healer

McNeil had moved the bodies of Romany Blackthorne and Dean Thomas to the infirmary. The body of Delores Umbridge was outside the sealed doors and unreachable until the doors were opened again.

Up near the Gryffindor common room, Draco and Ginny had finally managed to get Hermione up the seven flights of stairs. She was becoming increasingly distraught. Luna met up with them just outside the common room and held the door open while they helped Hermione into the tower. From there they made their way into the Gryffindor Head Suites.

Luna had grabbed Hermione's hand and was striving to keep her calm. Her efforts were having a minimal effect on Hermione, but Luna's broadcasting was calming the entire Gryffindor tower.

"I think we need to contact Remus. Is he at Grimmauld now?" asked Draco.

"No," replied Ginny, "he moved to Padfoot after he was injured. Hermione's parents and Amelia Bones are the only ones spending their nights in Grimmauld Place. If we owl Amelia, she'll be able to pass the message along. Blast! Dobby won't respond when we call, so we have no choice but to owl."

Ginny went in search of parchment while Luna rocked Hermione in her arms on the couch. Draco looked at his girlfriend and wished he could offer more consolation to Hermione than just patting her back. Harry was gone and Hermione's world had just come crashing down.

Down in the Gryffindor common room, Parvati was weeping in Lavender's arms. She had been dating Dean and she couldn't understand why Dean had shot Harry in the back like that. Many of the first years were very upset. Neville arrived in the common room a moment later. He had gone to the infirmary to pick up calming draught for the students.

"I don't understand," wailed Parvati. "Why would Dean kill Harry? It doesn't make any sense."

"Sure it does, Parvati," Neville said coldly. A hush fell over the room as everyone strained to hear him. "Ever since Harry was attacked by that spider at the beginning of the school term, we've known that one of us had gone over to Voldemort. Dean Thomas was Voldemort's assassin here in Gryffindor. He was Voldemort's spy," Neville spat.

"May he rot in hell for what he did," shouted a third year.

Parvati clung to Lavender, weeping and trying to deny her boyfriend was a Death Eater, but the evidence spoke for itself.

"Seamus," Neville said in a low tone. "I don't know what's going to happen now, but I think it's safe to assume the Ministry will be back with more men next time and they won't stop to talk. Until we know what is going on, I think it would be prudent to put a guard on the door to the common room. Let me know if you need any help. I'll be in the Head Suite. I need to get some of this calming draught up to Hermione."

Neville turned to leave, but Seamus stopped him. Neville looked at the boy he had shared a dorm with for the past six years. Seamus' eyes were wet with unshed tears. "You guys were right and we were wrong. I just wanted to say that."

Neville stared at him for a moment, then nodded grimly and moved to the entrance to the Head Suite.

---

### **Ministry of Magic, Department of Magical Law Enforcement, Receiving Cells...**

Minerva appeared in a holding cell with two Aurors and one body. When Harry fell, his staff fell from his limp hand and automatically resized and snapped back into its holster, which was undetectable. One Auror relieved Minerva of her wand, searching her roughly while the other searched Harry's body.

"I've got one wand and a portkey here," said an Auror.

"No wand here. It must have gotten lost in the firefight. He's wearing a portkey and a charmed earring. Collecting it now," replied the other Auror. Then he reached down and ripped the pierced earring out of Harry's ear.

"Shall we move the stiff?"

"Nah, that's what we have maintenance for. Let them handle it," replied the first Auror.

The two thugs walked to a door in the cell and banged on it. There was a sound of the door unlocking and it swung open.

"We have one Minerva McGonagall, former Headmistress of Hogwarts," said the first Auror.

"Who's the stiff?" asked a voice.

"Not sure, some kid who put up a hell of a fight trying to protect the bitch," replied the second Auror.

"No problem. I'll contact maintenance. Step outside of the cell please."

The two Aurors stepped outside, and one turned back to face the former Headmistress. With a taunting grin, he flipped her off.

"Close Holding Pen C!" called the voice.

"I hated that bitch when I went to Hogwarts." Minerva heard as the door swung shut and then locked.

Minerva knelt beside Harry and started to cry softly. He had not only been a student of hers, but he had been one of her lions. He had held a special place in Minerva's heart since he first arrived at Hogwarts.

She carefully straightened out Harry's arms and legs. He seemed so pale and cold. She brushed the hair from his eyes, then tried to straighten the rest of his hair with her fingers. In doing so, she touched his torn earlobe and his head jerked away.

Minerva gasped and rocked back on her heels. He was alive? It couldn't be possible! He had been hit with the killing curse!

Harry groaned softly on the cold stone and moved some more. His eyelids fluttered. She leaned forward watching him closely.

"Harry," she whispered.

Harry's eyes snapped open and the room lit up in a green glow from the magic burning behind his eyes. Minerva had seen Harry angry and threatening before, but never like this. The air around him rippled in waves from the magic pouring off him and his arm started to bulge and ripple strangely.

---

## **Gryffindor Head Suite...**

Ginny walked out of Hermione's room and into the Head Suite's common room having unsuccessfully searched it for some parchment she could use. A bracelet she'd found had sidetracked her.

"Hermione, I couldn't find any parchment in your room, but I ran into this. What is it and why is it making noises?" Ginny asked, holding up Hermione's charm bracelet. The little snitch was glowing brightly and it was making a pinging sound.

Hermione sat between Neville and Luna. She was holding each of their hands. The calming draught had reduced her weeping to the occasional sob. She glanced up at Ginny and her eyes slowly focused on bracelet. Then her eyes widened and she quickly stood up. Running to Ginny, she snatched the bracelet out of the younger girl's hand and slowly sank to her knees.

"He's alive! Oh, sweet Merlin, he's alive!" she cried.

Draco knelt beside Hermione and grabbed her by the shoulders. "Hermione, concentrate! We saw him hit with a killing curse! Harry's gone."

"No!" she shouted, then she thrust the bracelet under his nose. "This says he's alive. He's hurt and in danger, but he's still alive! The charm wouldn't work if he were dead!"

"But the killing curse!" protested Draco.

Neville shocked them all by laughing. “It figures he’d do something like this! The Boy-Who-Lived survived a killing curse at age one, and now he’s done it again!”

Hermione grasped the bracelet to her breast and wept once more, although for a much more joyous reason. “If there’s a way for him to get back here, he will. I know my Harry.”

Draco glanced at Neville, who nodded in reply. No words were necessary. Neville got up from the couch and slipped into Hermione’s room.

“Ginny,” said Draco, “owl Amelia. Tell her what’s happening and tell her we’re waiting on Harry to show up but that we expect to begin the evacuation any time after he gets back here.”

Ginny nodded and rushed out of the room. She’d find parchment somewhere between here and the owlery!

---

### **Fugitive Capture team seven and Convoy 626...**

Marcus Flint was in a sour mood. But then he had been in a sour mood ever since he’d been demoted and placed on a capture team after that incident in the restaurant. Part of that demotion included a lot of time under the Cruciatus curse to remind him where his place was in the grand scheme of things. Flint’s father had pulled a few strings and gotten his son transferred to his capture team where he could keep an eye on the boy.

Tonight they were after an older couple named Anderson. He was a teacher of Defense Against the Dark Arts at the local school and she was a healer. Marcus took up a defensive position across the street from the modest house, while other members of the team moved to their positions.

Meanwhile, Convoy 626 had been forced to leave A345 and resort to secondary roads within the town of Amesbury. A traffic accident had backed up traffic and would have delayed the convoy such that they would have missed their flight. The commanding officer of the convoy made the decision to leave the main road and detour around the blockage.

Marcus watched his father approach the front door to the Anderson’s home. There was a brief burst of light as his father crossed a defensive ward and he collapsed on the walkway. Thinking that his father had been attacked, Marcus stood from his position and pointed his wand.

“*Reducto*,” he shouted.

In the ensuing confusion, the other team members assumed that Marcus had been given orders to fight so they joined in the fray, hurling their own curses.

The Andersons, now alerted to the danger, began to fight back. So did the neighbors on both sides of the street. The fugitive capture team found itself under fire from all directions. This would have

remained a strictly wizard combat zone, but Convoy 626 had been rolling up the street when the fight started. The lead vehicle was damaged and it rolled to a stop. Six heavily armed military police and their commanding officer jumped from the vehicle, taking cover around them.

The military police guarding the convoy didn't understand the strange beams of light, but one thing was painfully clear. They were guarding a strategic asset of their country, and they were under attack by a force using lethal weapons. The sound of machine gun fire filled the street as the military police began to return fire.

The lorry carrying the bomb was quickly disabled, it's driver and technicians killed. The commanding officer of Convoy 626 ordered his men to defend themselves while he frantically tried to reach RAF Boscombe Down on his cellular telephone for help. His order was given late and would serve to have little effect, except to throw more confusion into the battle.

Gunfire mixed in with magic being hurled back and forth across the street as three distinct groups, two wizarding and one muggle, battled. The lorry with the bomb in it had been hit several times, ripping away its siding. As a result, the bomb casing was clearly visible.

Under normal circumstances, a bomb undergoes a complex fusing process before it's capable of exploding. No one has ever experimented to see what magic will do to one, however. One stray blast hit the bomb, penetrated its casing, and initiated the pre-fusion cycle.

A few seconds later, the capture team, convoy 626, the town of Amesbury, most of RAF Boscombe Down, and the Neolithic structure known as Stonehenge ceased to exist as the four hundred kiloton bomb exploded.

---

## **A World Awakes to a Nightmare...**

Colonel James Travers sat back in his chair and propped his feet up on his desk. Day shift at the North American Space Command wasn't as boring as working nights. But when the cold war ended, so did most of the utility of the facility. Most days, he spent his time checking satellite orbits and occasionally watching wildfires in real time.

A small ping came from his console, causing him to look up. Several people looked up at the big board as well, trying to spot what the computer was complaining about. Travers bolted out of his chair, staring at the board.

"Isolate and enhance," he ordered a tech.

"Computer confirms analysis, Sir. That's a nuclear event," a voice said over a speaker.

"Someone find General Brandon and get him in here ASAP," ordered Travers, as he started to flip switches on his console. He then began to speak in a clipped 'mil-speak' language, saved for only

the direst of occasions.

“MNCC Duty Officer, stand by to copy flash message... From NASC watch command, we are declaring a nuclear event in the southern United Kingdom. Coordinates to follow. Confirm double flash signature, computer estimates three hundred kilotons minimum yield.”

Travers waited for the confirmation of his message before closing the connection, then he sat heavily in his chair.

“Dear God,” he whispered. The unthinkable had happened. Someone had exploded a hydrogen bomb in a populated area.

Airline pilots confirmed the blast next. One aircraft was close enough that both pilot and co-pilot suffered retinal damage and were unable to see well enough to land their plane. With the reports from the commercial pilots, the media organizations quickly picked up on it and started to broadcast about the explosion.

Regular programming was preempted world wide as the news spread like wildfire. Surprisingly, the BBC was one of the last media organizations to find out about the explosion and they sat on it for several hours, hoping to get government confirmation. Confirmation would never come as the government slipped a few more notches into anarchy.

---

### **Ministry of Magic, Department of Magical Law Enforcement, Receiving Cells...**

With Minerva’s help, Harry stood up slowly and she gazed at him in disbelief.

The sleeve on one of his arms was bulging and rippling strangely. As she watched, the sleeve tore and something black leapt from his arm, growing and taking shape as it went. By the time it hit the ground, the Grim came up to Harry’s shoulder. It was huge and it was angry.

The ethereal dog snapped and snarled and paced by the door.

“Harry?”

Harry turned to look at Minerva. “Are you alright, Professor?” he asked softly. His voice resonated with power.

“I’m fine, Harry, but what about you? You were hit with a killing curse!”

“I’ll be fine, Professor. Right now I’ve got to get you out of there. This place won’t be safe for much longer.”

“What are you planning to do, Mr. Potter?” Minerva asked in her sternest teacher’s voice. She had no plans of losing this student if she could prevent it.

“I’m going to chastise a few people. But that doesn’t matter. I need your help, Professor. You need to get back to Hogwarts, calm the students and get them ready to move. Find Hermione and tell her I’ll be there soon. Let her know I’m alright.”

Minerva stared at him for a moment. “But the killing curse...”

Harry grabbed her by the shoulders. “Professor... Minerva... we don’t have time for this. I’m sending you back to the school. I’ll be there after Padfoot and I teach Tom and his band of merry idiots not to think that Hogwarts is an easy target.”

Harry concentrated for a moment and Minerva vanished before she could protest again.

He then looked at the large phantom dog. “You ready, boy?”

The large Grim wagged its tail. Harry smiled and flicked his wrist, causing the shrunken staff to fall into his grasp. He quickly enlarged the staff to full size. There was so much magic pouring off him that the crystal on the end of his staff pulsated brightly and the air around him hummed with energy.

He walked to the door keeping him inside the holding cell and tapped the door once with his staff. The door blew off the hinges and flew down the corridor at high speed, crashing through the wall into the office where the Aurors who monitored the holding cells stayed. There were shouts from that office.

Harry smiled and nodded to the Grim. The huge dog bounded out of the room and headed straight for the office with Harry following. The dog hit the door and went crashing through. From inside came shouts, the sound of spells being cast, then screams. Somewhere an alarm started to go off, it’s wailing pitch echoing through the halls, adding to the confusion.

Harry checked and found the other two holding cells empty. He wasn’t sure whether to be relieved by that or not. Stepping into the office, he saw that the Grim had torn the throats out of three Aurors. Smiling coldly, he spotted a stairway with a sign reading ‘To Level Two’. He could now place himself within the building, and he was very close to the Auror Headquarters. He opened the door to the stairway and stepped onto the lower landing.

He looked up the stairs and spotted the door to level two. As he watched, it was suddenly flung open and five people rushed onto the stairs. Harry held up a hand and all five people exploded in a shower of blood, flesh and bone. The Grim bounded past him and up the stairs. Harry followed.

Climbing the stairs, he entered Auror Headquarters proper. Padfoot had trapped several Aurors in a corner and they were firing spells, which passed through the ethereal dog. Harry levitated a heavy desk and threw it at the Aurors. The desk landed with a heavy crash, breaking through the wall crushing the Aurors under its weight. Outside of the large office area he could hear shouts as reinforcements took up positions, waiting for him to come out.

He banished the door and waited. He didn’t have to wait long. Dozens of spells flew in through the



open door way. Padfoot snarled and bounded out.

Deciding that going out the door was a bad idea, Harry blew the entire wall out, spraying everyone outside with lethal high speed fragments. Then he raised his staff, the crystal flared, blinding everyone in front of him. Stepping through the rubble, Harry paused now and then to concentrate. As he did, Aurors exploded. Padfoot danced through the crowd, hamstringing people then going for the throat. None of the ready-duty Aurors managed to escape.

A nearby door opened and a tall black man stepped off the lift. Harry smiled, spotting Kingsley Shacklebolt.

Shacklebolt froze in his tracks when he spotted Harry. He was rushing to help with the escape from the holding cell and hadn't expected to find the escaped prisoner standing amongst the wreckage of Auror Headquarters.

"Kingsley," Harry murmured, his eyes flaring.

Kingsley howled in pain as his wand, and the hand holding it, flashed to ash.

"You know what happens to traitors, don't you, Kingsley?" Harry asked softly.

Kingsley moaned and held the stump of his arm in his good hand. "Harry, no please." he moaned.

"You betrayed the Order, you betrayed your friends, and you betrayed the light. Kingsley. Now you'll burn for it, slowly and painfully," Harry said as he stepped past him. Padfoot growled and snapped at the stricken Auror.

"No, Boy. He's being punished, he just doesn't know it yet," Harry murmured. The large Grim looked at Harry for a moment, then followed him into the lift car.

Kingsley swayed and breathed a sigh of relief. He had been badly wounded, but he'd survive and live to fight again. He slumped to the floor, then hissed as a burning sensation started in his feet. He fumbled with one hand trying to get his shoes off as smoke started to pour from them.

Harry never heard the howling of the slowly cooking Auror one level below.

---

## **Gryffindor Head Suite...**

Minerva appeared in the small common room of the Head Suite. Hermione was kneeling on the floor weeping and clutching a bracelet to her breast. Draco jumped back in surprise when Minerva appeared and cursed loudly.

"Professor? Bloody hell! What the hell is going on?" Draco said loudly.

Luna stood and walked over to him. “Hush, Draco.” she said simply, and then looked at Professor McGonagall. “Professor? Are you alright?” asked Luna.

“Aye, I’m fine, Miss Lovegood,” she replied, and then she knelt next to Hermione.

“Hermione, he’s alive. I don’t know how, or why, but I’m not going to question it. He’s alive and he told me to tell you that he’d be here soon.” McGonagall said to the girl. Then she looked up at Neville.

“Mr. Longbottom, find Professor Flitwick, tell him I’ve returned and expect him to meet me in my office in five minutes.”

Neville nodded and dashed for the door.

“Excellent. The rest of you start getting the crates of portkeys out. Harry said we’ll be starting the evacuation almost immediately upon his return,” McGonagall said.

Nodding, the others sprang into action.

---

## **Grimmauld Place...**

It was the banging on her door that awakened her. “Amelia!” shouted Dan Granger through the door.

Throwing on a robe, she unlocked the door and threw it open. “What? What is the emergency Dan?”

“It’s the sign, Amelia! We need to get word to Harry and Remus. It’s happened!”

Emma showed up behind Dan, also wearing a robe. Apparently, Dan had not retired to bed yet. Dan turned to his wife when she touched him and he grabbed her.

“It’s the sign, Em! Hermione’s second prophecy! Oh, sweet Jesus, someone actually did it!” he said, and then he sagged against her.

“Sign? Prophecy? Dan what are you talking about?” demanded Emma.

“Overseas news services are reporting a nuclear explosion in the vicinity of Amesbury, Emma. All those people,” he said, then started tremble.

Emma held her husband for a moment, while what he had said sunk in, and then she clutched at him in horror.

“Will someone please tell me what’s going on?” asked Amelia plaintively.

Dan nodded and released his wife. Then he motioned for both of them to follow him to the muggle room where he had set up the short-wave radios.

Once there, Dan pulled up a map on the computer, which showed Amesbury and the surrounding area. Amelia nodded. This was technology she was used to seeing, even if she only understood small parts of it.

“Not long ago, someone set off a nuclear weapon within the city of Amesbury,” he said and waited, watching her.

Amelia looked perplexed. “I’m afraid I don’t understand, Dan.”

“Amelia,” Emma said gently, “a nuclear weapon is the most dangerous muggle weapon ever built. Amesbury has ceased to exist. Depending on the size of the bomb, there will be thousands of victims and the land will be poisoned for years to come.”

“It was a big one Em, a city killer. The fireball consumed everything for miles around, including Stonehenge. Remember the prophecy?” he said, then he rooted around in a pile of paper and parchment until he found a copy and showed it to the two women.

“...A STAR WILL BURN BRIGHT IN THE REALM...NIGHT WILL BECOME DAY AS DARKNESS DECENDS...AND THE SOUND WILL SHAKE THE FOUNDATIONS OF ALL BELIEF...WHEN ANCIENT STONES ARE TURNED TO ASH...A SCORE OF DAYS ARE ALL THAT IS LEFT...BEFORE THE FAITHFUL MUST FLEE...A STAR WILL BURN BRIGHT IN THE REALM...”

“Ancient stones. And that prophecy is an apt description of a nuclear explosion. We have only twenty days before Voldemort assumes full control,” Dan said in conclusion.

“We need to get this information to Harry and Remus right away,” Amelia said, then she shuddered at the implication of being able to kill a city of people with a single device. No Wizard, not even Voldemort, could do that!

“Dobby?” Amelia called.

There was a popping noise and Dobby appeared before the adults, looking up at them with large worried eyes.

“Dobby,” Amelia said gently, “we need you to get messages to Harry and to Remus. Can you tell them that Hermione’s second prophecy has come to pass?”

“Miss Hermione’s second prophecy is come true? I tell them!” Dobby said excitedly and then he vanished with a pop.

The three adults looked at each other in relief and Dan went over to one of the radios and flipped a switch so that everyone could hear the reports.

*“There is no word coming from the British Government at the moment and rumors has it that the Prime Minister has already fled the country. Flyovers by American and French military aircraft are confirming that a strategic nuclear weapon has exploded in southern England.*

*“According to sources at the Pentagon, the explosion was centered around the city of Amesbury and was far too large to be the result of terrorists. One Pentagon official is quoted as saying that “...this was either an act of war by a foreign power, or an accident with one of the United Kingdom’s own nuclear weapons....”*

*“In other news, the United States admits that the explosion of a nuclear device in southern England is the reason why US Military forces have gone on high alert, recalling all personnel to their duty stations. Pentagon officials are refusing to confirm that the U.S. Military have moved to DEFCON TWO.*

*“In Brussels, NATO spokesmen are confirming a higher alert status for all of their member forces...”*

Dan flipped the radio to mute when he saw Dobby had returned. Dobby stood there staring at them, his large eyes filled with tears.

“There is big troubles at Hogwarts. Ministry men come to school and take Professor Pussycat and they say Master Harry too...” then the little elf choked. “..theys say Master Harry was hit with a killing curse. I’s can no longer feel Master Harry!” the little elf wailed. Large droplets fell from his eyes.

Amelia paled and sat heavily in a chair. Emma sunk her head in Dan’s shoulder and started to weep.

“Oh, Dan,” she choked, “Hermione must be devastated.”

“Amelia, we must get to Hogwarts. Can you make portkeys for the three of us?” Dan asked urgently.

Amelia broke from her reverie and nodded, then reached for a magazine to use as a portkey.

“Dobby,” she said over her shoulder, “go to Remus. Tell him we’re starting the evacuation now.”

Dobby nodded and vanished.

---

## **Headmistresses office, Hogwarts...**

Minerva looked up from the cup of tea a house elf had given her as the door opened admitting Professor Flitwick and the rest of the staff.

“I must say, Minerva, I am very pleased to see you back where you belong. Is it true about Harry?” asked the little Professor.

Minerva passed a hand over her face wearily, trying to wipe away some of the exhaustion she felt.

“Aye, it’s true. I don’t understand how he managed it, but Harry has survived his second killing curse,” Minerva said softly, her tone filled with wonder. “Filius, I know it’s late and the students should be in bed, but I think we should move everyone down to the Great Hall. I don’t know what Harry is doing at the Ministry, but I dare say we’re down to the final two minutes of the football match and I expect Ministry men to start breaking down the wards of Hogwarts any hour now.”

Professor Flitwick nodded. He didn’t know what football was, but he understood what she was trying to say. This was what they had prepared for since Christmas. “I’ll see to it right away, Minerva. May I suggest you try to get a little rest before joining us in the Great Hall?”

Minerva nodded and watched Filius leave her office. With a trembling hand, she reached for her cup of tea again.

---

## **Ministry of Magic, Entrance Atrium...**

Harry had long since lost count of the numbers of maimed and dead he had left behind. He had destroyed Level Two of the Ministry Building, and then moved on to Level One before ascending once more to the final floor just below the street entrance.

He paused in the Entrance Atrium and looked at where the fountain of Magical Friends had once stood. Less than a year ago, Dumbledore had dueled with Voldemort in the Atrium, destroying the fountain. The fountain had been rebuilt, but the statues had not been replaced.

Padfoot growled and Harry’s gaze moved in the direction that the giant Grim was staring. The bank of magical lifts showed that all of the cars were in motion, coming up.

“I don’t think we should allow that, boy,” he told the Grim.

Padfoot wagged his tail in agreement, but watched the lifts with burning eyes.

Harry held up one hand and all of the doors opened, stalling the lifts in place. He turned to the fountain and gestured with his staff. Water flashed to steam. A moment later, magma poured from the mouth of the fountain. The magic held against the intense heat and, rather than melting away, the fountain’s basin quickly filled with lava. The lava soon overflowed the basin and began to creep across the floor towards the open lift shafts.

Harry watched for a moment as the first of the flows hit the open shafts and started to pour onto the stalled cars below. Screams echoed back up to Harry and the Grim.

Padfoot walked over to one of the open shafts, completely ignoring the lava it stood in. Once there, it rose one hind leg and urinated into the deep hole. The large Grim then turned and walked back to Harry's side, tail wagging happily.

"Well boy, the little volcano of ours should last another hour or so. I think it's time we went home, don't you agree?" he asked the Grim.

The Grim wagged its tail again and pranced around Harry.

---

## **Malfoy Manor...**

Lucius Malfoy staggered into Voldemort's chamber. His robe was still smoldering and it looked like he had broken his arm somehow.

"Lucius?" Voldemort said in surprise.

"My lord. We've been attacked at the Ministry. Most of the building was on fire when I left, and we lost many Death Eaters."

"Attacked? Who did this?" snarled Voldemort.

"I'm not sure, my Lord. We captured some people from Hogwarts, and it was one of them. Minister Richfield was killed by the lava," Lucius said, afraid to tell him the damage had been done by one person, Harry Potter.

"Lucius, come here," Voldemort said softly.

Lucius stepped forward, trembling. Voldemort's hand shot out, gripping him by his arm. Lucius hissed in pain as Voldemort used his dark mark to summon his servants, then he started to shake violently as Voldemort poured more and more power into the mark. The Dark Lord wasn't just calling his inner circle. He was calling for a full summoning!

When Voldemort finally released him, he slumped to the floor. Voldemort stood and stared at Lucius for a moment, then turned to one of his other servants. "Bring me my armor. I want to be dressed properly before we go to meet my followers."

Turning back to Lucius, he whipped out his wand. "Now. I will see this attack you claim happened to the Ministry, Lucius. LEGILIMENS!"

Lucius rolled over on his back and started to scream. He continued to scream for a long time.

---

## Hogwarts, Great Hall...

It took some time before everyone was assembled in the Great Hall. Filius had alerted Minerva that the Grangers and Amelia Bones were at the edge of the wards, trying to find a way in. Minerva dropped the wards long enough to allow them entry onto the grounds. Filius met them at the doors. Once they were inside, she raised the wards again. Hogwarts was locked up tight.

It was a subdued and dazed student body that assembled in the Great Hall. Everyone was talking when Minerva stepped into the entrance of the hall with Amelia and the Grangers right behind her. Minerva blinked and dodged a brown haired streak as Hermione ran to her parents.

As the student body noted McGonagall's presence, they sat at their tables and watched in surprise as she walked calmly to the Head table. There, she turned around and faced the students.

Amelia went over and sat next to Susan, while the Grangers led Hermione over to her friends and sat with them. The emotional roller coaster that Hermione had been riding for the last several hours had her clinging to her mother and crying softly. Emma held her daughter tight to her, while Dan watched with a grim expression.

"Attention! May I have everyone's attention, please?" Professor McGonagall called loudly.

"I'm sure many of you are confused by the events of the last few hours, so let me see if I can explain what's happening. Hogwarts is now under a complete lock down. Forces of Lord V-V-Voldemort have assumed control of the Ministry of Magic and are, even now, spreading their influence and evil among the Wizarding World.

Many in the hall gasped in shock at the pronouncement. Several of the younger children started to cry.

"Some few of us, under the leadership of one of the greatest Wizards this school has ever seen, have been preparing for this eventuality. Even now, as the Ministry reaches out to take Hogwarts, plans have been made to keep you safe."

This announcement was news to the staff of the school. Only Professor Flitwick, McGonagall and Danni knew of Harry's plans. Professors Sprout, Vector and Sinistra, as well as Hagrid and Trelawney looked at Professor McGonagall with surprise and suspicion.

"We will, hopefully, be leaving this place very soon for one that is safe. In the meantime, all houses will spend their evenings here, together in the Great Hall. First through Third years will come with us when we leave the school. The older students will be given a choice to come with us or not."

"No, Professor," came a weary voice behind her, "everyone is coming. I will personally deal with the Slytherins and anyone else who doesn't want to be there, once we get to safety."

Minerva turned to face the Head table. Someone screamed in the hall and everyone stood up.

Harry Potter stood behind the Head table, swaying slightly. A five-foot tall ethereal dog was standing in front of him, growling at everyone. Harry said a quiet word to the dog and started to move to the side of the table so he could come around in front. His footsteps were faltering and his gait drunken. Padfoot followed him, watching him closely and eyeing the others warily.

Hermione pulled away from her parents and shoved her way to the front as quickly as she could. She stopped when Padfoot looked at her and growled.

“It’s alright, boy. You can trust her,” Harry said hoarsely to the dog. Padfoot walked over to Hermione and sniffed around her a few times. Then he wagged his tail and gently grabbed her hand between his teeth and led her to Harry.

She stopped only a foot away from him as if she didn’t believe that he was really there. He swayed and she immediately reached out and grabbed his shoulders to steady him.

“Hey,” he said, grinning at her. “I missed you.”

Then his eyes rolled up in his head and he sagged into her arms. Minerva and several others moved to help, but Padfoot growled them back. Hermione lowered him to the floor then looked up at the dog.

“Padfoot, sit! Stay!” she commanded.

---

## **The Cemetery at Little Hangleton...**

It was the first general revelry Voldemort had called since his return to a corporeal body nearly two years ago in this very cemetery.

Voldemort looked out over the ranks of nearly three hundred Death Eaters and frowned. The attack on the Ministry had cost him far more Death Eaters than he had initially thought. *Potter!* The name echoed in his head, going around and around like a pinwheel. He had seen who had been responsible for the attack on the Ministry and tonight he was going to pay for it. Tonight it would end, once and for all, and he, Lord Voldemort, would be victorious!

Glancing back at his Death Eaters, he finally approached the slightly raised platform. Nagini, his familiar, flowed silently along the ground next to him.

“My servants!” he shouted. “Tonight, we take what is ours. Tonight we assume mastery of our world and mastery of our fates! Tonight we attack Hogwarts!”

The crowd before him began to cheer and he smiled at the repeated shouts of “Voldemort! Voldemort!”. It was nearly as intoxicating as torturing muggles!



“Lucius,” Voldemort called. “Unleash my muggle army. I wish to own this land.”

Lucius nodded and backed away from Voldemort in relief. He wouldn't be called upon to participate in the attack, and that was, to his mind, good news. It also meant he had time to see a healer. The Master cared little for the pain of his servants and Lucius was suffering from a broken arm, burns and pain from his Master's Legilimency.

Lucius made his way up to Riddle Manor, which wasn't far from the cemetery. Behind him he heard the popping sounds of dozens of Death Eaters apparating to Hogwarts.

---

## **Hogwarts Great Hall...**

The large dog blinked at Hermione and sat immediately. Minerva and Danni rushed forward to help Hermione with Harry. They pulled him up to a sitting position and Hermione moved so he was leaning against her. Danni ran a diagnostic charm and muttered to herself while searching a small bag she carried.

Danni pulled out a vial opened it, and waved it under his nose. In a moment, Harry was coughing and waving his hand in front of his face. As soon as he was awake she pulled another vial out and opened it.

“Harry, this is combination of Pepper-Up potion and a strength restorative. Drink it,” she commanded, holding the vial to his mouth. Harry instinctively drank the offered potion. For a moment nothing seemed to happen, then steam started rising from the top of his head and his face turned a strange bluish color for a moment.

Harry shook himself slightly and he reached down and grabbed one of Hermione's hands. He pulled her hand up and gently rubbed his cheek against it. She tightened her grip on him. She had plans to yell at him later. Right now just wasn't the time.

“Harry, what did you do to the Ministry?” McGonagall asked.

“I'm afraid I'm a wanted criminal now, Professor. But then, there isn't much of the Ministry left to chase after me. I sort of filled the place with lava and I know for a fact that I killed Richfield,” he replied wearily.

“‘Sort of filled the place’? How did you manage that?” asked Hermione, still holding him.

“I transfigured the fountain in the atrium in to a miniature volcano, then I opened the doors to the lift shafts. This was after I destroyed three levels of the building, and probably killed most of the Death Eaters on duty,” he said, the last part dropping to a whisper. He trembled in Hermione's grip and she whispered words of comfort in his ear as he fought with the grief of what he had been forced to do.

“Harry, we have to get the children out of here,” Minerva urged.

“I agree, Professor, but we’re still bound by the second Prophecy. You begin the evacuation and I’ll hold the castle until it’s...”

“Harry, you’ll do no such thing,” Emma said, stepping into his view. “The second prophecy was fulfilled earlier today.”

Hermione looked up sharply and asked the question Harry didn’t want to ask. “How? Where?” she gasped.

Emma gazed at her daughter and her chosen mate and felt as though she was a hundred years old, rather than in her early forties. “Amesbury, late this afternoon. The foreign media say it was a nuclear weapon in the three hundred kiloton to half a megaton range. Stonehenge was vaporized along with most of the surrounding countryside.”

Emma’s words meant little to the witches and wizards clustered around Harry and Hermione. But to those two, the words would be forever etched into their souls. Harry curled in on himself. He remembered vividly the educational films from school which had shown pictures from Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Dan pushed forward in the crowd and knelt by the two of them. Hermione was clutching at Harry and trying not to weep and Harry was sinking into his own despair.

“Harry, Hermione, we don’t have time to grieve. We have plans to put in motion,” Dan said, shaking Harry.

Harry blinked and looked up at Dan, then his words pierced the fog that seemed to surround his mind. Straightening, he stood up, and noticed that Hermione hadn’t been able to push the grief aside yet. He pulled her to her feet, and then wrapped his arms around her tightly. He spoke to her in a low voice, calming her.

Once she had collected herself, Harry turned, still holding her tightly with one arm. “Dobby!” he called.

There was a popping sound and Dobby appeared in front of Harry. Before he could say anything, Dobby was hugging both Harry and Hermione’s legs. A moment later, an embarrassed Dobby stepped back and looked up at them both with adoration in his eyes.

“Dobby, you are the only elf I know who can carry this message. I want you to find Remus. Tell him Case Green is a go and he is to activate Team Weasley again. Can you do that for me, please?” Harry asked the little elf.

Dobby straightened up and looked proudly at Harry. “Dobby can do!” he said and vanished with a pop.

Harry looked to the end of the hall where the rest of the outcasts stood. “Well? What are you

waiting for? Everyone knows what they are supposed to do,” Harry said in a loud voice.

Draco and Luna nodded and started to talk to the others. Terry and Neville ran from the hall. Harry turned back to say something to Minerva when the Great Hall echoed with a bell like tone. Harry’s eyes glazed for a brief moment.

“He’s coming,” he murmured. “Voldemort’s at the outer edge of the wards with three hundred Death Eaters. They’re trying to break in.”

Harry gestured and his staff dropped from its holster into his hand and expanded to full size. “Professor, I’ll hold them off while you get everyone out. Everyone goes. Make sure you send a staff member with the first group to keep the kids calm.”

“Harry, no! You can’t fight him now. You’re too weak from that curse and what you did at the Ministry,” Hermione protested, her eyes echoing the fear in her voice.

Harry turned to her. “Hermione, I’m the only one that can face him. We both know that.”

Neville and Terry came back into the Great Hall. Terry ran to one side of the hall and started pulling miniaturized crates from his pockets and expanding them. Neville ran up to Hermione and held out her staff.

Hermione took her staff and her own eyes glowed with a glint of power. “I’m not letting you stand up to that monster alone, Harry. I promised you once I’d be by your side, and by Merlin, you aren’t going to stop me from being there!”

Harry knew it would probably come to something like this, but that didn’t stop him from looking shocked once she’d made her decision. She’d always been stubborn in some things. Shaking his head at her, he grinned. Wrapping an arm around her waist, he gestured towards the main doors of the castle with his staff. “Shall we welcome our guests to Hogwarts, my love?” he asked in a strangely gentle voice.

She nodded and the pair vanished in a blink. Emma turned and buried her head in Dan’s chest. “Oh, Dan!” she cried. Her only daughter and her future son-in-law were off to face a madman.

“Draco!” shouted Terry. When the Slytherin turned towards him, Terry levitated a small crate over to him.

Draco plucked the crate out of the air and handed it to Luna. Then, hand in hand, the pair left the Great Hall.

---

**Hogwarts Approach Road...**

When Minerva activated all of the wards and locked down the school, it meant that no one would be able to enter the school grounds. Harry had passed through the wards when he returned from the Ministry, but the average wizard lacked the ability to do so.

Voldemort and his Death Eaters were forced to apparate to Hogsmeade and walk the distance to the school. Concerned that the villagers might come to the aid of the school, Voldemort indulged his followers lust for blood in the village before moving them out onto the road. They left Hogsmeade a burning ruin.

Now Voldemort paced in front of the school's wards while nearly forty curse breakers worked to bring them down. The group was involved in a complex ritual that required precise coordination, so Voldemort kept his distance from them. He did not want to distract them.

The school loomed in the distance, mocking him, and it was making him angrier by the minute. It was just a few hundred yards away, but with the wards in place, it might as well have been on the moon.

“Look! Someone's come out!” shouted a Death Eater.

Voldemort turned and watched three figures standing in front of the doors to the school. Two were human, the third seemed to be that of an enormous dog. The taller figure turned to the shorter and they spoke for a while. Then both began to glow an eerie blue. Turning they began to slowly walk down the approach road. The dog followed closely behind.

The two figures stopped about ten yards inside the wards.

---

## **Hogwarts Library...**

Draco and Luna entered the library and Luna immediately opened the crate that she had been carrying. Inside the crate were other crates, all neatly shrunk and packed within the first.

Luna pulled out two crates and opened them facing a shelf of books. She nodded to Draco and he traced a complex motion in the air with his wand.

“Redigo quod repono,” he intoned.

Books began to fly off the shelves. Each book moved toward the open box, shrinking as it went. The books landed neatly in the crate and, when the crate was full, the books went to the next available open crate.

Draco had to keep repeating the spell, while Luna kept opening new crates. As she did, she sung a little song about her love and one of his more appealing physical aspects. Draco shook his head and tried to ignore the urge to kiss his girlfriend senseless.

---

## Hogwarts Great Hall...

“May I have your attention, please?” called Professor McGonagall.

The crowd of students quieted down and faced the Head table in the Great Hall. Minerva nodded to herself and stood up.

“In a little while, prefects will escort you back to houses. You are to pack all of your belongings right away. We are going to be leaving the school soon...”

“What if we don’t want to leave?” called someone from the Slytherin table.

“*Stupefy* !” shouted Ginny and a student at the Slytherin table collapsed. Then Ginny climbed on top of the Gryffindor table. She looked around for a moment, her hands on her hips. “You have a choice. Either come with us to a place of safety, or remain behind to face the wrath of your ‘Lord’ when he discovers an empty school. Now pay attention to the Headmistress and shut up!”

Ginny unconsciously waved for Professor McGonagall to continue and more than a few Gryffindor’s snickered at her audacity, then she climbed off the table.

“Thank you, Miss Weasley,” said McGonagall dryly. “Now, as I was saying, you will pack your belongings, your books, your clothes. Once packed, a prefect will summon an elf to bring your trunk down to the Great Hall. From here, you will leave via portkey to the Haven School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.”

“Now prefects, escort your students to their houses. I want everyone back here as soon as possible,” she concluded.

Amelia Bones moved to McGonagall’s side. “Minerva, unless you think I can be useful here, I’ll go to Padfoot and make sure they’re getting everything ready there to receive you.”

McGonagall nodded gratefully. “Aye, that would be a big help. I don’t know how many families have used the portkeys yet, but we might want to alert them, if possible.”

“According to the last report I’ve heard, there are roughly one hundred and fifty families of students already at Padfoot,” she said quietly.

McGonagall nodded. “Hopefully there will be more soon,” she replied. Far too few families had used the portkeys they had been given.

The two older women exchanged a look, then Amelia grabbed the portkey she wore around her neck.

Minerva looked around and spotted the Grangers standing off to one side. “Mrs. Granger, you

would be most helpful if you could keep track of the students as they are sent off.” she offered.

Emma’s eyes lit up and she nodded eagerly, taking the conjured list of students and a quill from the Headmistress.

“Mr. Granger, why don’t you see if Terry and Susan need help? They will be handing out the portkeys,” asked McGonagall.

Dan nodded moved to speak with Susan and Terry.

Neville and Ginny left the Great Hall carrying a crate between them.

---

## **Hogwarts Approach Road...**

“Hi, Tommy!” shouted Harry Potter as he waved cheerfully at the Dark Lord. Hermione just flipped him the bird.

Padfoot walked to the very edge of the wards and lifted a leg urinating in Voldemort’s direction.

Voldemort snarled and stepped forward. He hit the ward and bounced about thirty feet back. Climbing to his feet he snarled, “Damn you, Potter!”

“Now Tom, that’s not nice. I’d expect that sort of bad language from an ill bred pure blood, but you’re a half blood, raised by muggles! You know better because muggles taught you manners!” Harry replied, grinning.

Hermione stood slightly behind Harry. His shield was strong enough to catch anything thrown at it, but it was her job to make sure no one was able to sneak anything up on them.

A murmur rippled through his Death Eaters at Harry’s words.

“How dare you talk to me like that! I am Slytherin’s heir!”

“Oh, really? Do you know how to find Slytherin’s chamber?” challenged Harry with a smirk.

Voldemort paused in his rage and his brow furrowed in confusion. Harry started laughing softly. “I’ll take that as a no, Mister-I-am-Slytherin’s-Heir,” he called out in a light tone.

Dolohov, having survived Harry’s trip through the Ministry tonight, spotted Hermione and he stepped up to the edge of the ward.

“*Avada Kedavra* ,” he snarled, pointing his wand at her.

Hermione’s eye’s bulged and she felt a momentary flash of panic. She tried to duck and then the

unthinkable happened. The curse hit the shield and bounced off in another direction.

The curse hit one of Voldemort's curse breakers in mid chant. All of the curse breakers had been involved in the ritual to break the wards. The loss of one of their number was sufficient for five others to faint, while the rest doubled over and threw up. The ritual collapsed to the sound of Harry laughter.

Voldemort's eyes widened in surprise and for the first time, fear.

Harry turned his attention back to Voldemort who stood glaring at him. "Tommy, I'm going to try to be reasonable about this, but if you don't agree, then we'll do things the hard way."

"*Avada Kedavra* ," Voldemort said, his wand pointed at Harry.

---

## **Padfoot Manor...**

Amelia appeared in the foyer of Padfoot Manor and was surprised to see that the Manor was in total chaos.

"Amelia!" Remus shouted, attracting her attention as she wormed her way through the crowd of people.

"Remus? What's the problem? Why is everyone here?"

Remus ran a hand through his silvering hair. "It's a bloody, balls up mess, Amelia. We only just realized that the portkeys at Hogwarts will bring everyone to the front lawn of Padfoot, not to the receiving center, or the school, or even the town. We're trying to figure out how we're going to handle some three hundred students..."

"Five hundred," Amelia corrected quietly.

Remus blinked at her in surprise, and then he smiled. "He's taking everyone then? I thought he would!"

Amelia grabbed him by the robes. "Remus, I need to talk to you alone, right now," she said urgently.

Remus stared at the older woman and he could see the plea in her eyes. Remus turned to Arthur and Bill. "Arthur, some five hundred students will be arriving tonight, not three hundred. Can you and Bill take over here, while I speak with Amelia?"

Arthur nodded and Remus turned to lead Amelia into a nearby sitting room. Tonks spotted them and joined them.

Once inside, Amelia turned to face the couple. “The two of you might want to sit for this.”

She waited for a moment, but neither showed any signs of sitting. “Very well. Earlier this evening, the Ministry came to Hogwarts to arrest Minerva, ostensibly for the disappearance of Ronald Weasley. According to all reports, Harry was struck with, and survived, another killing curse.”

Tonks swayed and Remus grabbed her to hold her steady. Her eyes filled with tears.

Amelia held up a hand, stopping them from commenting. “There’s more. Hogwarts is under total lockdown at this point. Harry arrived back at school, but only after he’d killed the Minister, and destroyed the Ministry. When I left the school, Harry had gone out, despite his exhaustion, to face Voldemort.”

Remus walked to a nearby day bed and both he and Tonks sat heavily on it, staring at Amelia.

“He knows not to fight him, Remus. But what’s keeping him going at this point is beyond me,” Amelia said softly. “I will say this. After tonight, that young man will be a legend, whether he wants it or not.”

---

## **Hogwarts Great Hall...**

Minerva watched as the first group of Hufflepuffs returned to the Great Hall.

“Pomona,” Minerva said, calling the Professor over.

“Yes, Professor?”

“I want you to go with this first group, Pomona. The children are going to be frightened and upset. Your presence will calm them.”

Pomona Sprout frowned. She had known Minerva for many years and she trusted the Headmistress, but she didn’t really want to leave her students behind. The first group back only consisted of some third year Hufflepuffs.

“Minerva,” Sprout started to protest.

“I’m afraid I must insist, Professor,” Minerva said firmly.

Sprout sighed and nodded. She walked over to where the house elves had set up twenty trunks in a circle.

“First group! Over here, please!” called Terry Boot. He then handed Susan Bones a hula-hoop. She walked to the center of the circle made by the luggage. Laying the hoop on the floor, she stepped into the hoop and pointed her wand.



“*Engorgio*,” she intoned and the hoop grew in size until it was touching every piece of luggage.

“Come give me your name, then find your trunk and sit on it,” Emma said. One by one the students walk over to her and gave their names, which she then crossed off her list.

Professor Sprout released the prefects to return to Hufflepuff house for the next batch of students. Nearby, great numbers of Hogwarts elves were piling up, waiting to drop off their burden of student’s trunks.

Susan checked to make sure every trunk had a student. “Alright you lot, everyone bend over and pick up a piece of the hoop at your feet. Hold it steady and stay seated on your trunk.”

The group lifted the hoop and held it, looking uncertainly at Susan. She smiled back at the younger students. “Don’t worry, you lot. Professor, if you would kindly grab onto the hoop as well?”

Professor Sprout touched the hoop, holding a section in her hand. Susan walked over to one side where she tapped the hoop twice with her wand. The Professor and twenty students vanished from sight.

As soon as they were gone, the elves moved forward, placing more trunks in a circle. At the entrance to the Great Hall, a group of first year Gryffindors who had been waiting moved into the hall.

---

## **Hogwarts Library...**

“Do you think we’ll have enough crates?” Luna asked Draco. She had finally stopped humming and became more serious as she picked up on the worrying that Draco was doing.

Draco looked at the empty crates he had and did a quick count of the shelves still left to empty. They were now working their way through the restricted section of the Library.

“I think so,” he replied, “but it’s going to be close.”

He glanced out the window and nibbled thoughtfully on one finger. The wards around the school were flickering. He wasn’t sure what was causing it, but it couldn’t be good.

---

## **Greenhouse Number Two...**

Ginny watched with admiration as Neville expertly culled certain key crops from the greenhouse.

Unlike Draco and Luna, who were stealing the entire library, Neville and Ginny's mission was far more sinister.

They were supposed to remove certain crops from the greenhouses. Then, at a prearranged signal, they were to leave some delayed action explosive hexes in Greenhouse Number Six.

---

## **Hogwarts Approach Road...**

Once again the beam bounced off the glowing shield that surrounded the two of them. The rebounding beam killed another nearby Death Eater.

"Tom," Harry said sadly, shaking his head, "you need to understand. We can't fight. Not here, not now. The Prophecy, you know." Then he paused for a moment. "Oh, that's right, you don't know the prophecy. Your Death Eaters failed to get you that," Harry said with a shrug.

"You will be begging for mercy before I'm done with you, Potter. First I'll kill your friends, and then I'll kill you, slowly. I'll kill you like I killed your useless parents," Voldemort sneered.

"In case you've forgotten, Tommy, I ripped your soul from your body that night. Me. A babe not yet two years old. And now I stand before you and you can't do a damn thing about it, half blood," Harry shouted cheerfully.

Several Death Eaters screamed defiantly at his word and five killing curses were fired at Harry and Hermione.

Padfoot lunged at the throat of a Death Eater. There was a terrible scream as the ethereal animal passed through the wards and ripped the throat out of the black robed man.

Three of the five killing curses rebounded into other Death Eaters. One rebounded straight at Voldemort causing him to dive headlong into the grass to avoid it.

Hermione had been watching Harry carefully and she was becoming worried. He had been very clear about one thing. The shield around them would stop anything, including a killing curse, but they could not cast through the shield. And with each killing curse, it took more and more power from Harry to maintain the shield.

To the casual observer, Harry appeared fine, but Hermione could see signs of the stress he was under. His body trembled slightly every now and then, and his voice had a disjointed, almost flippant tone. He started to pace and he took to running a trembling hand through his hair. She kept glancing back at the castle waiting for the signal that the students were gone.

Voldemort whispered something to one of his followers and a group of Death Eaters detached themselves from the rest. They moved back a few yards and started casting a power draining spell

on the wards. From their wands a dull gray beam issued. The beam combined with those from other wizards so that it was a thick rope of gray light when it struck the wards. The rope brightened and the wards began to visibly flicker.

Harry motioned and Padfoot leapt at one of the Wizards. Curses flew through the air as the other Death Eaters tried to protect those draining the wards. Many of the curses passed right through the ghostly Grim, but a few seemed to slow it down. A few of the curses that passed through the Grim struck other Death Eaters, adding to the mayhem.

Harry realized that time was running out. He had to do something now. Glancing over his shoulder, he looked at Hermione. “It’s time for you to leave. I have to drop the shield and do something or they’re going collapse the wards,” he said desperately.

“I told you I’m staying by your side, Harry, and I meant it,” she hissed angrily at him.

“What’s this? A lovers quarrel?” Voldemort taunted in a silky tone. “You know, Potter, your family has no luck with women. Your father told your mother to take you and run, and she refused him as well. Now your own woman refuses you. I don’t know why you put up with such disobedience.”

---

## **Hogwarts Great Hall...**

Minerva watched as another group of twenty left. A few Slytherins had to be stunned and she was seriously considering leaving them behind.

“How many are left, Minerva?” asked Professor Flitwick.

“Five groups, I think, Filius. We have less than one hundred students left, and I think you should go with the next group,” Minerva replied.

Flitwick nodded and walked over to the current group that was forming up.

Minerva motioned to one of the house elves. “Would you tell Pappy that I need to speak with him please?”

“Yes, Professur!”

A moment later, a wizened old house elf appeared in front of Minerva.

“Professur McGonagall,” exclaimed Pappy.

Minerva pulled her gaze away from watching another group of students vanish. “Ah Pappy, good. I know Harry Potter’s elf, Dobby, was supposed to talk to you...”

“Dobby is bad house elf! He free elf! No elf is free,” retorted Pappy.

“Yes, I know, Pappy. But do you remember his conversation with you?” pressed McGonagall.

Pappy nodded reluctantly.

“Good. I want you to listen carefully and understand. We are fleeing Hogwarts. The Dark Lord is coming and nothing will be able to stop him. Very shortly there will be no one here in the school and it will be empty,” she said softly.

“Dark mans coming? He will owns Hogwarts?” Pappy asked in fear.

“I’m afraid so, Pappy,” replied Minerva sadly.

“Dobby was telling the ‘truuf!” exclaimed Pappy in wonder. “Professur, we help yous to leave. When school is empty, we go to Dobby. He promised us homes and families.”

Minerva smiled as a wave of relief pass through her. At least the house elves would flee.

“Minerva?” Emma called, “this is the last group of students.”

Minerva nodded. “Tell Terry to save one portkey and destroy the others. We’ll use that portkey to leave. The others have their own, but they’re supposed to make it back here before using them.”

Emma waved in acknowledgment.

Minerva then activated one of the internal Hogwarts alarms in test mode. The castle rang with the sound of braying elephants.

---

## **Padfoot Manor...**

“The first group has arrived!” came the shout.

Arthur Weasley looked up from instructing the elves.

“Ok people, lets get everyone moving,” he called.

The elves had set up a large tarp with a series of tables underneath it. One long table was loaded with food.

He stepped out the front door of Padfoot. Several house elves had erected torches to light the area. The first group of students was all clustered together, looking decidedly frightened.

“Everyone, follow me,” called Professor Sprout.

Arthur hurried over to the Professor.

“Mr. Weasley? What are you doing here?” Professor Sprout asked in confusion.

“I’m sorry, Professor, but there was a mistake in the making of the portkeys. You and your students are actually about two kilometers from the school,” he said waving a hand in a direction away from the Manor.

“We’re going to get the students under the tarp for now, then we’ll moved them to the new school once they’re all together. Once you’ve moved this group under the tarp, come back. The house elves will see that they get something hot to drink and some sweets to occupy them. We’ll have some adults with them. But I need you to move the students as they arrive.”

She stared at the elder Weasley and watched as several other adults coaxed the students to the food waiting for them. With the students out of the way, the house elves swarmed over the trunks moving them aside. A moment later another group of students arrived.

Teacher’s instinct kicked in and Pomona Sprout moved towards her charges. “Alright you lot, everyone over to the tents over there. Don’t worry about your luggage.”

Arthur relaxed a bit and nodded to Remus who had just come from the Manor. “This will work, Remus. I’ve got Bill waking up the town, trying to alert the parents. He’s also telling them to be sensitive to those children whose families are not here yet.”

Remus nodded grimly and watched as the third group arrived. “Harry is bringing the entire school. That’s going to be at least a hundred more families who didn’t receive the portkey letter.”

Arthur expression turned grim. “Do you want to add them to the list of muggles we’re supposed to start picking up?”

“Let’s try owl post first, Arthur. You’re going to have your hands full as it is, rescuing thirty muggle families.”

Arthur nodded in relief. As the two men walked around the area, more students continued to arrive to the safety of Padfoot.

---

## **Hogwarts Approach Road...**

For nearly an hour Harry had been taunting and teasing Riddle. His shield had dealt with nearly a dozen more killing curses. Hermione, in her worry, finally latched on to the back of his pants and was keeping a firm grip on him.

Harry glanced up in confusion when he heard the sound of braying elephants. That had to be the

first signal! The students were gone from the school. Now it was just a matter of waiting for the second signal, which should come any minute.

“Hey, Tommy, I forgot to apologize for destroying the Ministry tonight. I realize that it makes it difficult for you to have any sort of legitimacy without the Ministry backing you up,” Harry offered with a grin.

Voldemort snarled and paced at the edge of the wards. Over the past hour he had personally cast the Cruciatus curse on several of his servants and killed three in rage because he couldn't strike back at Potter.

The whole episode at the wards edge had turned into a nightmare for Voldemort. His men had seen that he was powerless to do anything to Potter and that was something he simply couldn't have!

“You know, I think you'd be a lot nicer if you'd just get laid now and then,” Harry offered. “Learn to lighten up, Tommy. Find yourself a nice cuddly woman like I did and have some fun with your life!”

Hermione's eyes widened in shock. Here was the most dangerous Dark Lord of all time and Harry was offering him advice on sex?

Voldemort leaned against the wards and, rather than being thrown back this time, the barrier sparked and held him in place. He snarled and waved. Several other Death Eaters leaned against the wards. The wards had weakened to the point where they were able to start to push their way through.

The elephants brayed again and Harry smiled broadly.

Harry felt himself pulled backwards into Hermione. She had shrunk her staff and placed it in a pocket earlier so she was able to wrap both arms around him. He blinked in confusion and then he felt the familiar pull behind his navel. The wards, Death Eaters and Voldemort vanished from sight.

Voldemort staggered as he slipped past the last resistance of the wards and looked up. He screamed in rage as Harry Potter and his slut vanished before he could do anything about it. Then it dawned on him. He was through the wards! He motioned to his servants and in a moment nearly three hundred Death Eaters were pushing through the greatly weakened wards.

From the direction of the castle, Voldemort heard the sound of explosions. He turned to two servants. “Go find out what's exploding and report back to me!”

The two Death Eaters took off at a dead run. Voldemort heard a noise behind him and he spun to see that most of his Death Eaters had fallen to the ground. The additional strain on the wards had caused them to collapse, removing all resistance and dumping most of his servants on their faces in the dirt.

With the wards gone, Voldemort led his servants toward the school. He was nearly to the entrance to the courtyard when he heard a scream. One of his servants came running from around the corner of the building being followed by Acromantulas. The man got only a few more steps before being overwhelmed by the dog sized spiders.

The Death Eaters stood in shock for a moment, then hundreds of curses cut loose as the spiders surged forward.

---

## **Padfoot Manor...**

Hermione cursed as she staggered from the landing. It was hard enough to stay on her feet when she was by herself, but holding onto to Harry made it nearly impossible.

Arthur Weasley saw the pair arrive. He had been greeting his daughter and Neville when Hermione and Harry appeared. Harry's face was a chalky white, his eyes were open, but only just barely.

He leapt to Hermione's aid before they fell. Grabbing the two, he helped Hermione steer Harry over to a chair. He seemed confused, and he kept blinking rapidly.

"Where's Danni?" Hermione asked urgently.

"I think she's outside with the students," offered Bill. "I'll go get her."

Hermione knelt in front of Harry. He had been going for so long on his magic and adrenaline. Now that it was washing from his system, he was on the verge of a collapse.

"Harry, look at me" she urged. He turned his head and stared at her, his eyes blinked rapidly and his body began to shake.

"H-H-Hermione?" he whispered.

"Yes love, I'm here. We're safe now. You need to stay awake until Danni arrives," she said, then she turned "Someone find a healer, damnit!" she snarled.

Emma stepped forward and placed a hand on Hermione's shoulder. She knelt next to her daughter. "Hey Harry." she said gently.

Harry looked at her uncomprehendingly for a moment, and then he smiled. "Hi mum," he whispered. His head rolled forward then and his eyes started to close. His breathing was very slow and very shallow. Emma felt for a pulse and her eyes widened in alarm. She held his chin and she looked him in the eye.

"Harry love, you have to stay awake for the healer."

“I’m trying, mum, but I’m so tired... just want to sleep...” he mumbled.

“Harry!” Hermione protested, in tears. “Don’t you dare leave me!”

He popped one eye open and he smiled gently at her. “...not going to leave, just sleep...” he whispered.

Bill rushed back into the room leading Danni. Dobby followed carrying a large box with all of her supplies in it.

Danni assessed Harry’s condition and pulled a needle from the box of supplies, then a vial. She plunged the needle into the vial and filled it. Then, in a single motion, she turned and plunged it into Harry’s thigh.

Danni took Harry’s chin in her hand and tilted his head so she could see him. “Harry, you’re dangerously exhausted. I have some potions that will give you energy and then you’re going to sleep. But I need you to stay awake long enough for me to give them to you.”

Harry nodded weakly. “Mmm... I’ll be able to sleep with Hermione?”

Hermione blushed at his comment and Emma snickered.

“Harry, if it will help you sleep and recover, I’ll put any girl you want in the bed,” Danni replied with a smile. Hermione glared at the healer.

“Don’t want any girl...,” Harry mumbled, “...want my Hermione...”

Hermione smiled, while Danni pulled potions from the box Dobby had.

“Oh, he’s a keeper alright,” murmured Emma.

---

### **Author’s Notes:**

Once again we turn to the dreaded Author’s notes. This is the space where we hold kittens hostage and insist on you sending us donuts or we refuse to finish the story. No? ok, well that didn’t work. I suppose you want us to apologize for last chapters cliff hanger? No? You want more? I suppose we can accommodate you. Heh.

We have to admit, Harry whined and moaned and at first we thought he wanted to get laid again, but no, he really wanted to play with his magic in this chapter so we opted to let him play to his hearts content. We hope you enjoyed it, but if that little bugger whines again like that we’re going to feed him Ron burgers.

We didn’t make Harry an Animagus in this story and many people kept asking what his form was.



We were tempted to make him a sea cucumber or something equally useful like a pushmepullyou but we changed our minds. So we opted to put the issue to bed once and for all. He is not an animagus. End of problem.

Ok to all those people asking that we write a story hooking Harry up with Tonks, Minerva, Hagrid, Narcissa and Amelia etc. PLEASE STOP! We are in favor of hooking Harry up with contemporaries of the female sex. We're not into May/December stories thank you very much.

Usually when you see Harry making snide comments about Voldies blood lineage its because he's making a public statement not because he believes in any of that bigotry.

For those looking for proof that Ron is dead (Bob points to his plot outline and nods grimly). There you have it. Unless we decide to bring him back from the dead as some sort of zombie like spider mutant thing.... nah.... hahahahaha.

For those other authors that want to have us mention them in our story, we have some specific requirements. For one thing, you need to (a) have stories that we actually like and (b) don't use anonymous reviews to ask that we include you, and (c) tell us where we can find your stories. In the meantime we highly recommend to everyone that they read the story by anonymous reviewer. Don't ask us where to find it.

For all those people that have been hounding us for chapter 23 because of that evil cliff hanger in chapter 22? We laugh at you and refuse to publish 23 knowing full well... What's that Alyx? This is chapter 23? Oh... nevermind.

Yes we spelt the killing curse wrong. We know it and wish to thank the 2.7 million people that pointed that out to us. Alyx had ironed her fingers as punishment and I have stapled my head to the monitor so that won't happen again. In the meantime I suppose we could make a case of Harry didn't need to survive a killing curse because Dean was too stupid to spell right!

OK Now we're pissed!!! We just checked the lexicon and we looked. We DID NOT MISSPELL the killing curse. To all those people that had to repeat AVADA KEDAVRA in their review we have a crucio for you. You do realize that Alyx has ironed her fingers don't you? And I've got a friggen monitor stapled to my head! What if it rains?

For all of those people that are going to write and insist that Britain has no nuclear weapons, or the queen is gay or something equally silly. STOP. I will not only ignore your nitpicking I will delete those reviews. We have made a reasonable attempt at ensuring some measure of accuracy in the background portions of the story. But its fiction for Christ's sake, enjoy it as fiction and stop picking on us.

Pet Peeve:

Authors that look to reviewers for inspiration and plot lines. (This doesn't really need any explanation. You know who you are and you know you're doing wrong!).

STOP IT!! (Alyx's iron is still hot!)

## **Sunset Over Britain**

### **The Darkest Hours**

#### **Standard Disclaimer:**

Musings\_of\_Apathy stepped into the center of the stage and a spotlight snapped onto him. Severus Snape walked out from the other side of the stage, his cloak billowing out behind him like some demented bat. Snape approached Musings and loomed over the ickle first.

“Well Mr. Apathy? Are you going to stand here all night? I swear you Hufflepuffs are becoming as arrogant as the Gryffindors!” he snarled.

“Sorry Sir,” squeaked the author of Harry Potter and the Cracked Reservoir. “Bob and Alyx invited me to be the guest announcer for this disclaimer.”

“Well then Mr. Apathy. ANNOUNCE!” roared Snape.

The ickle firstie author quailed under the gaze of the stern professor, then grabbed the microphone. “Ladies and Gentlemen, I give you Professor Snape with a message from Bob and Alyx”

Snape smoothed back a greasy lock of hair and stepped up to the microphone. “The authors of this story wish to make it patently clear that they do not own the rights to anything. The Potterverse is the copyrighted property of JK Rowling.”

Suddenly the backdrop slipped from its ropes and fell on Snape and Apathy crushing them both under tons of props. Then several dozen fifty pound sand bags fell on the spot where the two lie, ensuring a grisly death.

There was a moment of silence, then Harry jumped to his feet. “I’ll save them!”

Hermione climbed off her knees and pulled up Harry’s zipper, then wiped her mouth with a tissue. “Even hero’s are easily distracted.”

Alyx turned to Bob and smacked him. “You’re disgusting! How could you write this drivell?”

“Would you prefer to hear her talk about polishing his wand?” Bob replied with a casual air.

Alyx huffed. “Pervert! You are sleeping on the couch tonight!”

# Sunset Over Britain

## Chapter 24

---

### Padfoot Manor...

Danni stood from her kneeling position and motioned to Hermione and Narcissa to help her get Harry up to the master bedroom. She had given him some strengthening potions and so she was sure he'd sleep normally. Now it was a matter of seeing what other damage he had caused to himself.

Hermione levitated Harry and moved him towards the stairs with Narcissa and Emma following close behind. Danni paused before leaving the room and turned to Arthur.

"Have the boys left yet?" she asked.

"Yes, a few minutes ago. Miles gave them a twenty man Auror team for the job. Hopefully we'll start seeing the results of their work in a short while. And this time we have proper portkeys, everyone will go to the receiving center."

"I just hope they remember to send healers and medi-witches first," Danni said warningly.

Arthur looked at her with an innocent look. "My boys can be trusted to do as they are told, Danni."

Danni arched an eyebrow. "I know they can. It's their exuberance to go above and beyond their orders that worries me," she replied with a half smile.

Danni turned to follow Hermione who had vanished up the stairs when Arthur stopped her by touching her arm.

"How is he?" he asked. As he did, she could sense the others in the room straining to hear her words.

"He's dangerously exhausted himself, but I've taken care of that for now. The next thing to find out is exactly how much other damage he's done to himself, not to mention what that killing curse did. I didn't spot any major trauma though, so any problems he has are probably going to be subtle."

Arthur nodded and nearly everyone else in the room breathed a sigh of relief as she turned and went up the stairs.

Danni found Hermione, Narcissa and Emma in the master bedroom. Harry had been floated into his bed and they were discussing what they should do next. Shaking her head, she entered the

room.

“Ladies, this is all well and good, but we have a patient to deal with. I know he’s tired and he’ll probably sleep through everything we do, but we need to get him stripped out of his clothing and I need to make sure he has no other problems.”

Hermione and Emma both blushed while Narcissa nodded in agreement. “Hermione, we still need to make sure he doesn’t have an injury we don’t know about, and he was hit by a killing curse,” Danni said gently.

Hermione blanched and trembled, but nodded at the healer. Then she moved to the bed where Harry lay and started to remove his clothing. It wasn’t until she had all of his outer clothes off that some of the answers started to come to light.

“What is that?” exclaimed Danni as the iridescent skin tight second skin came into view.

“Oh, thank Merlin!” Hermione breathed. “He was wearing his second skin.”

“Hermione, I know what second skin is, and I’ve never seen a second skin like this!” Danni proclaimed.

“It’s Basilisk skin, Danni. It came from a thousand year old Basilisk that Harry killed in his second year at Hogwarts. He had second skin made for all of us at the school from it and asked us to wear it all the time.”

Danni sat in a chair for a moment, thinking hard, then nodded. “All right, he probably avoided any major injuries to his legs then, but let’s get that off to make sure. Then we’ll take the shirt off and check his upper torso.”

Hermione blushed as they removed the last items of clothing exposing Harry. Emma arched an eyebrow and looked over at Hermione who smiled weakly.

“Well, he puts Lucius to shame,” murmured Narcissa.

“Dan too,” muttered Emma and then she started to laugh.

Hermione frowned at the two women. “Must you? That’s disgusting!”

Both women grinned at her, unashamed, while Danni rolled her eyes at their foolishness.

Turning Harry over, Danni ignored the two tittering women and removed his shirt revealing the second skin covering his torso. Just between his shoulder blades it was obvious that he’d been hit with a powerful curse. There was a large burn mark and the skin had been broken. In fact, bits and pieces of the armored skin were embedded in his back.

She frowned, looking at the damage. “Well, we can see where the curse hit him. I’ll have to cut the upper armor off and remove the pieces to get it off him. It’s going to be ruined, I’m afraid.”

Danni then turned to Hermione. “Can you stand the sight of blood? Especially his?” she asked sternly. “I know your mother can, and so can Narcissa. If you can’t, I’ll have to ask you to leave the room.”

Hermione’s face darkened. “I’ll stay and help.”

“Good, I’ll use you to keep the area free of blood. You’ll need to cast the vanishing spell when I call for it. It’s painful and he may respond to it, but you must not hesitate to cast when I need you to. Do you understand?”

Hermione nodded grimly.

“Emma, when I remove the back of his second skin, you need to spread it flat on the table and take every piece I pull out and try to fit it to the skin. I need to know if any pieces are missing. Understand?”

Emma nodded and went to clean off the table.

Narcissa pulled a pair of tough looking shears from Danni’s box of medical supplies and slowly cut up the back of the skin.

“Cut just around the hole, Narcissa,” instructed Danni.

---

## **St. Mungos Hospital for Magical Maladies...**

It had been a nervous day for the Wizarding world. The Wizard Wireless Network had reported a major disaster at the Ministry building, including the death of the current Minister of Magic. Then word came from Wiltshire of some strange disaster that resulted in the destruction of one of the Wizarding Worlds most sacred relics, Stonehenge. Finally, word came of a massive Death Eater attack on Hogsmeade and Hogwarts.

People in the hospital were afraid. It was generally agreed that it was only a matter of time before the Death Eaters attacked St. Mungos.

The receptionist looked up as the door burst open and a large group of men led by three red heads hustled into the lobby. She started to reach for the panic button, and then froze as she found herself staring down the business end of twenty-three wands.

“Welcome to St. Mungos,” she squeaked instead.

“Why thank you, my dear,” said one red headed man with a dashing smile. Behind him the other two red heads, obviously twins, smirked.

“Can I direct you?” asked the receptionist, trying to rebuild what little Hufflepuff courage she had.

The oldest of the three red heads smiled sadly.

“Actually no,” said one of the twins.

“This is a stickup,” said the other with an infectious grin. The tough men behind the two twins all grinned.

“But this is a hospital!” protested the receptionist.

“And you’re part of the loot, my pretty!” cackled one of the twins.

“Oy! I saw her first!” said the other.

The other red head smacked them both in the head. “No more muggle television for you two!” he swore, and then he held out a hand with an empty sack. “Would you deposit your wand in here please? I promise you will get it back soon.”

The young witch placed her wand in the sack and trembled in fear. One of the twins wagged his eyebrows at her.

“Bring her along,” said Bill Weasley, “and lock down the doors.”

Bill looked at the twins and shook his head in dismay. “I know I’m going to regret this, but you two take team one and get the main waiting room as well as the emergency rooms.”

Fred and George grinned evilly at Bill and nodded eagerly. Then Bill turned to the rest of the group with him. “You lot know your jobs. Healers and medi-witches first, then patients and finally books, potions and any other goodies you find. Strip the building. Dobby has already spoken to the elves.”

Nodding, the men moved off to their appointed tasks.

Fred had a hand loosely on the arm of the receptionist. He turned and looked her over with a grin. She wasn’t sure what he had in mind, but she was coming to understand they really wouldn’t hurt her. His next words shocked her totally.

“I say, you wouldn’t have to have a sister, would you?” he asked hopefully.

She shook her head and he looked disappointed, then he leaned in close. “It’s for my lazy brother. He pouts if I get all the pretty birds and he doesn’t,” he said in a voice loud enough for George to hear.

“Hey now! I do not pout!” protested George. Then he went off in the direction of the main waiting room. He kicked open the door and fired off a concussion hex, causing those within to shriek and duck.

“Don’t anyone move! We’re hijacking this hospital in the name of the British Organized

Wizarding Elite Liberation Movement!” he shouted.

“That’s really a shitty name. I mean, BOWEL-Movement?” commented Fred.

“I was pressed for time when I came up with it. And that was a terrible pun you know,” replied George loftily.

“Definitely too much muggle television,” muttered Fred, who was still dragging the girl along with him.

“You’re doing what?” someone shouted.

“We’re hijacking the hospital,” replied Fred reasonably.

“It boils down to this, folks. Voldemort is taking over, the Ministry is gone, the Minister is dead, Hogsmeade is destroyed and Hogwarts has fallen. Those of you here who aren’t badly injured or sick can leave right now. Go back to your homes and hunker down and hope the Death Eaters don’t come for you. If you work here at the hospital, or are too sick to go home, you’re coming with us,” answered one of the ex-Aurors who had accompanied Fred and George.

One of the healers frowned, then asked the question that was on everyone’s mind.

“Where are you planning on taking us?”

“Someplace safe.” George said with a smile.

“What about our families?” asked a Medi-witch.

“Floo them. If you can get them here within the hour, they come with us. Otherwise we schedule them for a later pickup,” replied Fred.

“Unless they are pretty birds, then we’ll pick them up right now,” offered George.

“Definitely,” quipped Fred, who was still holding onto the now giggling receptionist.

---

### **Padfoot Manor, the front lawn...**

Minerva looked at the mass of students. Some of them guarded by prefects and an irate Hagrid.

She put down the cup of tea she had been sipping and sighed. She still had to lead the students to the new school, roughly two kilometers away, and she was hoping the house elves would show up. Otherwise it would take all night for the twenty or so Padfoot elves to move all the luggage to the school.



Minerva looked toward the front entrance to the manor house when Dobby and Pappy came out looking for her. Relieved she walked over to the little elves.

“Professur! We is sorry we late, but we had to pack up the castle,” Pappy cried.

“Pack up the castle?” Minerva said in confusion.

Pappy nodded and pointed to a line of elves, all of whom were levitating paintings, suits of armor, mirrors, the carriages... it looked like they had taken everything they could get their hands on.

“Dobby will show us to the school, Professur. We puts the Hogwarts stuff away then come back to get the trunks.”

Numbly Minerva nodded to the little elf, then Pappy and Dobby vanished with a pop.

“Can I have everyone’s attention, please?” Minerva called, and then quietly lit the end of her wand. “We have a short walk to the school. Prefects, stay close and help the first years. Do not let anyone fall behind. Teachers, let’s lead the students to the school.” She was loathed to admit she didn’t know where the school was, but a moment later, Winky appeared in front of Minerva.

“I show you, Professur,” whispered the little elf who then shocked Minerva to the core by taking her hand and leading her. The students and teachers fell in behind her.

---

## Hogwarts Castle...

Voldemort looked around in satisfaction. His Death Eaters had taken a lot of casualties in the fight with the acromantulas, but they had pushed them back to the remains of greenhouse number six, then sealed the wall with transfigured stones.

He walked to the front doors of the castle and was surprised to find them ajar. Stepping inside, he frowned. The castle always felt alive. There was the bustle of students, the sound of the staircases moving, the ever-present murmur of paintings conversing. But not this time. This time, there was nothing. He glanced over to the alcove where the house point counters were kept and his eyes narrowed dangerously.

They weren’t there.

“Search the castle!” he snapped. A large group of Death Eaters rushed past him. Voldemort stood for a moment longer, then turned in the direction of the Great Hall and walked towards it.

Voldemort was getting angrier by the minute. The short distance between the Entrance Hall and the Great Hall revealed bare walls. It was as if someone had removed all of the portraits and suits of armor. He didn’t even see any of the uncomfortable wooden benches that had once lined the

Entrance Hall.

He stepped into the Great Hall and was surprised to find the ceiling blank. The hall was unlit, save for some moonlight filtering in through a nearby window. Voldemort's eyes narrowed further and he walked into the hall, looking around. No banners adorned the walls, no skylight charm on the ceiling, not even the floating candles.

He spun when he heard rapidly approaching footsteps. A Death Eater stopped a dozen paces away and looked at his master fearfully.

“Well?” he snarled, his eyes glowing evilly in the dimly lit hall.

“The castle is empty, my lord. There's no sign of anyone here, even the library has been emptied of books!”

Voldemort growled in the back of his throat and pulled his wand. In seconds, the groveling Death Eater was reduced to a pile of ashes on the floor. He stepped back from the smoking pile and waited for a house elf to arrive to clean up the mess, but none came. It slowly dawned on him why the castle felt empty. All the time that Potter had spent taunting him, Hogwarts was being robbed of everything that belonged to him!

“Dolohov!” he screamed.

The older Death Eater quickly ran into the hall and bowed before Voldemort.

“Take a company of men and set up a forward base at Malfoy's estate in Ireland. Once we get Hogwarts presentable, I'll join you there to oversee the search for your fugitives. Perhaps Potter escaped to Ireland, as well.”

“As you command, my Lord!” Dolohov said, then bowed and ran from the hall.

---

## **Haven School of Witchcraft and Wizardry...**

Minerva could see the crowd gathering ahead of her. She passed word back to the teachers to halt the students while she went to meet with the crowd.

A middle aged couple detached themselves from the crowd and walked forward to meet with Minerva. She vaguely recognized the pair of them. Mr. and Mrs. Abbott, the mother of Hannah and her little brother, Michael, a first year.

The three of them stopped only a few feet apart, then the woman impulsively embraced Professor McGonagall, to her great surprise.

“Thank Merlin you've finally arrived!” breathed the woman. “We've been here for nearly a week,

waiting and worrying.”

“Mrs. Abbott...”

“Please, Professor, call me Miriam,” said Mrs. Abbott, interrupting the Professor.

McGonagall smiled thinly and continued. “Miriam, I would like to stay and chat with you both, but I have an entire population of exhausted and frightened students to deal with.”

Mrs. Abbott smiled and her husband nodded. “Yes Professor, we know. That’s why we,” she said, waving an arm at the crowd that had moved up close enough to hear the conversation, “are here. Most of us have children at Hogwarts and we’re here to help you settle them down and reassure them. We’ve been asked to pay close attention to those students whose parents aren’t in Haven yet. We’re willing to take direction from you, Professor. But I’m sure you can understand that we also want to see that our children are alive and safe?” the woman asked, ending on a timorous note.

Minerva relaxed slightly and smiled. “Very well. You’ll have some time to talk to your children when we get to the school. Right now, however, I want to get them moving again and start getting them put to bed. Some of the first years are exhausted and being carried by others, at this point. It’s been a trying day for everyone.”

Mrs. Abbott turned to her husband. “Michael, find Hannah and Mike. Let them see you, then help where you can. I’ll walk with the Professor and explain what they’ve done up at the school.”

Mr. Abbott nodded and took over walking past the column of students, searching for his own children.

Mrs. Abbott gestured and Professor McGonagall resumed walking. Exhausted, the column of students shuffled forward.

“Unlike Hogwarts, Professor, the school has a girls dorm and a boys dorm. They’re separate buildings, connected by a third building, which contains a library, study rooms, practice rooms and several social common rooms. Finally, there’s a covered walkway that connects the common building to the main school itself. Teachers quarters are also connected to the school by covered walkway, but the designer of the school opted to give the teachers cottages on the campus rather than quarters within the building itself.

“It is quite unlike Hogwarts and, while I admit I greatly enjoyed my time at Hogwarts, Lord Potter-Black has built us a school surrounded by a park. It’s a most comforting place.”

Minerva was both appalled and intrigued by the description of the school. After nearly fifty years of teaching at Hogwarts, the new design sounded alien, and yet it seemed to address several key deficiencies that Hogwarts had.

“I hope so, Miriam. Right now, the children need a break,” Minerva commented as they rounded a

bend in the road and the school came into sight. Silently she murmured a prayer of thanks. This horrible day was finally coming to an end.

---

## **Headquarters of the British First Armored Division...**

Sir Charles Worthington read the dispatch handed to him by Brigadier Malfoy. Malfoy had just arrived with special instructions from the Prime Minister, which he hand delivered to Worthington.

“Colonel Tibbets!” shouted Worthington.

There was a moment of silence, then the door opened and a trim, mustached man walked in with precision and snapped off a perfect salute.

“Sir?”

“Colonel, we have a situation. Inform the commanding officers of the ready brigades that I expect them ready to roll out by eight hundred this morning, followed by a complete division roll out by ten hundred. The plan is in the book as Civil Suppression Plan Delta, option Echo.”

“Sir!” acknowledged the Colonel, who then turned and left to issue the orders.

Worthington turned to look at Malfoy. “Damn shame. I had hoped the PM would be able to get a handle on this without our help. Ah well, that’s what her Majesty pays us for.”

Malfoy smiled at the Major General and nodded knowingly. “Quite so, Sir.”

The first idea that something was wrong came when reports started filtering into the home office of movement of military units. Calls to the MOD went unanswered. Couriers dispatched to the MOD never returned. By midmorning, London police had had sporadic encounters with Military units taking control of civilian facilities like power and communication centers. Civilian authorities had been severely routed in every encounter.

A scheduled national address by the Prime Minister came and went with no address and no explanation. It wasn’t until the U.S. State Department announced late in the day that the Prime Minister had been rescued by US Navy Seals from the US Embassy in London that the rest of the world realized a coup was underway in the United Kingdom. The Prime Minister was currently aboard the USS Kitty Hawk, which was steaming its way through the English Channel, along with the rest of the US seventh fleet.

In a scene reminiscent of the evacuation of Saigon, a steady stream of helicopters flew to the US Embassy, loading US personnel and US nationals, along with selected British citizens, for evacuation from the island. Seahawk Helicopters were in continuous flight from dawn while other

Seahawks provided close in air cover and a cap of F/A 18 Hornets flew overhead.

Elements of the British 3rd Mechanized Division had attempted to approach the American Embassy and did manage to fire on the crowd that had formed in front of the building. Several Maverick missiles fired from the orbiting F/A 18 Hornets quickly convinced the 3rd Mechanized to find another place to play.

Around the country, military units, confused by conflicting orders coming from command channels, deployed and began to engage other units, seemingly at random. Civilians panicked and the roads filled with vehicles attempting to flee the cities.

---

### **Padfoot Manor...**

It was late morning and sunlight streamed into the bedroom, shining in Harry's eyes, waking him. Blinking in the bright light, he felt Hermione draped over him, her head on his shoulder. It was a position they often slept in. He reached up and caressed her cheek for a moment, then tried to stretch. It was at that point that he discovered his body was sending him urgent pain messages. He moaned and tried to roll, but he still had Hermione holding him down. Her grip on him tightened and her head came up.

"Harry?"

"Hey, love. Heck of a day yesterday, wasn't it? Ummm... it was yesterday, wasn't it?" he asked uncertainly.

"Yes, and you were remarkably lucky, Mr. Potter, getting off with only a bad case of exhaustion."

"Then why do I hurt all over? And my back itches like crazy!"

"We'll fix that up now that you're awake. A hot soak will take care of it. Your back itches because we had to dig pieces of your second skin out of your back. I'm afraid your second skin is ruined," she said softly.

"I had Remus make extras. Now let's see about that soak," he said in reply. Then he winced as he tried to move again.

Hermione rolled out of bed, helped him out and into the bathroom. She drew a hot bath, adding his mineral salts and helped him into the tub. Then she surprised him by peeling out of her own clothing and climbing into the large tub. She pushed him forward slightly, and slid into place behind him before pulling him back into her embrace.

Harry leaned back against her and smiled. Soaking in the tub would have done wonders for his aching muscles, but leaning against a naked, wet Hermione was performing miracles, especially

when she grabbed a large sponge and began soaping him up.

Hermione stopped and there was a long moment of silence.

“Hermione?”

Her arms went around him and he could feel her shaking. Harry turned around to face her in the tub and was surprised to find her crying silently.

“What’s wrong?”

“I nearly lost you yesterday,” she choked out, and then she tightened her arms and held onto him, weeping. Harry held her for a long time, rubbing her back and stroking her hair. Eventually she calmed down and they were able to talk normally again. The two leaned apart, sitting across from each other in the large tub.

“Look, Hermione, I know yesterday wasn’t a good day for either of us. I remember helping Professor McGonagall, and then the world exploded. It seemed like every nerve in my body screamed in pain as if I was being burned, frozen and electrocuted at the same time. And the strange thing is, I still don’t know why that happened. Then I woke up to find McGonagall leaning over me and I was so angry I could barely think properly,” Harry said, then he paused frowning.

“That was Dean, Harry. Dean Thomas hit you in the back with a killing curse. Then Professor Blackthorne killed him, only to die herself a moment later. By the time I got to the Entrance Hall, there was a full battle going on as the students fought off Malfoy and his Goons. Two of them ran up when everyone ducked and grabbed you and McGonagall. Umbridge was killed in the fight.”

“Dean? Dean Thomas shot me with a killing curse?” Harry said in wonder. Then he shook his head. “I guess we now know who sent that spider after me,” he offered in a wondering tone.

“Dean was a half blood, like yourself, Harry. That’s why even Parvati didn’t suspect him. And he was marked on the bottom of his foot, not on the arm,” Hermione said watching him cautiously. “What did you do at the Ministry?”

Harry tightened his grip on the edge of the tub and his eyes took on a glazed look. “I was so angry. Padfoot and I killed as many as we could... I don’t think I had any real plan, except to destroy as much as I could. In Auror headquarters I was... exploding people. I can’t even tell you what spell I used. They just... exploded. Then I ran into Kingsley Shacklebolt and I remembered Amelia saying how he had turned against the Order of the Phoenix. He pulled his wand on me and I turned his wand and his hand to ashes, then I set him to burn... slowly...”

Harry started to pant as he described his romp through the Ministry, and his body was wracked with shudders. Hermione knew he had to come to grips with what he had done in his own mind. He had to face it. Hermione moved closer to him, but hesitated to touch him until he had settled down again. Harry closed his eyes for a long time and he reached for her. He held her, saying nothing, then he looked down at her again.

“I know you were frightened yesterday, Hermione, and I’m very sorry for that. I never planned on going to the Ministry. I thought we could chase them off. And when I woke up in the holding cell, I didn’t think about coming back right away. That’s probably why Voldemort came to the school last night,” he said quietly.

She shivered and he glanced at her sharply. Despite being in a tub full of hot water that was charmed to remain hot, she was shivering. He reached over and pulled her into his lap. Standing with him to face Voldemort for nearly a full hour had been the bravest thing he could think of. And now, thinking back on it, he wasn’t sure he’d be brave enough to do it either.

He held her tight and, despite the grim circumstances, discovered that he really enjoyed holding a naked and very wet Hermione. He bend down and nibbled on her neck and she sighed and wiggled a little on in his lap. Her fingers began to trace a lazy circle in his hair and she retaliated by nibbling on his neck.

Harry’s last coherent thought was that he really enjoyed a tub large enough for two people.

Two hours later, Harry and Hermione descended the stairs and went into the main dining room in search of some food. Harry was still tired and a bit wobbly, but he felt much better, even if he did need to lean on his cane.

Remus looked up and dropped his cup when he spotted Harry leaning lightly on Hermione as they entered.

“Harry!” he said standing. His shout alerted everyone else. Suddenly Harry found himself being helped to the table by Narcissa, Emma and Dan, while Tonks, Remus, Arthur and Hermione watched in amusement.

“Alright, you lot. I’m alive, if a bit tired and a little sore. But Hermione helped me work out a few kinks,” he said, and then he coughed and blushed. Hermione sat next to him and stared down into her own cup of tea, blushing, while Emma and Narcissa snickered.

Emma nudged Hermione and grinned, much to her embarrassment. “Nice to have him up, eh? Well, a happy patient is a healing patient.”

Narcissa frowned. “Harry, you shouldn’t have gotten out of bed today. You had quite an ordeal yesterday…”

“I know, Narcissa, and that’s exactly why I had to get up. There are things I absolutely have to do today and I’m the only one that can do them,” he said quietly. “I promise, once that’s done, I’ll climb back into bed and stay there for a while.”

He then turned to Remus. “Please send word to the school. I need to see the Outcasts here as soon as possible, even if they have to be taken from class. Also, inform Professor McGonagall that I’ll address the school after dinner this evening. Then, let the folks in Haven know that I’ll be addressing the school and that they’re invited to attend. I’ll do it on the lawn in front of the

school. We have a lot we need to accomplish and a very short amount of time to do it in.”

---

## **AP News feed, mid afternoon, April 15th...**

*Norfolk Virginia, U.S.A.*

*Office of CINCLANT:*

*A public affairs officer for the US Navy confirmed this afternoon that the Prime Minister of Britain and some key members of his cabinet, as well as some respected members of Parliament, are now aboard the USS Kitty Hawk of the US Seventh Fleet.*

*The Seventh Fleet was pulled from active duty and sent to the Atlantic when the British Government offered the entire deep-water compliment of the Royal Navy for voluntary impounding at US Naval bases. The US Sixth Fleet, which is normally on station in the Atlantic, is providing security for the Royal Navy, including their three Polaris Nuclear Submarines.*

*CINCLANT further confirms ongoing rescue efforts are being conducted to extract embassy employees and other American nationals from the country.*

*In related news, the UN Security council met in emergency session in New York earlier this morning and has decided they will recognize the British Government in exile, granting them their full rights as a member of the permanent Security Council.*

*Wall Street is down nearly three hundred points as numerous multinational and British based companies scramble to restore operations. Trading on most British based companies has been suspended, as has speculation on the British pound, which has hit its lowest point in over a century. Experts agree that, unless drastic action is taken shortly, the Pound may be worth less than the Yen in short order.*

*The chairman of the Federal Reserve commission announced today an interest rate hike in an attempt to stabilize the dollar. The collapse of the British Government came unexpectedly late last night after a nuclear weapon exploded in the southern region of the country.*

---

## **Padfoot Manor...**

Harry sat in one of the first floor studies and listened to people as they updated him on what had happened while he had slept.

“I can’t believe you trusted those children, Harry! And who told you I gave you permission to get out of bed young man! You were hit with a killing curse, for Merlin’s sake!” Danni stormed.

Harry smiled at the healer. “Look Danni, I’ll talk to the twins. I know they get a bit carried away.”



“Carried away? Do you know they sent people to the hospital here thinking they were being taken hostage by a terrorist group that wanted the islands of Britain and Hawaii to trade places?”

Harry tried not to laugh. Instead, he reached out and snagged her hand. “Was anyone hurt?”

Danni rapidly deflated and her shoulders slumped in defeat. “No... not really, just some embarrassment.”

“Danni, the twins are wild and crazy, but sometimes that’s exactly what’s needed. By tonight, that story will be doing the rounds of the communal kitchen in Haven and people will be laughing. And they need to laugh. It’s a different type of medicine than you deal with, but it’s a medicine nevertheless,” Harry offered her gently.

Danni laughed ruefully, then shook her head and glared at him. “And what about you leaving your bed, Mr. Potter?”

“There are a few things I absolutely have to do today in order to make people feel safe. I’ve been sitting here in this chair, or the chair in the dinning room, since I got up. Tonight I have to talk to a bunch of people, but after that I’m going to back to bed. I promise.”

“You better, or I’ll dose you myself and see that you don’t wake up for two days,” she replied with a grin of her own.

“If it will make you feel better, stay close to me and Hermione tonight. I’m sure she’d feel better with you there. And I know I would,” Harry offered.

“I’ll do that,” she said, then she stood and went in search of Hermione.

A moment later the door opened again and Remus walked in with Tonks behind him. Between the two, they carried several armloads of books.

Remus dropped the books down on one table, then sat heavily in a chair. Tonks sat on the edge “Harry,” Remus said, waving a parchment, “I’ve looked at your arithmantic equations and I can’t find anything wrong with them. But Arithmancy isn’t my best subject, either. I’m going to suggest that you have Professor Vector double check your notes. Danni is insisting that you can’t proceed with this ritual, or the casting, for at least three or four days.”

Harry looked thoughtfully at Tonks and Remus for a moment before nodding. “Alright, I’ll have Dobby pop over to the school and give the notes to Vector. In the meantime, we’re going to need to assemble the coven and ensure that there is adequate security here in the manor, since so many of us will be exhausted. This is a top priority, Remus. It’s the only way we can contain the infection of Voldemort.”

Remus nodded, then looked up as Harry’s friends walked into the room. Danni followed Hermione closely and she eyed Harry suspiciously before moving to stand near a wall. Everyone else took seats around Harry.

“Well, there’s no way to say this easily, so I’ll just come out with it, and the explanation for it. Effective immediately, I’m dropping out of school,” Harry said quietly.

Hermione looked ready to explode and several others frowned at him. Even Remus and Tonks frowned at him. He held up his hand to stop people from yelling at him.

“I said I’m dropping out of school, that doesn’t mean I’m going to skip taking my NEWTS. The simple fact is, with everything going on, I won’t have time to spend in a structured school setting. I’ll hire tutors and resort to self study to take my NEWTS, I just won’t be doing it through the school.”

“Then I’m doing it with you, Harry,” Hermione said with quiet conviction.

He arched an eyebrow at her and her expression hardened. A moment passed before he nodded, then turned back to face his friends.

“Each of you sixth years will have that option and, if you decide to follow me, I’ll make sure we all get sufficient tutoring for our NEWTS. You two fifth years,” he said, nodding to Ginny and Luna, “are stuck until you complete your OWLS. We’ll help you in every way we can and include you as much as possible, but until you complete your OWLS, you must stay at the school.”

Ginny and Luna both frowned at him. Neville and Draco moved to offer support to their girlfriends.

“I wish it were otherwise, but my hands are tied for now,” Harry concluded.

“Harry, what are you going to be doing then if you’re not going to be in school?” asked Remus.

“What I was prophesized to do, Remus. Though I can’t kill Voldemort at the moment, that doesn’t mean I can’t fight him. I’ll be a thorn in his side until the time comes for us to face each other. I’ve talked with Miles about advanced dueling techniques and I’m sure there are plenty of libraries here in Ireland with material I can learn that will help in our fight.

“Hermione will be there every step of the way with me,” he continued firmly. “I don’t want her there when I face Voldemort again, but I know I can’t keep her away either. This is perhaps even more of her fight than it is mine. She fights not only for those muggle born, but muggles everywhere,” Harry said in ringing tones.

Hermione reached out and placed a gentle hand on his knee. Her eyes shone with pride as she listened to him.

“Alright, tonight I talk to the school and to the people of Haven. I have to reassure them. Today is the fifteenth of the month. In five days time we will conduct a ritual that will require all of us, plus five as yet unknown people.”

“A full coven?” asked Ginny eagerly.

Harry nodded. “Exactly. The Power Sharing Ritual of the Gen is an old Celtic ritual. Basically, you’ll be lending me your power so that I can take steps to lock Voldemort in Britain.”

Seven students and three adults looked at him, intrigued. No one in living memory had participated in a Light Coven rite. The results were supposed to be unlike any other experience a witch or wizard could partake in.

“Well, that’s all I have to say. Those of you in sixth year think about what you’re going to do. In the meantime, let’s go talk to our classmates.”

---

## **Haven School of Witchcraft and Wizardry...**

It had been a hectic day for Minerva and it was finally coming to an end. There had been no classes and probably wouldn’t be for at least another couple of days. Not until the Irish Ministry of Magic certified the school, well no real classes anyway. And as far as she knew, no one had even addressed that subject yet. In the meantime they would continue holding classes as normal even if they weren’t certified. It would keep the children occupied.

The arrival of the students the night before and the events leading up to their departure marked a major upswing in the number of arrivals to Haven. Last night alone saw the arrival of all of the staff of St. Mungos and their families, as well as any patient too ill to be sent home. The receiving center also processed another sixty incoming families from Britain. Mostly families of students. This meant that over two hundred families had been accounted for and gotten to safety.

Tonight the school was playing host to some nineteen hundred people, counting the students. Harry had requested a general meeting of everyone at Haven and it had been decided to hold the meeting at the school. Special charms had been laid down to keep the area warm and comfortable and the house elves seemed to be everywhere as they set up the massive meal.

Minerva sat at a head table atop a raised platform and she winced slightly every time she heard the sounds of a tearful reunion. Her chance of that had vanished long ago, and while she didn’t have any regrets, she did have the occasional wistful thought about a family of her own.

She started when a hand landed gently on her shoulder. Glancing up, she saw Harry smiling at her. She was struck by just how different he seemed from James. James had been an eternal child and Lily used to despair that he’d never grow up. Harry, on the other hand, was born an old soul and had never had a childhood. Staring at him, she wasn’t sure if it was a trick of the light, or if he truly had gray hair growing at his temples.

“While you are a very formidable lady, Minerva, every Gryffindor in the last fifty years has thought of you as family,” Harry said quietly. “You’ve cared for those of us in your house, stood up for us against the other houses when needed, helped fight our battles and heal our wounds, though the more intelligent of us know that you’re quite capable of stripping the flesh from our bones with just a lecture. While you may not have children of your body, you have a rather large extended family,” he concluded, waving his hand at the students assembled before them.

Minerva's eyes widened slightly as she stared at the young man standing next to her. She'd always thought of the students in her house as her children, she'd been unaware that they returned the sentiment.

"Thank you, Harry," she said, watching as he sat next to her.

When Hermione took an empty seat next to Harry, and Danni stood behind them both, watching Harry like a hawk, Minerva raised a questioning eyebrow at him.

He shrugged. "My healer seems to think I should be in bed instead of taking care of business," he said, smiling slightly to take the sting from his words.

"Harry," Danni said in a voice laced with frustration, "any other patient who'd gone through what you did yesterday would be dead!"

Minerva saw the blood drain from Hermione's face and a shudder wrack her body. She coughed, distracting Harry and Danni, and then used her best Professor's voice. "I think this is a subject best left alone. I trust Mr. Potter will follow your advice once his business is done here tonight?"

Harry nodded and scowled at the Healer. "I have to. She's threatened to dose me with enough Dreamless Sleep potion to put me out for days if I don't."

Danni smiled smugly, while Hermione grinned into her cup. Harry dug into the meal and made small talk with Minerva and Hermione. Occasionally, he'd nod and wave to someone in the crowd in front of the platform. Finally sated, he leaned back in his chair and faced the inevitable.

"Well, I might as well get this over with so I can make my Healer happy," Harry murmured sourly. Hermione grabbed his hand for a moment, trying to convey her support.

Harry stood and walked slowly around the table, leaning heavily on his cane. When he was in front of the table he conjured a tall stool and sat on it. He lifted his cane and cast a charm, lighting up the entire area in fairy lights. The crowd slowly quieted down and Harry amplified his voice so he could be heard.

"For those who don't know me, I am Harry Potter. Some also call me Lord Potter-Black. I'm glad you've all come tonight, as there are a few things that need to be said.

"First, the bad news, and if some of this is confusing to you, there are people in the audience who can explain parts of it. Lord Voldemort has assumed complete control of Wizarding Britain," he paused while the crowd flinched.

"For reasons no one as yet knows, and perhaps never will, a nuclear weapon was detonated in southern England. A nuclear weapon is a muggle creation. It is the single most destructive and dangerous weapon created by muggles. A single one of these weapons can destroy a city, killing thousands or hundreds of thousands and poisoning the land for years to come.

"The explosion of this weapon destroyed the city of Amesbury, in Wiltshire," he said, pausing

while several people in audience cried out in shock. Lavender Brown collapsed, weeping in the arms of Parvati.

“With the explosion at Amesbury,” Harry continued once the crowd had settled, “the muggle government collapsed into anarchy. Even as I speak, the Prime Minister has escaped to an American naval vessel and there is open fighting in the streets of London. Elements of the Muggle Military are apparently under Voldemort’s control and they are fighting to take over the country.

“When the school term began, I knew this time would come. However I was unable to prevent him from accomplishing this for reasons I can’t go into here. Once I realized I couldn’t stop what was happening, I decided to do what I could to save as many lives as possible.

“You few,” he said motioning to them all, “were all I could save. My fellow students, their families and the families of those who believed in what we were doing. Which brings us to the here and now.”

“You are here because it’s safe. You are here because I have invited you here. Some of you will eventually become involved in our attempt to take back Britain. Some of you will bide your time and go home to help in the rebuilding. Some of you will set down new roots and eventually become Irish citizens. Had you not come here, you would have been killed, or been captured and sent to one of the camps being built to house Wizarding Prisoners.

“This is my home and you are guests here. That does not mean I want your fealty. I claim no lordship over you or anyone, anywhere! What I do insist is that you maintain secrecy of this town until we are ready to reveal its existence. I also insist you abide by the basic tenets of English law. Your very lives depend upon it, as do the lives of your new neighbors!”

Harry sat for a moment, then he turned to a table up near the front of the crowd. At the table were five older Slytherin students who had put up a fight during the evacuation. They had been stunned and their wands taken away, and were now kept under a watchful eye.

Harry’s expression hardened. “You lot fought to prevent the evacuation of Hogwarts. From what I hear, two of you wanted to go welcome Voldemort personally. You are a danger to everything we have and are trying to do here. Some want to erase your memories and send you back to Britain. Personally, I’m more inclined to turn you into squibs, and then send you directly back to Hogwarts for your master’s amusement. The last two days have taught me the lesson of ruthlessness well,” Harry said coldly. Everyone around the table flinched and leaned away from the Slytherins.

“I will decide your fate in the coming days. And I will give you a chance to sway my opinion, but I warn you, I am not inclined to show mercy to supporters of that half blood animal, Voldemort,” Harry said, then he stood and started to walk around the table. As he did a ground swell of applause started in the back of the crowd along with cries of “Merlin Bless Harry Potter!”

He paused in front of Danni. “I’m ready to go back to bed. Merlin, I’m so tired,” he whispered.

She nodded and gripped his arm tightly before she signaled to Remus, who had a thestral pulled

carriage that the house elves had stolen from Hogwarts brought around. Danni and Hermione helped Harry into the carriage, and he was leaning against Hermione, dozing, even as the carriage started the short trip to the Manor house.

---

### **Team Weasley in Tamworth, North of Coventry England, April 16th...**

Two tall men hid in the shadows and observed the small brick home from the woods. “Are you sure this is the right place this time?” asked Fred in an annoyed tone.

“Of course I’m sure,” replied an indignant George.

“You said that the last time and it turned out to be a fish store!” exclaimed Fred.

“So I made a mistake. You didn’t have to compound the mistake by tripping and spilling that barrel of pickled herring all over yourself,” George sniffed.

“I didn’t trip! You pushed me!”

“Oh blimey! Come on, we’ll stand here all night arguing and we have a family to pick up. What are the names? Sven and Olga Johansen, mother to Johan Johansen, an ickle firsty,” replied George.

“Any other kids?” asked Fred.

“Yeah, twin girls, squibs apparently, Helga and Inga, age nine,” replied George.

“Alright. My turn to do the talking this time?” asked Fred.

“Righto. And don’t muck it up this time. Danni is still mad at us for what we told the emergency room healers,” George said with a note of complaint in his voice.

“How was I supposed to know that Danni really *had* worked a summer as an exotic dancer to earn money for Healer school? I was just making it up!” Fred offered as an apology.

“Oh right... let’s just do this!” George said, grabbing his brother’s arm and dragging him across the clearing towards the small brick house.

Stepping up to the rear of the building, George knocked on the door. A moment later, it was opened by a burly blond man.

“Ja?”

“Mr. Sven Johansen, father of Johan Johansen who is attending Hogwarts?” asked Fred, impressed by the very large man.

“Ja! What is wrong? Did something happen to Johan?” asked the man, now concerned.

“No sir, Johan is fine, but may we speak to you and your wife please? It is quite important,” Fred replied trying to look sincere.

“Ja! Ja! Vilcomen! Come in please,” said the man then he turned and bellowed. “Mama! Ve haf guess! Comin!”

Sven led Fred and George into a nice kitchen, offering them seats at the table. A moment later a short round blonde entered the room and her eyes lit up seeing her guests.

“Mama! Come see. Friends of Johan!” said Sven.

“Mr. Johansen, we came here for a particular reason and we need to talk to you and your wife.”

“Papa! They are twins! Oh, aren’t they cute!” gushed Mama. “I can’t wait to introduce them to Helga and Inga!”

“Now Mama, be reasonable and let’s try not to scare these boys. They say they are here on bizness,” replied Papa.

George buried his head in his hands and shook it back and forth. This was not going well at all!

“Mr. Johansen, Mrs. Johansen, please! We are here on serious business. Please sit and let us talk.” Fred pleaded, then glared at George who had started laughing at the situation. Meanwhile Mama and Papa continued to hold a conversation, occasionally slipping into Swedish...or maybe it was German. Fred couldn’t tell.

Finally Fred pulled his wand and fired a small concussive charge in the room, deafening everyone.

“Thank you! Now please, sit, I have news which you must hear,” Fred said loudly, then he glanced at George sharply. In the distance he had heard the distinctive crack of apparating wizards. George pulled his wand and stood near the door watching out a window.

“All right, we have no time. We’re here to take you and your daughters to Johan. With the unrest in the country, Johan has been evacuated to another country and we’re here to take you there as well. Mrs. Johansen, could you please get your daughters? I’m terribly sorry about this, but it seems we’ve run out of time to do things the nice way,” Fred said in a rush, pulling out a small plastic circle and expanded it. He glanced at George and held up a hand showing five fingers.

Five wizards were approaching the house.

Sven’s eyes narrowed and he spat something in a commanding tone to his wife, who bolted from the room. Fred handed Sven the hula hoop and told him to hold onto it, then he went and took up position across the door from his brother.

“They’re just about ready, George. Any ideas?” asked Fred.

Sven shrank back from the window. He could tell from the change in attitude of these two young

men that the situation had suddenly become very dangerous. A moment later Olga came back into the room dragging two very blond, very twin and very grown up girls.

George glanced back into the room and blinked in surprise when he saw the girls. Someone had obviously made a mistake somewhere, because these girls looked to be nineteen, not nine. He was about to turn to say something to Fred when Fred lunged at him. There was an exploding sound that made his ears ring and he found himself laying on the floor of the kitchen, covered in debris.

Fred fired off two *Reducto* r curses before collapsing from a severe injury to his shoulder and chest. His brother pulled him out of the way and was about to fire out into the yard when two more explosions rocked the room. He looked around wildly. He saw one of the wizards Fred had taken down lying on the ground, and two more doubled over, bleeding heavily.

The two uninjured wizards were backing out of the yard. He looked behind him to spot Sven reloading a double-barreled shotgun. Then he saw the hula-hoop leaning against the wall. He grabbed Fred by the shoulders and dragged him into the center of the room.

He picked up the hula-hoop and tightened his grip on Fred. “Everyone grab this! Before they come back!” he shouted.

He checked to make sure everyone was touching the hoop and he activated the portkey. A second later the farmhouse was empty.

---

## **Haven Hospital...**

The night duty medi-witch and Healer both glanced up as the alarm rang, signifying the activation of an emergency portkey used by one of the extraction teams.

In a cushioned area, less than a minute later, six people appeared. Four seemed to be in shock from the trip itself. George dropped the hula-hoop and turned to Fred.

Fred lay on the ground, his back and shoulder torn up from the *Reducto* r curse that was meant for George.

George dropped to his knees next to his brother, tears streaming down his cheeks. “Fred! Don’t leave me!” he cried.

The medi-witch and Healer rushed over to the group, pushing George out of the way. Olga Johansen, recognizing George’s shock for what it was, moved to his side and put her arms around him. In a minute, the Healer and the witch had levitated Fred and moved him into one of the treatment rooms, leaving everyone else standing in the emergency room.

“Papa? Where do you think we are?” asked Olga in a worried tone.

“I’m not sure, Mama. But I think we need to find someone who can help us, and we need to find



this boy's family. He should be with them at a time like this."

"How can we find anyone when we don't know where we are, Papa?" asked one of the blond twins softly. The trip by portkey had frightened them badly.

There was a popping sound behind them and everyone turned to a short being dressed in a smart looking uniform. Dobby looked over the newcomers, not sure why he felt they needed him, then he spotted George.

"Mister Wheezy! What is wrong, Mister Wheezy? Where is your brother?" cried the little elf.

Sven looked down at the little elf in amusement, although he had no idea what it was.

"Little creature, his brother was injured and we don't know where to go."

"Dobby take care of that. Follow Dobby and Dobby will take you to Master Remus. He'll know what to do."

George managed to get a grip on himself finally and he nodded in agreement. "Yes, I need to speak with Remus. The extraction teams are in danger."

Dobby and George led the Johansens towards the manor house and into a study before Dobby went to get Remus, Arthur and Bill.

George sat heavily on the couch, his shoulders slumped. It had been a long day and it was promising to be even a longer night. The image of his brother's broken body flashed through his mind and he shuddered. When he closed his eyes tightly, trying to block the image, he felt two bodies sit next to him on either side.

"Hi, I'm Helga," said one blond twin.

"And I'm Inga," said the other.

"Do you find your twin as annoying as I find my twin?" asked Helga.

"I'm not the annoying one, you're the annoying one," protested Inga.

"You always finish..." started Helga.

"Don't you say it. I do not finish your words," Inga said, finishing Helga's words.

George looked at the two girls and was immediately struck by their beauty. "Fred better survive! I can't wait to introduce the two of you to him."

The door opened and Remus and Arthur entered the room. George stood and looked at his father nervously. Arthur frowned. "Where's Fred?" he asked.

“We were ambushed, Dad. We were extracting the Johansens here when we were ambushed by five Death Eaters,” George’s hands twisted in front of him and he dropped his eyes. “The healers are working on him. Fred jumped in front of curse meant for me,” he whispered.

Arthur blinked and his eyes filled with tears. Before George could move, Arthur pulled him into a hug.

“Dobby?” Remus called.

The little elf appeared with a pop and snapped a salute off to Remus. Privately, he vowed to catch whoever was letting Dobby watch old British World War Two movies.

“Dobby, go to the Hospital and see if you can get any information on the condition of Fred Weasley.”

Dobby saluted again and vanished with a pop.

“I know Tonks gave him the uniform, but who’s letting him watch war movies?” Remus muttered, before he realized he’d been ignoring the Johansens. He turned to face Sven.

“I apologize. I’m Remus Lupin, seneschal to Lord Potter-Black. I realize this has been a confusing and frightening night for you and your family, but you’re safe now,” he said, motioning for Sven and his wife to sit down.

A moment later, Bill appeared in the doorway dragging a pale looking Fred into the room. “Look what I found at the Hospital. They patched him up and sent him home, but no one waited around for him,” Bill offered.

Arthur moved quickly to embrace his son, then steered him over to a couch and sat him down. Remus smiled at the incredulous looks from the Johansens and started to explain.

George sat next to his brother on the couch. Both of the young men seemed totally bedazzled by the Johansen twins. Helga and Inga seemed to make up their minds without actually speaking to each other and picked a twin. Helga sat next to George and Inga next to Fred.

George sat listening to Remus, while Fred dozed. Despite being patched up by the healers, he was exhausted and still in a bit of pain. Mama Johansen looked at the two red headed twins, then looked at her daughters and smiled knowingly.

---

## **Hogwarts Castle...**

Voldemort looked up as two Death Eaters dragged the prisoner into the Great Hall. At the far end of the hall, where the head table had once been, he had installed his throne like chair. Next to it was a nesting place for Nagini.

He reached down and stroked Nagini a few times before looking up at the prisoner.

“Ah yes, our former potions master. You are in luck, Severus. I’ve decided to keep you around, after all. Dumbledore may be a foolish old man, but he wasn’t stupid. Having you research the power amplifying rituals makes sense, now that I’ve seen Potter in action for myself,” the Dark Lord said. Then he waved his arm, causing Severus to look around.

“Back to the old alma mater, eh Severus? To think what these halls could say if they could talk. But now they answer to me and me alone! I am master of Hogwarts finally!” he gloated, then he turned to the Death Eaters holding him.

“Take him to one of the cells in the dungeon. See that he’s fed enough to stay alive for now. Once I’ve set up the space, we’ll set him to researching the Ritual of Anthrokrak again,” he commanded.

Voldemort watched in a pensive mood as the Death Eaters dragged Snape from the hall. Taking over Hogwarts had turned into a Pyrrhic victory for him. He had won the hallowed out shell of a building and it had only cost him fifty of his servants fighting giant spiders in order to obtain it.

The castle had been emptied of portraits, books, instruments, furniture, owls, and elves. The kitchens had been deliberately sabotaged and would take weeks to fully repair. Even the carriages used by the students had been removed from the grounds and hidden somewhere.

Voldemort frowned and thought about his forces. Right now he was very low and using the muggle military to back him up in places. McNair was recruiting among the Wizarding community here in England and by tomorrow Dolohov would begin doing the same in Ireland. His position was solidifying slowly, but it was still precarious.

---

## **Ballincollig, County Cork, Ireland...**

Albus Dumbledore sat near the window of the cheap room he had rented. His clothing was decidedly un-wizardish. And while no one with any sense of decorum would have admitted it to him, it was about fifty muggle years out of date as well. He had taken some pains to fit into the muggle world. His long hair was tied off in a pony tail and he had taken the opportunity to shorten his beard to a more manageable length.

Looking out the window, he was amazed by the amount of activity he saw. Trucks and cars were continually rumbling by on the road. Overhead he could see aircraft heading to the international airport in Cork, just up the road. The television in the room was turned on and, like so many televisions around the world today, all regular programming had been preempted in favor of news coming out of Britain.

Dumbledore frowned as they recapped the news about the nuclear weapon and the expected death

toll and damage areas. He didn't understand why the French, Dutch and Norwegian Governments were up in arms about something they called fallout. He knew it was muggle stuff, and that somehow Voldemort was behind it. He turned off the TV and turned on his Wizing Wireless receiver. Reception had been sporadic at best all day. Finally he caught a message on the small box that said they would repeat the news on the hour, if they could.

He sat back and listened to the scratchy sounds coming from the small box and reached for a cup of tea. He paused when an uncharacteristic sound came from the box.

*"This message is for all wizards and witches within the sound of my voice. This will be the last transmission of the British Wizing Wireless Network,"* said the shaky voice.

*"With the destruction of the Ministry of Magic two days ago, Lord Voldemort has come out and openly claimed the British Isles as his personal kingdom. We have confirmed reports of the destruction of Hogsmeade, St. Mungos is empty, and Hogwarts is now under control of Voldemort who, it is said, is using the building as his own base of operations."*

Dumbledore bowed his head and a single tear leaked down his cheek. Despite everything that had gone wrong this past year, he never really believed that Hogwarts would fall.

*"There are stories of whole families vanishing without a trace. It is rumored that the entire population of Hogwarts escaped this same way. Rumors from abroad abound with tales of underground movements to free Britain. The Irish Ministry of Magic confirmed that they are in contact with such an organization, but refused to give any details... Hold on...What? Ladies and Gentlemen, I've been told by my producer that our location has been found and we must flee. This is the British Wizing Wireless Network signing off. God Save the Queen and Merlin help Harry Potter save us all!"*

Dumbledore leaned back in shock. There was a burst of static and then the box started to play Rule Britannia, then even that was cut off without warning, replaced by silence.

Dumbledore stood and paced the room angrily. Potter could have stopped this from happening. But instead, he'd chosen to run like a coward. Merlin help Potter if Albus Dumbledore got his hands on him!

Then he sat and began to plan. There were few Order assets in Ireland, but there was an International Gringotts and several hidden accounts he could tap into. If Harry Potter was on this God forsaken island, he'd find him and make him do what he was supposed to do. Fight Voldemort!

---

## **Padfoot Manor, April 17th...**

Narcissa had just finished a large batch of letters to send out to the families that had been missed

with the first batch. She looked up in relief and smiled when she saw Harry, Hermione and Draco enter the room.

“Mum, you heard that Harry and Hermione are dropping out of school,” Draco started hesitantly.

“Yes and I heard that Hermione’s parents weren’t happy with her, but really couldn’t come up with any good reasons to make her stay either. Why? Are you asking for permission to do the same thing, Dray?”

Draco blushed at the use of his private name and he started at the floor for a moment, then he looked at Narcissa and nodded.

Narcissa reached up and took one of Draco’s hands. “Draco, for nearly seventeen years now you have been my sole reason for living. But I cannot and will not hold you back from fighting for what you believe in,” she said, and then she choked up. “My little boy has grown into a fine young man who I’m very proud of, and I know he’ll make me even prouder.”

Narcissa turned to Harry with a critical eye, looking at him carefully for a moment. “Harry, I knew your parents in school, although I am sorry to say I did not know them well. We traveled in different social circles. But I think it’s safe to say your parents are watching you with pride. And they would definitely approve of your choice of mate.”

Harry blushed and looked at Hermione lovingly. “She’s not quite my mate, but that’s one of the things I plan to correct as soon as possible, Narcissa.”

“You do that, Harry. She’s too valuable to let her get away,” Narcissa said with a smile.

“I don’t intend to let her get away,” Harry said with a grin. The door to the room opened and Remus poked his head in.

“Harry, our contact with the Irish Ministry of Magic is here. He’d like to meet with you, if possible.”

Harry nodded and thought for a minute. “Remus, take our guest to the main dining room. I’ll be along shortly,” he said, and then turned back to Draco. “Stay and talk with your mother, enjoy your time. Hermione and I will deal with this.”

Draco nodded and Narcissa’s eyes lit up at the thought of spending time with her son.

Harry moved to open the door, then paused and called for Dobby, who appeared a moment later. “Dobby, please ask the Grangers, Arthur Weasley, Amelia Bones, and Minerva McGonagall to come to the main dining room as soon as possible for an important meeting.”

Dobby clicked his heels and snapped off a salute before vanishing once more. Harry stared darkly at Hermione. “You do realize I’m going to have to kill your father for introducing Dobby to bad British war films? Look what he’s done!”

Hermione snickered.

A short while later, Harry and Hermione walked into main dining room. Remus waved him over to meet a tall, very freckled man.

“Lord Potter-Black! I finally get to meet you. An honor sir, a great honor indeed. Michael O’Dalley, Irish Department of Magical Law Enforcement and, for the time being, your liaison with the Irish Ministry of Magic,” said the man, shaking Harry’s hand.

Harry smiled. The man’s grin and attitude was infectious! He motioned for him to sit, then took the seat next to him.

“Mr. O’Dalley, I am very pleased to see you here. I’m sorry we couldn’t meet earlier than this. Before we begin, I’d like to introduce you to my girlfriend and most trusted advisor, Hermione Granger. Hermione and Remus Lupin are the only people I allow to speak for me.”

Hermione blinked and stared at Harry for a moment in confusion and Michael O’Dalley started to laugh.

“Ach Lass, the girlfriend is usually the last to hear those words,” he said with a chuckle.

Harry managed to look sheepish but he nodded to Hermione. “It’s true, Hermione,” he finally said in a very quiet voice.

Hermione searched his eyes for a moment, and then nodded. Her expression, however, clearly said they would be discussing it later. Satisfied, Harry turned back to O’Dalley.

“Mr. O’Dalley, I hope you won’t mind, but I’ve taken the liberty of inviting some people here to meet with you. While we are largely able to handle a lot of things ourselves, some of them are clearly going to need the help of your government.”

The door opened, admitting Amelia Bones, Arthur Weasley and Minerva McGonagall. A moment later, Dan and Emma Granger entered the room and took seats.

Remus introduced everyone and there was silence for a moment.

Harry shrugged mentally, knowing there wasn’t time for polite pleasantries, even if the people in the room had been inclined to exchange them. “Mr. O’Dalley, what’s your government’s opinion on the British Ministry of Magic?”

“Well, my Lord, I do believe that the current Ministry has been replaced. As of a few hours ago, Lord Voldemort had declared dominion over all of the British Isles. The Ministry of Magic has ceased to exist,” he concluded.

“Then I’ll ask you to put it to your Minister if he is willing to recognize the British Ministry of Magic in exile, formed around Amelia Bones, former chief officer of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, as well as Judge and Wizengamot member and Arthur Weasley, former Head

of the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Office.”

“Harry, are you crazy?” blurted Amelia, only to stop, seeing O’Dalley holding up his hand.

“What Lord Potter proposes is a valid point of international law. With Irish recognition of a government in exile, we are really denying legitimacy to any government Voldemort may attempt to form. It also means we won’t accept any embassies of his on our soil. It’s a shrewd move, my Lord, and one I will try to present in as favorable a light as possible to my government,” he said with a slight bow.

Harry nodded in acceptance of his praise and pushed on. “We have few needs, Mr. O’Dalley. Most of them we are capable of arranging for ourselves with the local muggle and Wizarding communities. But we have two pressing problems and I find myself in need of the assistance of your Government.”

Everyone looked at Harry in surprise. No one knew exactly what he was talking about.

“My Lord?” asked O’Dalley curiously.

“We managed to escape with nearly the complete student and teaching population of Hogwarts, sir. That’s close to five hundred student wizards and witches. In addition to those students, we have another three hundred primary school children. We have the facilities and the teachers on hand to teach them. What we lack is the accreditation from your Government. We would also like to explore opening up an institute for higher studies, as well as allowing any Irish Wizarding children to attend the Haven School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.”

Minerva looked at Harry when it dawned on her what he was talking about. Squashing the urge to kiss the young man in gratitude, she quickly nodded her agreement instead.

O’Dalley nodded and made a notation in a small book. “If I may, my Lord, how many people do you now have living in Haven and the surrounding areas?”

Harry reached into a pocket and pulled out a small scrap of parchment. “As of eight hundred this morning, we had a total of one thousand two hundred and fifty seven adults, of which three hundred thirty eight are muggles or squibs and nearly eight hundred school aged children, with another ninety preschool age children.”

“Saints preserve us! Two thousand one hundred and forty seven people?” O’Dalley gasped.

Harry nodded grimly. “The number goes up every morning, sir. We have teams that leave every night, rescuing families of students, or people whose skills we may need. I also need to warn you. There will come a point where we will use Haven as a staging area to go after Voldemort.”

O’Dalley scribbled more notes in his book before he smiled thinly at Harry. “While the Irish Government doesn’t normally condone planned raids on sovereign nations, since that nation is cruelly oppressed under an unfair and unjust form of government, we’ll probably not say anything,

especially if these raids are sanctioned by an official government in exile. At least, that's what my Prime Minister would say if he recognizes Madam Bones and her Government."

"I think we understand each other very well, Mr. O'Dalley," Harry said with a large smile.

---

## **Lossiemouth, Northern Scotland (April 18th)...**

Lossiemouth, a small Scottish village on the edge of the North Sea, had once thrived on the mainstay of the whaling industry. Now it survived by being quaint enough to attract tourists during the summer months. During the winter, spring and fall, the regulars hunkered down and let Mother Nature rage.

The landscape around Lossiemouth was dotted with failed farms and other signs of mankind's intrusion that didn't last.

Ian Bell cringed and looked at his wife of nearly twenty years. Muriel shivered with fear and shook her head, but the scratching at the door persisted. They had been on the run for nearly two weeks now and were running out of places to hide. Muriel's family was large and muggle, with many places they could have hidden, but that endangered them.

Muriel shrank back into the corner and clutched her ten-year-old daughter, Elsbet, to her breast. Ian looked at the food they had, and where they were hiding, the cellar of a burned out farmhouse, and sighed in defeat. The last bit of news they had heard was that Hogwarts had fallen to Voldemort. They could only assume their oldest daughter was dead, and Elsbet would never get the chance to walk the halls of Hogwarts as a student.

Ian realized they had reached the end of their rope and perhaps it was time to indulge in a little Christian providence. He opened the door and was surprised to see a large international delivery owl fly in. The owl landed on a large barrel and offered its leg with the attached parchment.

Ian removed the parchment and prayed this would be what they needed. Relieved of its burden, the owl flew back out. Ian closed the door quickly before walking over to the small table. He lit the stub of a candle they had with his wand. Performing magic these days was dangerous; it was how the Death Eaters caught those who tried to flee.

Unraveling the parchment, he began to read aloud for his family.

*Dear Mr. & Mrs. Bell,*

*This letter is to let you know that your daughter, a student of Hogwarts was safely evacuated to a school outside of the country. Due to conditions within Britain, we cannot divulge where your child is.*

*This letter is charmed so only you and your immediate family may read it. This letter will also act*



*as a portkey, should you wish to come to where your child is. If you wish to come to your child, have every member of your family touch the letter, then tap it once with your wand. Please note that the portkey will only work for immediate family members.*

*If you do not wish to use the portkey, the letter will turn to ashes thirty minutes after it's been read.*

*Sincerely,  
Minerva McGonagall,  
Headmistress of the Haven School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.*

“It’s a trap!” hissed Muriel, clutching at Elsbet.

“But what if it isn’t, Muriel?” asked Ian plaintively.

“It’s got to be a trap, Ian! We would have heard something about Hogwarts students escaping,” she retorted.

“Muriel, be reasonable. We’re trapped here. We have enough food for one day, if you don’t mind moldy potatoes, eaten cold. Elsbet is running a fever. Even the camps would be better than this. We have no where to turn to.”

“So what are you saying? Give up? Roll over and die?” Muriel countered, starting to weep.

“No Muriel, I’m saying we take a chance!” he said, then he pointed to the door. “That way leads to our deaths, we know that. This” he said, waving at the parchment, “offers hope. Maybe a cruel and vain hope. But it’s hope!”

Muriel shuffled forward and looked into the eyes of her man, then she laid her hand on the parchment. Elsbet followed her example. Ian touched the parchment and then tapped his wand to it, while gazing into his wife’s eyes.

---

## **Haven Receiving Center...**

A small chime alerted everyone on duty of the approaching portkey. Four men filed into the room and took up positions in each corner, wands drawn. A healer stood in the doorway, ready to step aside in a moments notice if the people arriving were looking for a fight. It hadn’t happened often, but the one time it had, they had been very glad they’d taken the precaution.

The alarm chimed again and three people suddenly arrived in the small room. The girl stumbled and fell, her small frame wracked with fever induced shivers. The healer immediately moved forward, while the team leader motioned to his men to lower their wands. He summoned a clipboard and looked at the two adults. The woman was clutching the man and swaying in relief seeing the man dressed in Healer green working on her daughter.

“Names, please?”

“Ian and Muriel Bell, and our daughter, Elsbet,” mumbled the man in shock. He wasn’t sure if they had been captured or if they were safe.

The man nodded and consulted his list. “Yes, here you are. Parents of Katie, a seventh year student.” He wrote something on a parchment and laid it on a box marked ‘outgoing’. A moment later an owl flew into the room and picked up the parchment.

“Are we prisoners?” whispered the woman.

“No, Mrs. Bell, you’re not prisoners. Team Leader Slimmer will explain everything,” said the healer, then he glanced at Slimmer.

“I need to get her to hospital right away. I’ll take one parent with me, Tom,” said the healer.

Muriel looked at Ian and he nodded with a smile. She knelt and grabbed the hand of her daughter. The healer then grabbed their hands and activated another portkey.

“Mr. Bell, if you wish, I will walk with you to the Hospital and explain what is going on,” offered Slimmer.

Ian Bell nodded numbly and followed the man out the door.

---

## **Haven School of Witchcraft and Wizardry...**

Minerva froze. Her eyes tracked the inter-haven owl as it made it’s way along one of the many tables before stopping in front of a student.

These owls brought news, but it wasn’t always good news. Some brought tales of families captured and sent to re-education camps, or killed while resisting capture. So far it seemed to be a slightly better than even mix. More families were being saved than being captured. But a number of families were still missing and unaccounted for.

Seeing which student this letter was for, Minerva was up and moving even as a trembling Katie reached out for the message the bird held.

Katie unraveled the parchment and her eyes moved quickly over the short form. Then she blinked and read it again and again. Minerva placed a hand on the girl’s shoulder and Katie looked up at her Head of House.

“They’re alive, they’re here,” she whispered, as if saying it louder would change the fact. Minerva smiled and breathed a sight of relief.

“I release you from your classes for the afternoon, Miss Bell. Find a house elf, have them locate your family and then go to them,” Minerva said gently.

Katie beamed up at Minerva and nodded eagerly.

---

## **Haven Hospital...**

Elsbet lay in a bed in the children’s ward. She was very sick, but the healers were confident they could beat it. She had a high fever, but it was coming down. The rest of her condition could be attributed to stress and malnutrition.

Ian and Muriel clustered around the bed with Elsbet and watched the healers and medi-witches work on her. The staff actually thought that treating an illness was a nice change from the spell induced damage that they had seen far too much of lately.

When the healers and medi-witches finally left the couple alone with their daughter, Muriel sat heavily on a nearby chair and wept with relief. Ian stood next to his wife and gave what comfort he could, while his eyes were glued to the bed with Elsbet in it. They had been in Haven for just over two hours now and neither one had had a chance to rest, or even have something hot to drink.

Hermione had been visiting the hospital when she ran into Katie. Hermione’s mum had managed to convince the healers that muggle style healing could help in some instances and she spent time in the hospital helping where she could.

She walked past an open door and was surprised to see Katie bouncing with joy at seeing her parents. She didn’t mean to intrude, but Katie dragged her into the room and introduced her parents to her. She had been explaining what Haven was and who was running it to her parents when she spotted Hermione.

Hermione chatted for a while with Katie and her parents, then made her excuses. Before she could turn away, she found herself embraced by Katie.

“You be sure to tell that boyfriend of yours that I thank him. He’s a hero, Hermione. He’s a real life hero. Don’t let him get away,” she whispered.

Hermione’s eyes misted. She nodded, and then smiled at her friend before turning away. As she left the hospital, she frowned slightly. Everyone kept telling her not to let Harry get away. What she kept trying to figure out was why people thought he’d want to, or that she’d let him. With a mental shrug, she set off for the manor.

---

## **Authors Notes:**

Welcome once again to the Author's Notes. This is the point in the file where Alyx and I respond to some of you reviewers comments. This is also the point where we beg and grovel for stuff. This week we're begging for a Krispy Kreme Donut. A Hostess Powered Donut will do as well.

To the persons wanting Harry to become a Platypus Animagus and the one wanting him to become a Pokemon Animagus. Not Happening. But we have emailed your parole officers concerning your blatant use of illegal substances.

The two portkeys that were taken at the Ministry were unfortunately lost in the disaster that befell the ministry. Sorry, but if you think we were going to let it be THAT easy you have another thing coming!

Yes, we nuked Stonehenge. We did it and we enjoyed it. Muwhahahaha.... For all those that can't believe we nuked Stonehenge wait until you see what we do to Euro-Disney in the next book!

Dobby was unable to sense Harry while he was in the heavily warded Ministry building. It was a good question. But we had an even better answer.

Hey you! The guy in the front row that left the review saying you liked the story. That's really great! We enjoy having you here. Now shut up and keep reading!

For all those people that have just now found us after FF.net deleted our story. Why didn't you follow the trail of breadcrumbs we left for you?

There is no truth to the rumor that Ginny will catch any flack over the fact that she once dated Dean Thomas.

We'd like to thank all those readers that insisted on providing complex technical details concerning the explosion of the bomb near Stonehenge. Its wonderful to know we have so many smart readers that go to wonderfully detailed analysis concerning fallout, relative hot zones etcetera for a work of fiction. No really! We do appreciate knowing that the convenience store 8.01 kilometers up the road from the blast will probably still be standing even if it does glow in the dark. COME ON PEOPLE. IT'S FICTION! Why are you trying to analyze a story that is mostly about magic?

BTW The twinkies in that convenience store are probably still ok to eat. Did anyone see a giant cockroach?

Dumbledore is not missing. He's merely going underground for a while.

What does Draco get? Well you'll have to see what he gets in the next book, but we've dropped enough hints about it.

For those that asked. Yes, stapling the monitor to my head was a bad idea. It rained here the other day and I was nearly electrocuted. Does anyone know where I can get a wig cheap?

**Pet Peeves:**

STORY THIEVES!!!! Oh boy does this piss us off. Kinsfire is the latest victim. We've been victimized by these underhanded dirty knicker crowd also and it really sucks. We've nothing more to say on the topic except that story thieves must be exterminated.

## Sunset Over Britain British Lockup and Brotherhood Reborn

### Standard Disclaimer:

The curtain draws back to find Hermione Granger, dressed in a string bikini, dancing around a bound Severus Snape.

Harry walks on stage and pulls a lever, which caused the roof to pull away from the building. Then he gently stands a still bound Severus upright.

“Say the words, Professor, and I’ll be able to set you free,” Harry said solemnly.

“Damn you, Potter, one billion points from Gryffindor!” snapped Snape.

Harry sighed and shook his head. “This isn’t Hogwarts, Professor,” Harry reminded him gently. “Just say the words and you’ll be out of here.”

“The authors of this story, Bob and Alyx, wish to make sure you morons understand that they don’t own the Potterverse. JK Rowling owns everything and they own nothing. And if you can’t understand that, you don’t deserve to be reading this!” snarled Snape.

“Thank you, Professor. *Wingardium Leviosa* !” Harry said, pointing his staff at Snape.

Hermione continued to dance and hum, ‘Fly me to the Moon’ as Snape rocketed out of the building at a fantastic speed.

Alyx turned to Bob. “Did you have to let Snape insult our readers? And what’s with Hermione in the bikini anyway?”

Bob shrugged. “I like bikinis. And I didn’t tell Snape to insult anyone. He’s Snape, not Alan Rickman, who I understand is a nice fellow.”

Alyx crossed her arms and glared at Bob. “Your not going to let that go, are you?”

Bob snickered. “Nope. Just be thankful I don’t tell our readers about the time you tied up the dog to the trailer that wasn’t there.”

“Be my guest,” Alyx said, smiling evilly. “I’ll just have to tell them about the time you set the

stove on fire.”

The authors glared at each other, while Hermione and Harry looked on in amusement.

---

## Sunset Over Britain

### Chapter 25

---

#### Padfoot Manor (April 18th)...

Hermione was in a thoughtful mood since leaving the hospital. Katie and Narcissa’s words echoed in her head. *Does everyone really think I’d let Harry go? Or he’d let me go? It makes no sense*, she thought to herself.

She walked slowly up the path and considered their relationship and Harry’s qualities. He was so gentle it surprised her again and again. He treated her like she was some precious gift. She paused mid-stride. *That could be a problem, couldn’t it? What if he sees me not as a person, but as something precious to treasure? Would that really be a problem?* She shook her head and decided that perhaps she should talk to Harry to try and figure out exactly what his feelings were for her.

Quickening her pace, she covered the ground from the Hospital to the Manor in record time for her. In the foyer she met up with Winky, who told her Harry was upstairs in his private study. She thanked the elf and went upstairs. Opening the door she peeked in and found the room empty. She stepped into the room and paused by Harry’s desk. The desktop was covered with parchments of equations and books on charms and Arithmancy, as well as several ancient rune references.

Spotting something of interest, she bent over the desk to examine Harry’s writing. It was an Arithmancy equation that he had crossed out rather violently with his quill. Frowning, she sat down on his chair and looked over the equations. She couldn’t quite put her finger on what he was working on, but the equations seemed to be right despite his crossing them out.

She felt her hair being moved and lips gently kissing her neck. An arm snaked around her slowly pulled her against the back of the chair. She moaned softly, and then shook her head.

“Harry,” she said firmly. “I think we need to talk.”

Harry released his hold on her and slipped into a chair next to the desk. “Ok, what do you want to talk about?” he said with a sigh. He knew the tone. This was one of those girl things they did every so often where they sat you down and made you ‘express’ your feelings, no matter how uncomfortable it made you.

“Don’t get angry with me, but I’d really like to know how you feel about me.”

Harry looked at her for a moment in surprise. “You know I love you, don’t you?”

Hermione nodded. “Yes I know. But sometimes it almost seems like you want to lock me up someplace safe where I can never get hurt.”

Harry twisted his hands together nervously. “I’m not sure what to tell you. You’re precious to me and I don’t want to lose you. When I realized how I felt about you I also realized that love is the only gift we can truly give a person. I’m the richest wizard in Europe, Hermione, and yet the happiness you give me can’t be bought in any store. You’ve given me something priceless. I never meant for you to feel like I objectify you, but yes, I do want you safe. Is that so very wrong of me?” he asked plaintively.

Hermione blinked and looked at him carefully before mentally kicking herself. She had given him the wrong impression. She stood and walked over to him. Kneeling, she placed her hands on his knees.

“I didn’t mean to hurt you, Harry, or make you think you were doing something wrong. It’s just that lately everyone seems to be telling either one of us not to let the other get away. And it got me wondering if others were seeing something we were missing,” she told him softly.

Harry smiled and caressed her cheek. “You’re not getting rid of me until you’re tired of me, Hermione. And if that never happens then we’re together for life,” he replied, losing himself in her gaze. He lifted her hand and kissed her palm.

“It’s hard for me to put what I feel into words. They always seem so inadequate and silly. How do I feel about you? I’d fight a thousand Dark Lords; give up my life, if it meant you would be safe and happy. I look at you and it makes me happy. Your smiles are brighter than the sun and they shine light into the darkest places within me. I want to spend my life with you. I wish Voldemort were dead and we were married. And yes, I want to spend a lot of time practicing making babies with you before we make some real ones. I know it’s corny and silly sounding, Hermione. But I don’t know any other way of telling you how I feel, except when I touch your aura.”

Hermione blinked in surprise. Then she smiled shyly. “I like it when you touch my aura,” she offered softly.

“So do I, Hermione, but every time I have, I’ve had trouble breaking the connection. It’s like you don’t want to let go of me,” he replied quietly. “I’d like to teach you aura magic, but I’m afraid I’ll connect one day and not be able to sever it.”

“Would that be a bad thing?” she asked him, staring into his eyes. His expression grew troubled.

“I don’t know. And that makes me cautious. Come on,” he said cheekily, “you can help me with our wedding preparations.”

“Wedding preparations?” she exclaimed.

“Right. Step one - kill Voldemort. Step two - marry Hermione. Right now I’m working on step one,” he replied with an infectious grin.



“You still haven’t asked me to marry you,” she said archly, though she suppressed a hint of a smile.

“Oh, I know. I just haven’t figured out the right way to go about it. Then there’s the whole problem with the ring. I think I’ve fixed that, but only time will tell. Shall we get back to the matter at hand though? I had something I wanted to show you.”

Hermione stared at him in frustration. She was so close! Sighing, she nodded, though she wondered if Harry ever would ask her to marry her.

He looked at her for a moment. “Have I ever broken a promise to you?” he asked gently.

Numbed she shook her head. Harry stood and pulled her to her feet, then he wrapped his arms around her. “Soon,” he whispered in her ear, “very soon, I will ask you to marry me. I’m just waiting for the right time. Believe that, sweetheart, believe that we’ll have a life and a family together.”

Hermione wrapped her arms around him in return and held him for a long while. The two stood silent for several moments before a knock on the door caused Hermione to sigh with regret for the interruption.

Harry looked up and smiled, seeing Remus at the door. Harry waved him in, then led Hermione to a chair next to the desk, before taking his own.

“Remus, I’m glad you’re here. I had something I wanted to show you and Hermione,” Harry said.

Remus and Hermione both nodded and Harry pulled out piece of parchment.

“This is a passage I copied from a book concerning the Salem witches in the States. The book was written by Bridget Bishop in 1685, only seven years before she was hung for being a witch in the witch trials,” Harry said, frowning, as he passed the parchment to Remus. Hermione leaned back to read over Remus’ shoulder.

*Jan 1st, 1685.*

*Janet attended our coven tonight. She came with a friend who was apparently a muggle who had married a wizard. Several of the coven members were upset at seeing a stranger, but calmed once they learned she was married to one of our kind. Camilla asked for a coven ritual to help nearby Salem Town, which was beset with Pox.*

*We formed the circle and, by sheer chance, we included Janet’s muggle friend. To our surprise and amazement it was one of the most successful coven rites we have ever held. I have documented the experience and have sent it via owl to Elphrick Everard, the current Headmaster of Hogwarts in Scotland.*

“There you have it. Admittedly it’s brief, but it suggests that there’s something more than just magic happening within the confines of a coven ritual. That’s where all this comes in,” Harry said,

waving at the desk full of parchments.

Both Remus and Hermione glanced at the parchments covered in arithmantic equations.

“I’ve been trying to deconstruct exactly what goes on in a coven rite and I’ve come to suspect that an emotive context in the ritual would be highly beneficial to the rite,” Harry said, then he paused for a moment before dropping his bombshell on them. “And because of that emotive context, I asked myself if there are any non-magical people that I’m very close to here and came up with two names.”

Hermione gaped at him and Remus chuckled. “He’s got a point, Hermione. The emotive context is very important. The more people who participate, even if all they do is think happy thoughts about the ritual, the better off we’ll be. It certainly can’t hurt.”

“B-B-But as much as I love my parents, they’re muggles,” Hermione began. Then she faltered, seeing the disappointed look in Harry’s expression. She suddenly looked at her feet, ashamed with her own reaction.

“Hermione,” Harry started to say. She looked up at him sharply.

“No, you don’t have to say it. I will tell my parents about it myself at dinner tonight. I guess I’m just ashamed to see that even I can fall into that trap,” she said softly.

Remus reached over and put a hand on her arm in sympathy and she shot him a grateful glance. Then he turned back to Harry.

“Have you picked everyone you need for the rite?” he asked.

“Mostly, but I do have one important question, and it’s aimed directly at you, Remus. Can you participate in a blood rite? Can you share your blood with others and not transmit your Lycanthropy?” Harry asked pointedly.

“Yes, I can, as long as we’re not within four days of my transformation, or four days after, which we aren’t. Why?”

“We can’t just hold a coven rite and hope it works, Remus. I’ve been looking into this. We need to initiate the coven before we can hold the rite, and it will take a blood sharing ceremony,” Harry replied quietly.

Remus looked at him for a moment and nodded. “I’m safe if we do the initiation anytime within the next three days,” he said after a moments thought.

“Right then, we’re going to have a total of sixteen in the coven then. Thirteen general coven members, myself as the focus for the rite, and the Grangers for emotional support,” he said, passing Hermione a piece of parchment with his list of names on it.

Hermione took the list and read.

*Harry Potter - Elder*  
*Hermione Granger – Elder*  
*Remus Lupin – Elder*  
*Nymphadora Tonks – Elder*  
*Draco Black – Adept.*  
*Luna Lovegood – Adept.*  
*Ginevra Weasley – Adept.*  
*Neville Longbottom – Adept.*  
*Susan Bones – Adept.*  
*Terry Boot – Adept.*  
*Fred Weasley – Adept.*  
*George Weasley – Adept.*  
*Bill Weasley – Adept.*  
*Narcissa Black – Adept.*  
*Dan Granger – Associate*  
*Emma Granger – Associate*

“The status of elder is derived by power and abilities. The four of us have either the highest power levels or the most refined abilities. I thought about making Luna an elder, but her abilities are still developing and, from what I understand, will continue well into her twenties,” Harry said seriously.

Hermione handed the list to Remus.

“We’ll need to get them all together tomorrow, and someone will have to alert Minerva. Hermione? How many of the Outcasts are continuing school?” Harry asked.

Hermione looked at him with a broad grin. “Except for Ginny and Luna, none of them.”

Harry sat up in his chair and stared at her. “They’re all quitting?”

Remus laughed. “You’re a bad example, Harry. More importantly however, you’re a fine leader. Every one of them will walk into the fires of hell for you, myself included.”

Harry glanced over at Hermione and she nodded.

“Alright then. Let’s plan on getting every one together after the ritual so we can knock around training issues. I also have some research projects we need to address.”

Harry grinned as Remus and Hermione both sat up straighter in their seats, their eyes alight. He then leaned back and laughed at them, much to their annoyance.

The President of the United States put on his best, I'm-Going-to-Screw-You-and-You'll-Enjoy-It political smile and waited for the ambassador of France to enter the room. He stood and made ready to shake hands when the door to the Oval Office opened and men entered the room. Secret Service agents took up positions and tried to pretend they weren't there.

The French were here in regard to the British Crisis. The French had sent a notice to the United States that they would look very unfavorably on any further US intervention in Britain. The notice warned that France would oppose any US Military intervention with force, if necessary.

“Gentlemen! Come in. Please, take a seat,” said the President, his smile false.

A moment later everyone was seated, and served a cup of coffee or tea. The President waited until the butler had left the room before speaking.

“Mr. Ambassador, I will be blunt, since we do not have time to dance around each other. The people of this country look at Britain with a certain degree of fondness. Sure, we have our differences and we've had to kick old Mum in the pants a few times before she realized that we had grown up and thrown off the apron strings. But the United States of America will not stand by and allow what is happening in Britain to continue.”

Then the President frowned and his voice took a sterner note.

“Nor, sir, do we agree with your position that France should decide what happens in Britain. Therefore, I have ordered the Joint Chiefs to begin working up operational plans for the purpose of relieving Britain. I have also ordered that our Nuclear Forces be retargeted.” The President paused for a moment, met the Ambassador's eyes and smiled thinly. “According to my sources, France doesn't have the ability to reach the continental United States with her nuclear missiles. Our range, however, is more than adequate.”

There was a moment of shocked silence. It wasn't often that the US issued ultimatums, and yet here it was, clearly on the table with no euphemistic double talk.

Before the French ambassador could respond another voice, this one clearly with a Brooklyn accent, broken in.

“No, I forbid this,” the man said. Then the lighting in the room dimmed despite it being bright and sunny outside. The four Secret Service men who had been watching the meeting collapsed soundlessly to the carpet and four other men appeared, having removed silvery cloaks.

“Who the hell are you?” growled the President. The French Ambassador blinked in surprise and looked suddenly afraid.

“Louis Jefferson Paletto, call me Lou or Louie. I am your Secretary of Magic, sir, and I cannot allow you to begin a war when you don't understand all the facts.”

The President blinked in surprise. “You mean that bullshit they gave me in the initial briefing was

true? There's a Department of Magic? A sub-society?"

Louie nodded and beamed a smile at the man. "Now sir, if you sit down, I will explain what's really happening in Britain to both you and the Ambassador. And what is being done about it."

The President looked around the room, noting the collapsed Secret Service men, the strange dim lighting and the frozen appearance of everything outside. With a sense of wonder he hasn't felt since he was a boy, he sat and turned to listen to his Secretary of Magic.

"Well sir, it sorta goes like this..."

Several hours later, the Secretary of Magic was concluding his explanation. "...So there you have it, Sir, Mr. Ambassador. Right now my counterparts in nearly every country in the world are talking to their Presidents, Kings or Prime Ministers, explaining the situation. The Magical Governments are working together at the request of the Irish Ministry of Magic."

"The Irish," protested the President. "How the hell did they get involved?"

Louie smiled. "There is a British Ministry of Magic in exile forming in Ireland under the auspices of several former Ministry Managers. And, of course, that is where the Boy-Who-Lived is currently resting after single handedly rescuing over three thousand British Wizards. We're not entirely sure but, from all indications, the Boy-Who-Lived is forming up a British Wizarding Military unit to return to Britain and fight for their country. It's even said that the Boy-Who-Lived and his girlfriend faced Voldemort for three hours and fought him to a draw. And before that, he destroyed the corrupt British Ministry that had been supporting Voldemort. It's even said he took and survive multiple killing curses in the Ministry fight," the Secretary said with reverence.

The President shook his head and tried to get a grip on what was happening. One moment he had been the leader of the most powerful nation on Earth, the next moment he was learning that there really was a sub-society that was capable of destroying civilization as he knew it. And there was some boy who apparently lived in Ireland who was acting as a rallying point to fight the evil Voldemort who had taken over Britain. Sighing heavily, he realized this had suddenly become much more complex.

"So, Mr. Secretary, let me see if I understand this correctly. What you're asking is that no one do anything until you've first taken out this Voldemort. At which point you expect...muggle, is it?" When the Secretary nodded, the President continued. "At which point you expect muggle conditions to collapse into total anarchy. Then you want us to move in with rescue teams and military forces to help Prime Minister Blair's government in exile to retake the country."

Louie nodded, watching his President carefully.

The President ran a hand through his thinning gray hair and finally nodded in agreement. Even the French ambassador nodded in relief.

"Mr. Secretary, I will do as you ask. But I warn you; I expect every government to stay out of the

conflict. I expect the Wizarding world to keep a tight reign on their muggle counterparts. Furthermore, from now on, and until this crisis is resolved, I want weekly briefings. I want to know what is happening both there and here at home.”

Louie smiled. “Of course, Mr. President.”

---

### **Overflow Camp Number One, near Leeds...**

A bitter wind swept through the camp. The bright lights burned twenty four hours a day, yet offered no heat to the miserable mass of Wizarding humanity who resided behind its hellish barb wire walls.

At any given time there were only a small number of wizards on duty outside the fence. Mostly the guard force consisted of Dementors. Once per day, a group of wizards entered the camp carrying a large cauldron containing thin soup. The only advantage of the daily food riot was that, for a short while, the inmates were warmed by the activity.

Camp One wasn't the end of the line. One could bail one's self out of the camp easily enough, just by promising to join forces with Voldemort. It was an option that more and more inmates were taking in their desperation. It was said that one only had to pass a test, give a blood oath and accept the dark mark and one would be fed hot food, clothed, and given a job as a trusted member of the new order.

Some took the offer and were led away from the camp, never to be seen again. Others were forbidden even that avenue of escape, such as former members of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement or the Department of Mysteries. Prominent personages, scholars and war heroes were also excluded.

Everyday new inmates arrived. Sickness hadn't set in yet, but it soon would. Parents clutched at their children and fear gnawed at their souls as the Dementors glided overhead.

---

### **Armagh, Northern Ireland...**

Antonin Dolohov watched the last of his men appear. It had taken longer than he had expected to get Lucius to make the portkeys for his estate in Ireland. It had finally taken a threat from the Master to get them made at all.

Now he looked at the 'estate' and snorted in disgust. It was a ramshackle three story building set on a farm. Somehow he had to find room for himself and the one hundred men he had brought with him.

His mission was two fold, but his resources were limited. He had two thousand galleons and a very short list of people sympathetic to the cause that he could approach. With it, he was supposed to recruit new Death Eaters for the Master, and try to track down any of the fugitives who might have escaped to this land. His stooges back in London had pointed to the existence of some sort of organized escape effort to Ireland. He had to find the receiving end and shut it down.

---

### **Padfoot Manor, the evening of April 18th...**

Harry led his friends to a specially prepared room after their dinner. He had researched this carefully and had to explain away some of the myths people had before they could begin.

He led everyone into a large, empty room. To one side were simple stools for everyone to sit on. In the center of the room was an ornate pattern drawn into the floor. The pattern started with the common pentagram and became more complex as it radiated outward.

Next to Harry in the center of the room was a small, low table with a dagger, a large bowl and a goblet. The bowl contained a deep red liquid.

Harry examined the room for a moment, then turned to face his friends. His abilities had slowed in their progression but he had reached the point where his sight was always enhanced. In fact, he had to consciously turn it off these days. He smiled at his friends and laughed inwardly. If only they could see how colorful they were with their auras flaring nervously.

Hermione sat next to her parents and she glowed with her powerful aura. Her parents sat next to her, excited but unsure. They were the most interesting people in the group.

“Thank you all for coming tonight. Before we begin, let me explain exactly what we’re doing here,” Harry said, smiling at them. He paused while a murmur rippled through the group.

“A long time ago,” he began, “a group of witches and wizards noticed that, by working together, they could accomplish what they could not do singly. How this was discovered, we do not know. The first coven has been lost to history. Western Civilization, and in particular Western Muggle Civilization, has corrupted the concept of coven to mean a group of witches, usually for evil purposes.

“Works of literature, like MacBeth or Faust have twisted the concept almost beyond recognition. But a coven isn’t like literature. Coming from the Latin word *convenire*, a coven means ‘to come together or to gather’, usually for the purposes of working together, sometimes to celebrate or worship. In two days time we shall initiate the Rite of the Gen and I shall use the power you will loan me to seal Voldemort inside Britain.

“Now the ritual will work with the basic thirteen, but we’re not limited to that number. Nor are we limited to only those with power. I’ve asked the Grangers to attend and join the coven, despite

their lack of power, because of certain feelings I have for them and hopefully they have for me,” Harry said, ending on a shy note. He wasn’t about to tell them the full truth until he was certain of his suspicions, though what he had just told them was true enough.

Emma beamed a smile back at Harry and Dan shot him a thumbs up. He nodded back gratefully.

“The Rite of the Gen is best performed by a coven, which I’ve described as a gathering. But to witches and wizards, it’s that, and so much more. Covens are families. Just like I consider each of you to be part of my family, despite the lack of blood we share, coven members consider each other family.

“So, tonight, we will perform the rite of initiating a coven. It is a simple ritual. One by one each of you will come up, use the dagger to place a drop of blood into the bowl. Once you put a drop of blood in the bowl, lift the bowl above your head and say the incantation, ‘beatus nostrum gelamen planto nos prosapia’, then place the bowl back on the table for the next person. When everyone has done so, I will complete the rite, then I will pass around the goblet and everyone will take a sip,” Harry concluded, and then he folded his arms across his chest and waited for questions.

“Harry, is it true that we’ll experience a power boost after the Rite of the Gen?” asked Ginny eagerly.

“And your bat bogey isn’t powerful enough as it is?” asked Harry dryly. Everyone chuckled, though Ginny blushed.

“Alright then, let’s address that issue. Yes, you will experience a power boost. How much of one? As best as Hermione and Remus have been able to determine, not much, maybe twenty to twenty five percent. Will it be permanent? As far as we can tell, yes it will be. The down side of the Rite of the Gen is that, at the end of it, expect us all to keel over, unconscious from magical exhaustion. Now, are there any other questions?” asked Harry.

After a moment of silence, Harry nodded and signaled for people to come forward one at a time. To make matters a little easier, he had a small parchment with the incantation written on it next to the bowl.

Narcissa stepped forward and took up the dagger, cutting one finger she let a drop fall into the crimson liquid of the bowl. Then she healed the cut and lifted the bowl above her head.

“Beatus nostrum gelamen planto nos prosapia” she incanted, then lowered the bowl back to the table again. The liquid began to change from a rusty red to a red-gold color and seemed to swirl in the bowl.

One by one they all came forward, repeating the process. Harry stood ready to heal the cuts for Dan and Emma and smiled at the pair as they added their own blood to the ritual bowl. By now the liquid was pulsating with a reddish glow and boiling within the bowl.

He picked up the dagger and sliced his finger, and then he moved to block the bowl from view and



let sixteen drops of his blood fall into it, one for each member of the coven. Healing himself, he lifted the bowl above his head. He hissed in pain as the bowl turned too hot to hold and he said the incantation. Releasing the bowl, it hovered above his head and his magic flared as he prepared for the final part of the rite.

Dan and Emma gasped as Harry burst into a coruscating glow. The colors were blinding in the dimly lit room. He took one step back and spread his hands out over his head. The bowl lowered to hover between his outstretched hands.

“Vox meus prosapia consecro quod beatus nostrum iugum,” he said in a voice rippling with power. The pentagram on the floor flared to life and the whole room shimmered. A series of pure bell like tones sounded in the room. When the light faded, Harry stood next to the bowl, now resting on the table.

He picked up the goblet and dipped it into the now cool golden liquid. Once he filled the goblet, he conjured a flask and filled it with the remaining liquid from the bowl. Turning, he walked to Dan and handed him the goblet.

“Just a sip, Dan,” Harry murmured encouragingly.

Dan took his sip and Harry took back the goblet while Dan sat back down in his chair. He had an expression of wonder on his face. Harry turned with the goblet and was about to hand it to Emma when he impulsively kissed her on the cheek first. A moment later Emma sat back on her chair, as bemused as her husband. Harry hoped his plan worked and that they wouldn’t hate him too much if it did.

Turning to Hermione, he placed the goblet to her lips. They exchanged a look, filled with emotions. She took her sip, her eyes widening in surprise at the potency of the potion. She sat heavily on her stool as he walked to the next person.

One by one Harry worked his way through the group, his coven. When he finished, there was a small mouthful of the potion remaining.

Returning to the table, he swallowed the remaining potion, then walked to a cabinet by the wall and placed the goblet and the flask into it. Then he turned back to the rest of them.

“According to western literature, the coven would probably engage in an orgy at this point,” he said with a wink. “And while I hate to disappoint people, that’s not going to happen here. Instead, I’ve asked Dobby to prepare us a bit of desert in the dinning room. It will take a while for the potion to work its way through our systems, but I don’t expect anyone will suffer any severe aftereffects. And so, my friends, our coven is initiated and I am very grateful for your help. Now, let’s go see what chocolate surprises Dobby has waiting for us.”

Harry opened the door and held it open as everyone shuffled through. The mood among the group was extraordinarily upbeat.

---

## Haven Operations Center...

Bertrand Lovegood was deep in conversation with Miles Pickerton.

“Alright, I get the idea Mr. Lovegood, the presses are enchanted machines and no one knows how to make them anymore. Now the question is, how many of them would you need to run at least ten thousand copies of a two to three parchment newsletter on a daily basis?” asked Miles.

Bertrand looked up for a moment, thinking hard. “Three, at the minimum, but four would be better, Mr. Pickerton.

Miles jotted down the information on a sheet. “Good, now we know what we have to get...”

“No, no, no.” interrupted Bertrand. “It’s not sufficient to just sneak back and steal three or four printing presses, Mr. Pickerton. You must also ensure that no one else can use the remaining four that you’re not taking. You want me to publish a newspaper for Haven and for distribution to England? Fine, but we need to make sure we hurt their ability to print their own magical paper. Forcing them to use muggle methods will slow them down.”

Miles’ expression grew thoughtful. Then he nodded in agreement. “Alright, then. We’ll arrange to send a team in to get the equipment you need.”

Bertrand shook Pickerton’s hand and then turned to walk to the exit. Mr. Lovegood shook his head and chuckled to himself. A week ago he was a publisher in fear for his life, yesterday he became the official Director of Propaganda and Media for the Ministry of Magic. It was unbelievable in his opinion.

He had been greatly pleased and relieved to see that Luna and his future son-in-law, Draco, were safe. The events of the last week had shocked him to the core and he was greatly relieved that his wife had not lived to see them.

He had personally debriefed some of the refugees who had arrived in the last two days and he was appalled at the stories he was hearing. Summary executions, imprisonment for the slightest sign of dissension. *And Harry Potter! Merlin must be watching over that boy*, he thought. *He had stood up to Voldemort with his girlfriend cheering him on for hours!*

Bertrand paused and watched as a group of twenty ex-Aurors prepared for an extraction mission in Britain. Little was said as the group blackened their faces and checked their gear. Since the evacuation of Hogwarts, extraction teams had been working non-stop, around-the-clock missions, saving the families of Hogwarts students.

Students, he mused, then he shuddered. Earlier this morning he had personally sat in with Minerva McGonagall, Amelia Bones, Constance Longbottom, Remus Lupin and Harry Potter while they

heard the case of the five Slytherin students who had opposed the evacuation.

*Three of the students had offered to sign blood oaths under the pain of their magic and their lives that they would never support Voldemort. They asked to be allowed to accept whatever punishment Professor McGonagall wanted to mete out to them and be allowed to continue in school. Bertrand was surprised when Harry withheld judgment and allowed them to return to the school.*

*The two remaining students were an entirely different matter.*

*Again Harry kept silent throughout the questioning of the pair, both seventh years. In both cases, the boys knew that Harry had probably killed their parents at the Ministry of Magic and neither was willing to admit to any errors or change their ways. Finally Harry had them sent from the room and he addressed the other adults on the panel.*

*“We are faced with a cruel choice that I do not want us to make. On the one hand, we have more than twenty five hundred souls who look to us, and myself in particular, for protection. On the other hand, we have two people here who would gladly turn us in to Voldemort,” Harry said heavily.*

*“What are you suggesting, Harry?” asked Amelia.*

*“I don’t want to advocate killing them, Amelia, but we need to neutralize them,” Harry replied evenly.*

*“Surely we can come up with a better solution than killing them,” replied Minerva in a shocked voice.*

*“Harry makes a valid point,” said Bertrand Lovegood in a hushed tone. Everyone turned to look at him in surprise and he chuckled mildly.*

*“I know, most think I’m just the bumbling publisher of a paper with crazy ideas, but Harry makes a valid point. If you send them back, even obliterated, they will merely accept their mark and become one of Voldemort’s lackeys. And eventually we’ll face them again, next week, or next month, or next year. No, we must find another way.”*

*“Then don’t send them back. In my day as an Auror we used to have capstan nullifiers, which would render a wizard or witch powerless. Can we get them? If we could fit them into a collar, we could keep them here and just lock them up until we can convince the Irish to take them off our hands,” said Constance Longbottom, Neville’s grandmother.*

*Amelia frowned. “Yes, they are easy to make, but we stopped using them shortly before you retired, Connie. I suppose we could make more,” she said thoughtfully.*

*Harry breathed a sigh of relief and looked at the adults sitting at the table. “Thank you all. I thought I was going to be forced into hurting them,” he said softly. “Let’s use the nullifiers. If that doesn’t work, we’ll revisit the issue then.”*

*Harry stood and his shoulders straightened a little before walking from the room.*

*Bertrand watched the back of the retreating youth for a moment longer, then he turned to his companions. "That man is carrying a lot of weight on his shoulders."*

*"He does it because no one else wants the burden," Remus replied. "The weight of the world rests on his shoulders and I, for one, will do whatever I can do to help him carry that burden."*

*"Aye, as will I," murmured Minerva.*

Bertrand trudged back to the manor, enjoying the brisk night air. He knew his daughter was, right now, involved in a coven initiation ritual run by the same man who held the world's weight on his shoulders and his stride quickened. If anyone was capable of that burden, it was Harry.

---

## **Haven Manor, The Grangers...**

Emma sat on the loveseat in their bedroom and flipped through a copy of a Dublin newspaper, trying to judge the mood of the Irish in regards to the events unfolding in Britain. All standard communications had been lost with Britain several days earlier. British Telecom had shut down all circuits for no apparent reason, and just hours later, all radio and television broadcasts from Britain had ceased. The only source of information from Britain now came from a network of loyal Army transmitters, amateur Ham operators and flyovers by friendly nations, using surveillance aircraft.

Dan stepped out of their bathroom, dressed in pajamas and a robe, and stoked up the fire in the fireplace.

Emma gave her husband a curious look when he sat down next to her. He snuggled down into his thick robe and sneezed four times in rapid succession.

"Are you feeling alright?" asked Emma.

"I think so. I just seem to have a chill tonight and I can't seem to get warm," he replied shakily.

Emma frowned. "I know what you mean. I feel that way as well. I hope there's nothing going around Haven. It would be horrible if we all got sick. Why don't we have Dobby bring us a cup of tea, then we'll go to bed?"

"Hmmm, warm tea would be welcome right now. Or maybe a hot toddy?"

She nodded and Dan called Dobby.

A moment later the little elf appeared, all decked out in his uniform. Spotting Dan, he snapped off a salute. Dan laughingly returned it. He had been showing Dobby old World War Two movies and

they were developing an interesting relationship.

“Dobby, the misses and I are feeling a little under the weather. Would you bring us two hot toddies, please?”

Dobby nodded, saluted and vanished. A moment later he was back, handing them both heavy mugs. Then he was gone again.

The Grangers settled into their bed, shivering and sneezing occasionally. Lulled by the hot drinks, they quickly fell asleep.

---

### **Haven Manor, Harry and Hermione...**

Harry sat at the small table reading, while Hermione lay in their bed doing the same. She looked up when she heard Dobby appear in front of Harry and hand him a cup of tea, then he and Dobby conversed quietly for a moment before he vanished again. That in it self would not have caused her any concern, but Harry’s expression tipped her off that something was up.

“Alright you. Give it up and tell me what you’ve planned?” she asked playfully.

“Planned?” Harry replied innocently.

“Yes, planned. You have that look on your face, as if you’ve just pulled a prank on Remus or the twins. I know you, Harry, you’re up to something.”

He smiled and nodded, his expression smug. “You are one hundred percent right, but I’m not going to tell you what I’m up to. At least, not yet anyway.”

“Why not?” she asked.

“Why spoil the surprise? Besides, I’m still not positive it’s going to work, sweetheart. But if it does, I promise you’ll be happy about it. Maybe even impressed.”

Harry packed up his papers and peeled out of his robe before joining Hermione, who lay on the bed, fuming at him.

“Just tell me who you are pranking, Harry.” she asked.

Harry’s expression grew more innocent. “I’m not pranking anyone.”

She was about to retort when she heard a popping sound again and Dobby stood at Harry’s side of the bed. “I did like you asked, sir,” Dobby said, snapping off another salute.

Harry rolled his eyes and returned the salute, otherwise Dobby would hold it all night long. “Very

well, Dobby. Keep an eye on them for me tonight.”

“Sir, yes sir!” Dobby said, then vanished again.

Harry rolled onto his back and Hermione pounced on him. He grunted, not expecting her to jump on him.

“You’re pranking the twins, aren’t you?” she accused him.

“You know a master prankster can’t reveal any surprises before hand. All I’ll say is, if it works, you’ll be pleasantly surprised,” he replied, and then he rolled so they were lying side by side. With a quick wave of his hand, the lights dimmed.

“That ritual took a lot out of me, Hermione. I know it gave everyone else a kick, but you didn’t perform the magic at the end of that ritual,” he murmured, then he yawned.

Hermione looked at him suspiciously, but his eyes were already closed and he was absently playing with her hair, a gesture that often relaxed him, as well as her. Snuggling in his arms, she smiled to herself as she listened to his breathing slow.

---

## **Irish Ministry of Magic (April 19th)...**

Michael O’Dalley was ushered into the Minister of Magic’s office. He stood respectfully while the Minister used a muggle telephone to hold a conversation. Finally he placed the phone down and waved O’Dalley to a seat.

“You sent for me, Minister?” asked O’Dalley respectfully.

The Minister eyed his Auror for a moment. Brogan Mallory had been Minister of Magic for fifteen years now and, while he was an effective leader, he was also a consummate politician, meaning he was proficient at all the skills a politician needed in order to survive.

“Michael, how is your family? Margo and three boys, right?” asked the Minister congenially.

O’Dalley smiled and nodded enthusiastically. “They’re fine, Minister. Thank you for asking. My boys are growing and doing well, although my youngest has been pestering me to get an autograph of Harry Potter for him.”

Mallory smiled and nodded knowingly. “Yes, the little ones need their heroes. Now tell me, Michael, what is your opinion of Mr. Potter? I’ve not met the man myself, but I intend to correct that mistake as soon as I can. Your impressions will help me.”

O’Dalley leaned back in his chair and thought for a moment. “I’ve only had one meeting with him myself, Minister. Lord Potter-Black is a series of contradictions. He’s young, and he looks it from

afar, but when you see his eyes? He has old eyes, sir, eyes that have looked upon more than their share of misery. My first impression of him was that he was a young boy and that people were rallying around a myth. But I couldn't have been more mistaken.

“He's got a power to him, Minister, a magnetism, if you will. There is a sense of untapped power to him. It's like he could move mountains, if he truly desired it. I tried hard to get a sense of the man and I have to admit to coming away very impressed and more than a little intimidated. You know my record, Minister, and yet I will honestly say I would not want to find myself in a duel with Mr. Potter.”

When Mallory frowned, O'Dalley continued quickly. “Don't get me wrong, Minister. Mr. Potter has asked me to call him Harry several times, but I find myself unable to. He commands respect without trying. It's visible in all the people he's surrounded himself with. From the woman he loves, to the werewolf and metamorph who he treats like parents.

“I think Mr. Potter would be a dangerous opponent and I for one am grateful that he doesn't consider us to be his enemy,” O'Dalley said in conclusion.

Mallory nodded and thought about what O'Dalley had said. Legally, his government did not have to support Harry and his effort. Public opinion on the issue of Britain was unclear. Many Irish were ambivalent to their plight, but on the other hand they didn't want Voldemort to come to their country. On that issue, they were clear. They didn't want Voldemort here. Supporting Harry could prevent that from happening.

Sighing, he muttered under his breath, then he pulled a file folder out of a desk drawer and passed it to O'Dalley.

“Michael, we've already told several nations that we would recognize a British Ministry of Magic in exile. And while we didn't come out and say it, we implied it would be a Ministry set up under Mr. Potter.

“We're stuck in the cross fire here, Michael, and I hope you realize that all of us supporting Mr. Potter are on thin ice. Our public isn't really too upset about Britain. However, they don't want Voldemort here. But that is exactly what will happen if Mr. Potter fails. Therefore, it's up to us, and Mr. Potter of course, to sell the idea of supporting him to our public.

“The file contains our latest intelligence information. Some of our boys north of the border have spotted several of Voldemort's thugs. We suspect a cell has moved to our side of the Irish Sea. Also, I don't know why, but we've had some disturbing magical flares in Cork as well. I know that's not too far from Mr. Potter and his Haven.

“I want you to share this information with Mr. Potter, and then request that he and I have a private meeting in the coming weeks. Right now, I know he's probably too busy, but a private meeting would be to both our advantages.”

O'Dalley clutched the precious file and nodded. “We're doing the right thing, Minister. I'm sure

of it.”

Mallory looked up at O’Dalley as he stood. “I hope so, Michael, now off you go. That information would be best used if placed in Mr. Potter’s hands as soon as possible.”

Mallory watched O’Dalley’s retreating back for a moment longer, then he went back to his telephone. He had more Ministers and Secretaries to talk to today.

---

## **Hogwarts Castle (April 19th)...**

Harry appeared in the Chamber of Secrets and looked around carefully. He arrived fully shielded and ready to apparate out if necessary. Extending his senses, he carefully felt around the castle and it’s surrounding spaces. Voldemort was nearby, but seemed to be sleeping. Groups of Death Eaters were busy laying down new wards on the castle. Examining the aura of the new wards, he slowly and carefully adjusted them until they excluded all of the spaces from under the castle, including the Chamber.

Once he had completed that task, he began pulling boxes out of his pockets and expanding them. When he was done he had nearly ten large crates of material.

“Peeves!” Harry said loudly and then he waited.

After a five-minute wait, he called for Peeves again.

He smiled when he heard a familiar voice replying to his call. “Look nasty snotty Potty, leaves Peeves and the ghosts behind with the red-eyed man and his black robes. They are no fun, they aren’t like ickle firsties,” whined the pesky poltergeist.

“Peeves, would you like some toys to play pranks on old red-eyes and his black robes?”

“Potty brings pranks for Peeves to play?” asked Peeves incredulously.

“Look what I brought you, Peeves,” Harry said, pulling the top off the crates and revealing some of the more dangerous of Weasley Wizarding Wheezes stock. Peeve’s lower lip trembled and he looked at Harry with a mixture of awe and undying gratitude.

Peeves rushed forward to examine the cache of goodies, but Harry stopped him with a shield.

“Peeves, I want a promise from you. You will only use these on the black robes and red-eyes. Give me that promise and I will bring you more of this when you run low.”

Peeves nodded eagerly at Harry’s request. “Alright, Peeves. One more thing, then this is all yours. Can you find Sir Nicholas and ask him to meet me down here, please?”



Peeves nodded and vanished through a wall.

Harry leaned against the wall and chuckled to himself. Voldemort was about to discover the castle wasn't all that peaceful a place after all.

"I say, Harry Potter! What are you doing down here? Don't you know how dangerous it is for you?" said Sir Nicholas De Mimsy-Porpington.

"Hello, Sir Nick," said Harry smiling at his house ghost. "We're pretty safe in here as long as I don't attract attention to us. The *Fidelius* charm on the chamber doesn't affect you ghosts or Peeves, since it considers you a part of Hogwarts. Anyway, I'm here for a reason." He turned then and chuckled, spotting Peeves rooting through the boxes and stuffing his pockets with pranks.

"Oh, Mr. Potter? What reason would that be?" asked Sir Nick, interested.

"First off, sir, I want you to know that everyone managed to evacuate the castle to safety. I wish we could of brought you and the other ghosts but, being dead, we figured you weren't in much danger," Harry offered as an apology.

Sir Nick nodded and motioned for him to continue. "Professor McGonagall instructed me to tell you that, 'the Lion's Pride is roaring'," Harry said on an inquisitive note.

Sir Nick's expression grew determined. "Very well, Harry. What would you have us do?"

"I need to find out what's happening here at the castle, Sir Nick. We are planning on taking back our school and our country, but it's going to take time and information. I can set up a special portkey here that Peeves can activate. It won't bring him to us, but it will alert us that you have information and someone will come to talk to you."

Sir Nick looked thoughtful. "I don't know much about spying, Harry, but we'll do what ever..."

An unfamiliar and very chilling voice cut Sir Nick off in mid sentence. "We will do it."

Harry felt the hair on the back of his neck raise up and he was suddenly covered in goose bumps. He whirled to see the Bloody Baron floating a few feet away. Behind him were the Fat Friar and the Grey Lady, Moaning Myrtle and, surprisingly, Professor Binns.

Myrtle smiled at Harry and giggled, but his attention was focused on the Bloody Baron.

Harry bowed to the Baron whom, to his knowledge, had not spoken at all during his time at the school.

"Thank you, my Lord Baron. The house of Potter-Black recognizes that we owe you a debt for your aid," Harry said formally.

The Baron looked surprised at Harry's formal actions, but instinctively returned the bow.

Harry left the portkey for Peeves on the floor, and then turned to the group. “I hate leaving you here, my friends. I do not know when or how we’ll be able to take back our country and our school, but I vow I will do this.”

The Baron bowed again. “Go now, Lord Potter. Let us be about our duties, so that we may hasten the day of deliverance.”

Harry nodded, then activated his own portkey. For a moment there was a silence in the chamber, then the Baron floated out to the center of the chamber. “Call in the other ghosts. We must discuss this new information, and how best to go about our task.”

The five other ghosts shimmered and vanished to find the others. High above in the castle there was the sound of an explosion and a scream, and then the sound of Peeves’ laughter.

The Bloody Baron sighed, pinched the bridge of his nose, and reminded himself that Peeves, too, had duties to perform. If those duties were no different than the poltergeists’ usual antics, who was he to complain?

---

### **Padfoot Manor Evening (April 19th)...**

Harry relaxed in his tub. It wasn’t late, but he had done enough walking and other work during the day that his leg was quite sore tonight. He chuckled to himself when he recalled the day.

Peeves would make quite a nuisance of himself at Hogwarts. And here in Padfoot, they had an outbreak that made many suspect they had inherited a poltergeist as well.

It all started at Breakfast. Dan and Emma came down late and were still groggy from the night before. Both were complaining of aches and pains. Emma sat down and snatched the last muffin on the platter. Dan frowned and the windows in the dining room exploded outward.

Hermione and Remus both looked at Harry like he was to blame. He tried to protest his innocence, but neither of them was convinced by his protests.

No one but Harry had figured it out yet. He vowed that if they didn’t figure it out he’d tell them after the Rite of the Gen when things had calmed down a little.

There was a popping noise and Harry looked up to see Dobby staring at him in apology. Then he saluted.

“Sir, Harry Potter, sir! Master Remus wants you to know the Irish Ministry Man is back again, sir!”

Harry shook his head. He was going to have to find time to talk to Dobby about the saluting

business, but not tonight.

“Very well, Dobby. Inform Remus that I will join him shortly. Is the ritual room prepared?”

“Yes, sir! Exactly as you ordered, Harry Potter sir!”

Harry nodded and the little elf left to speak with Remus. Harry sighed, climbed out of the tub and threw on his robe.

Five minutes later, Harry was heading downstairs, wearing his finest family robes. The Rite of the Gen would start at midnight, so the manor house was abuzz with activity. Stepping into the first floor study, he smiled as he approached O’Dalley.

“Mr. O’Dalley! I hadn’t expected to see you so soon, but perhaps it is good that you are here.”

“Harry, Mr. O’Dalley has brought us some valuable intelligence concerning Voldemort’s involvement in Ireland,” Remus said, waving a folder at him.

Harry smiled in reply and waved Remus and O’Dalley to seats before taking one himself.

“My Lord, my Minister would like to arrange a meeting as soon as would be convenient for you. Something away from the eyes of the press. He has some concerns involving the opinion of the Irish people and he’d like to share them with you, perhaps asking for your aid in dealing with them.”

Harry frowned. “Yes, I can see where he might have that problem. But I think we already have a solution in the works. Mr. O’Dalley, I would like to invite you to witness a ritual that we will be performing tonight. If it goes as planned, it will confine Voldemort and his forces to the island of Britain,” Harry said in a serious tone.

O’Dalley’s expression grew shocked and his hands trembled. “Sir, you’re basically guaranteeing the safety of every Wizarding Nation on the planet. With that done, I don’t think there would be any country that wouldn’t support your cause,” he exclaimed.

“Tell me, Mr. O’Dalley, what do you know of the practice of Voodoo?” asked Harry.

O’Dalley blinked at the non sequitur and frowned. “N-N-Nothing, my lord,” he stammered.

“Fascinating art form, Mr. O’Dalley. Oh, most of the magic would be considered dark because of its intent to cause harm, but they have this truly unique similarity principle. For example, I can cast a spell on a doll and, if that doll were properly prepared to resemble you, you would feel that spell being cast. The principle covers anything; dolls, portraits, photographs and maps,” Harry said, carefully watching his guest who was showing signs of intense interest.

O’Dalley leaned forward in his chair.

“Tonight we shall hold a ritual in which a coven will loan me their power and I shall enchant a

map of Britain such that a line of death isolates the island. No man, woman or child bearing the dark lord's mark will survive crossing that line. If you'd like, you can join us this evening and witness the casting."

O'Dalley nodded eagerly and Harry smiled at the man, and then turned to address Remus. "Let me know if there's anything I should know about in the information Mr. O'Dalley has brought us, then turn it over to Amelia. I need to check the ritual room before everyone arrives."

Remus nodded and waved Harry to go about his business then he turned back to O'Dalley who was shaking his head.

"He doesn't sit still for long, does he?"

"The past few days have been busy. I understand he snuck back into Hogwarts today to arrange for the ghosts there to provide him with information. I admit I wasn't pleased when I heard about it, but by then it was too late. And the section he apparated to is fully hidden from prying eyes," Remus said in an annoyed tone.

"Perhaps he'll relax once he's locked Voldemort in Britain?" offered O'Dalley hopefully.

Remus snorted in amusement. "Oh, he'll relax alright, Mr. O'Dalley. The ritual will leave him and all the participants magically exhausted."

"It's that dangerous?" asked the astounded Irish Auror.

"It's not dangerous, it's just exhausting. The coven will be loaning power to someone who already has tremendous power. Think about it, Mr. O'Dalley, he's not warding a building, or even a town like Haven. He's warding an entire island."

O'Dalley shook his head, and then pointed to the file Remus held. "We're concerned about the reports from up north, Mr. Lupin. We could be looking at as many as one hundred and fifty Death Eaters in Ireland at this point. We have operatives trying to track down their base of operations, but we haven't had any luck so far."

---

### **Padfoot Manor, Ritual Room (Night of April 19th/20th)...**

With just half an hour to go before midnight, Harry stood nervously, waiting outside the room they had designated for rituals. He smiled as each member of the coven appeared and gave each of them a white robe to wear over their clothing, and then directed them into the room. The witnesses were directed to an adjoining area where chairs had been set up.

Then Harry nodded to Arthur and Amelia.

Amelia snapped off a word to one of her former Aurors and he ran back up the stairs to the Aurors waiting above. They fanned out to secure the building.

Harry nodded his thanks to Amelia, then put on his own robe and turned towards the door. He leaned heavily on his staff as he entered and surveyed the room. The beneficial effects of the earlier bath had long worn off.

Turning to the coven, he bowed to them once. Neville laughed nervously, but everyone returned the bow. They then moved to their prearranged spots and Harry turned to the spectators.

“Tonight we will invoke the Rite of the Gen. It will be a power sharing ritual that will enable me to cast a voodoo ward. The ward is cast on a map, which represents Britain. I will be placing a shield between the witnesses and those of the coven. This is for your protection but you can assume that once the shield drops, the ritual is concluded,” said Harry, then he turned back to the coven members.

“Do you all remember your phrasing?” he asked quietly. Nodding, each member then went to his or her appropriate position.

The house elves had prepared the floor precisely to Harry’s instructions. The interior pentagram was encircled by two outer rings. Between the rings were two layers of runes. Harry had meticulously checked the runes earlier to ensure they were accurate. Around the outer ring were fifteen positions marked by double rings and more runes between the rings. Inside the inner ring of each position was a rune designed to represent each person.

Harry stepped into the center of the pentagram and took the large map offered by Dobby. He carefully laid the map on the floor for now. Then he smiled and looked at his friends.

“We’ll begin in just a minute. Midnight is nearly here,” he said gently, then he looked at Hermione and winked at her.

He watched Amelia and she gave a nod.

Harry smiled and raised his staff in both hands. Turning so he faced one point of the star he waited for every one to turn in the same direction as he faced. Harry’s magic flared and the crystal on his staff shone brilliantly. With a sharp crack, he brought the end of the staff down in contact with the point of the pentagram.

In unison everyone bowed and chanted. “In diligo quod fides nos partis vox pro verum quod justicia.” Then they bowed again. As they did, the point drawn on the floor began to pulsate in time with Harry’s staff. Turning clockwise, they repeated the process for every point on the star until all five star points were pulsating.

The room groaned and dust fell from the ceiling. Harry was dazzled by the light and couldn’t see the coven. He was surrounded in a ring of power, but it had not yet begun to transfer.

The coven then turned inward to faced Harry, bowed and repeated the incantation once more. The circles that they stood in flared to life and now people could see those separate circles were really connected to the inner circle by a line. Light flashed from the outer circled in a rhythmic fashion as it flowed inwards.

From within the central pentagram they could hear Harry yell.

“Ego recipero vestri vox meus prosapia. Tribuo mihi sapientia utor is sapienter.”

The light faded from the center pentagram and Harry became visible. His body broke out into a coruscating aura of light as the power continued to feed from the outer circles down the lines in the floor and up into Harry’s body.

The map at Harry’s feet rose in the air and rotated until it was in front of him. The room groaned and shook from the power and a wind whipped at the robes of the coven members.

Harry took his staff and traced a transparent green line on the map. The line looked sickly and evil, and it widened until it was an inch thick. When he had reached the halfway point in his circuit around the map, his complexion had paled. The longer the line, the harder it seemed for Harry to move his staff. By the time he was three quarters around, people started dropping out of the Rite.

First to go was Terry Boot. Then, surprisingly, Bill Weasley and Neville Longbottom fell. When they collapsed, the circles they had been standing in flared one last time and then went dark.

After ten long, difficult minutes, Harry finally completed the circuit with a cry of, “Nos precor versus of nex pro malum!”

The line drawn around the map arched up to form a dome over Britain, and there was a bright flash of light. When the light cleared, the entire coven, including Harry, had collapsed, and the map floated gently above the pentagram. Amelia and Danni were among the first to move. Harry’s shield had dropped with the last flash of light. Danni was checking each person and administering a dose of Pepper Up potion. It wasn’t enough to wake them, but it was enough to allow them to sleep off the exhaustion safely.

“I’m doing this sort of thing far too often for this boy,” Danni grumbled to Amelia as she checked on Harry.

“I know, Danni, but would you trust this to anyone else? Harry’s the only one who can do it,” replied Amelia softly.

Arthur opened the door to the ritual room and instructed the house elves to levitate the coven members and move them to their beds.

---

## **Padfoot Manor (April 23rd)...**

Harry slowly woke and took stock of his surroundings. He was alone, in his bed and the sunlight streaming into the window suggested it was mid morning. Someone had left the window open and a cool breeze wafted into the room. The day's temperature was mild enough to leave the window open. From somewhere outside he could here birds singing.

He debated going back to sleep, but his back was sore from laying in one position too long. His leg felt severely cramped, which meant a bath first thing. Mother nature was knocking on his bladder quite strongly, which only increased his urgency of visiting the bathroom as quickly as possible.

Harry threw off the covers and he couldn't help but groan as he sat up and swung his legs off the edge of the bed. The door to the bedroom opened and he smiled, seeing Hermione enter the room.

"Oh, you're up finally. You're not going to believe what's been going on around here while you slept," she said in a rush.

"Hermione," Harry began.

"It's been crazy, Harry. First the muggle media reported massive auroras over the North Sea. They're calling it a localized solar flare, exciting the earth's magnetic field. Half of Europe experienced power black outs..."

"Hermione!"

She looked up at him and frowned. "What?"

"Love, I'll spend all day listening to you, I promise, but right now I need the loo... badly! And my leg has pulled up lame on me," Harry said through his gritted teeth.

"Oh? OH! I'm sorry, Harry. Let's get you into the bathroom and then I'll tell you what's been going on," she said contritely.

He shot her a grateful glance and wrapped an arm around her shoulder. She helped ease him into the bathroom. When he had finished his business, she came back into the bathroom, ran a bath for him and helped him into it.

With a sigh of relief, he sank into the tub and waved a hand to start the water whirling. "Alright, now that Mother Nature is leaving me alone, tell me what's going on. No, wait. First, what day is it?" he asked.

"It's the twenty-third, Harry. You've been asleep for nearly four days. Most of us were up by the twenty-first. Remus and I were the last to waken early on the twenty-second. Everyone slept for at least twenty four hours."

"Everyone, Hermione? Every one of us?" Harry pressed.

Hermione frowned at his questioning and nodded at him. “It wasn’t until we began waking up that things started happening, Harry. At first people thought we might have a poltergeist like we did at Hogwarts. Some even went so far as to suggest a leprechaun had moved into the manor.

“We’ve had windows shatter, pots go flying through the manor house and fireplaces explode. The library has had every book removed from the shelves twice now. The house elves are sure the rite invoked a curse and they’re working themselves ragged to keep the damage to a minimum,” Hermione said with a frown.

“Remus thought at first it was magic bleeding off you, but we ruled you out very quickly. Then we thought it might be accidental magic from Ginny or Draco; they both seemed to get the most power boost from the rite. But then Ginny went back to school and the disturbances didn’t move with her. Of course that said poltergeist to people.”

Hermione stopped her description of this truly intriguing mystery. Harry had grabbed a washcloth, wadded it up and was currently biting down on it...hard. She arched an eyebrow and put her hands on her hips when she realized he was laughing. And not just laughing, but laughing at her!

Harry was holding onto the edge of the deep tub to keep from slipping under and his body was rippling the surface of the water as he laughed. Hermione huffed a few times and whipped out her wand. The next moment Harry was sputtering as she dowsed him with a bucket of ice water. He moved to the other side of the tub, away from Hermione and glared at her.

“Well? Are you going to continue laughing at me or will you share the joke?” she asked in an angry tone.

“Oh Hermione, I do love you, but sometimes you can’t see what’s under your own nose,” Harry said, still chuckling to himself. “Tell you what. Ask Dobby to serve us an early lunch, I’m starving. Invite Minerva and your parents to have lunch with us and I’ll be happy to explain it all, and solve your mystery. If necessary, tell them it’s an emergency, but get the three of them here.”

Hermione counted to ten, then realized she wasn’t going to get any information out of him, so she went and did as he asked. Harry came out of the bath a few minutes later, though he hadn’t been in there long enough for the heat to help his leg. Hermione watched him limp to the bed and dress himself. She felt guilty for cutting his bath short before it could help him.

Harry limped to the table that Dobby was setting up and sat down heavily on one of the chairs. Twenty minutes later, Minerva, Dan and Emma walked into his room. He waved them over to the table. Hermione sat between Harry and her mother.

“Forgive me for not getting up, but the leg isn’t letting me today,” Harry said in an annoyed tone.

After a few minutes of polite conversation and commiseration about his leg, Harry decided to cut to the chase.

“I’m sure you’re all wondering why I wanted you here, and in such haste. The answer is, we have



an emergency. And professor, you're an expert in dealing with this type of problem." Harry leaned back in his chair and hissed in pain. He looked at the four of them and their blank expressions told him that they still hadn't figured it out.

Harry sighed. "Alright, let me show you."

He held up his hand and summoned his staff. "Deprehensio veneficus," he murmured, then he handed the staff to Hermione.

"Hermione, what spell is on the staff?" he asked.

"Detect magic. That's why the crystal is glowing...because I'm holding it," she replied instantly.

"Excellent, ten points, Hermione." When she glared daggers at him, he coughed and quickly moved on. "Now, pass the staff to your mother please."

Hermione looked like she had been kicked in the stomach. With a trembling hand, she passed the staff to Emma. The crystal dimmed somewhat, but stayed lit.

Hermione and McGonagall gasped in surprise. Emma looked as if she was holding a snake and it was telling her that Christmas had come early for her.

"Emma, pass the staff to Dan if you would please?" Harry asked.

Dan took the staff in an eager hand. When Emma released it, the crystal dimmed a little more but it was still brightly lit.

"Harry, what... when.... how..." breathed Hermione.

"One moment, Hermione. Dan, what happens when you let too much gasoline into an engine and try to start it?"

Dan leaned forward, his brows knitted by Harry's strange question. "Why, the engine tries to start, but can't. It's flooded."

Harry nodded. " Yes. Magic is a little like an engine. Once it's running, it runs for the life of the wizard or witch. Now, after the holiday, I noticed something strange about the two of you. At first I thought it was a mistake, maybe even something wrong with me. I can see auras. Normally, a wizard has a strong aura, a squib has a very small, weak aura, and a muggle has none. You both had none... most of the time. But every so often an aura would flicker into existence, then vanish again.

"This got me to thinking and I'm afraid I owe you both an apology. But it occurred to me that if I could somehow start your engines, so to speak, you'd be able to do magic. You two weren't squibs, and you weren't muggles. I don't understand it myself, it almost seemed like there was a block on your core," Harry said, frowning in thought.

Minerva started and then nodded. “Yes, that would make sense, Harry. During the worst of the witch-hunts, some families used a block on their magic, and that would have been passed down through the generations. The convergence of the two blocked lines was strong enough to give us Miss Granger. But I don’t understand how you managed to start their cores.”

Harry looked at the table and blushed. “That’s why I apologized earlier. You see, I didn’t know if it would work. But I wanted to try it, for Hermione’s sake.”

“Morgana, Harry! Try what?” Hermione exclaimed in exasperation.

“During the Rite of Initiation, I put more of my blood in than I should have. I felt that the direct infusion of my magic might sustain their core and burn out the block. The equations said it might work, but I wasn’t sure.”

Hermione’s expression softened, and she reached over to touch his hand. He refused to look at any of them. “What else did you do, Harry?”

Harry swallowed nervously. “I had Dobby dose them with a sleeping potion so they would sleep through their Matura Magicus,” he said, and then he pulled out a piece of parchment. “Dobby said Emma’s Matura lasted nearly four hours. Dan’s was a little shorter than that,” he whispered.

He looked up then at the shocked Grangers. “I’m sorry. I know it’s a terrible thing to do to you, to turn you into a wizard and a witch. But the more I thought about it, the less I liked the idea of Hermione being unhappy.”

“Unhappy how? Why would she be unhappy?” asked Dan in a hard tone.

“When you die,” Harry replied in a whisper. This was not going the way he thought it would. Dan and Emma seemed mad, Hermione looked dumbfounded and Professor McGonagall seemed to alternate between approval and shocked anger.

“When we die?” asked Emma.

Harry nodded. “You’re a witch now, Mrs. Granger. You’ll live as long as witches do. The same goes for Mr. Granger.”

McGonagall’s expression suddenly softened in understanding. “Of course! By activating your cores, Harry has more than doubled your life spans. Hermione could have expected to live to one hundred and fifty; some of us have lived to one hundred and ninety. I don’t approve of everything you’ve done, Harry, but your motives are pure. By giving you magic, and barring any accidents, you and your daughter will have many more years together than you could normally expected to have.”

Emma reached over and gently took the staff from Dan. “Slumos,” she whispered. The staff bucked in her hand, there was a buzzing sound and Harry’s bed exploded.

Dan stared at Emma in astonishment for a moment, and then he frowned. “It’s not ‘slumos’, it’s

‘slumus’!” he exclaimed into the shocked silence.

Emma lifted the staff again and Hermione snatched it out of her grasp. “I think that will be enough for today! That was my bed also,” she said archly. Then she turned to Harry. “I’m not overly upset with you, Harry, but I’m not entirely pleased...”

She stopped because her mother was clutching at her husband and they were both giggling like children. Emma finally stopped and looked at Dan. “You know what this means?”

“Yeah, we can do magic!” he replied and the two collapsed into laughter again. Hermione groaned and buried her head in her hands.

Harry looked at the wreckage of his bed and repaired with a wave of a hand. He glanced around at the other four who were now deep in a discussion about tutoring and selecting their own wands. Harry excused himself from the table and limped over to the bed. He sat against the headboard, pulled his bad leg onto the bed with both hands and started to massage it.

He must have dozed off at some point because he woke up to find Hermione sitting next to him.

“Nice nap?”

“Somewhat. Where did everyone go?”

“They left when they noticed you dropping off. My parents went into town to see Mr. Ollivander. I don’t know who is more excited, my mother or my father.”

He gave her a tired smile and she pouted at him.

“You’re not off the hook here, Harry. You caused this little mess, so you get to be one of their tutors, along with myself.”

“I’m sorry, Hermione. I know it was underhanded to slip your parents a sleeping potion, but I really thought it would be best if they slept through their Matura.”

Hermione smiled gently at him. “I’m not upset with you doing that, Harry. Oh, all right, maybe I am a little. But I can think of a few occasions when I would have gleefully slipped them a sleeping potion myself. I’m annoyed that you didn’t tell me. I went back and checked your Arithmantic equations. They didn’t make sense to me the first time I looked at them, but now they do. Harry... you really need to have some confidence in yourself and start sharing things with me. There was nothing wrong with your equations, yet you recalculated them eleven times and still didn’t believe in the results. And you could have asked me to check them for you.”

Harry nodded, and then he shivered. Hermione eyed him with concern. “Is your leg bothering you?”

Harry shivered again and he reached for the covers. “Yeah, hurts a lot today and I seem to have a chill.”

She felt his forehead then leaned back frowning. “You’ve got a fever. I’m going to send for Danni. I think you’ve exhausted yourself into illness.”

In short order Danni was there. She checked him out and started pouring potions down his gullet. Frowning at her patient, she finally stood up and faced a worried Remus and Hermione.

“He’s got touch of wizard’s flu, which we can deal with. Mostly it’s exhaustion. In less than 10 days time, he’s been hit with a killing curse and magically exhausted twice. When he woke up today, he immediately began drawing on his magic to make up for what his body was lacking. Now, I want him in bed for no less than five days. He’s going to be fine if he just has the chance to rest and rebuild his reserves.

“I’ll speak to Dobby about some changes to his diet for a while. In the meantime, no magic! Are we all clear about that?” she asked

Harry scowled, but the other two nodded their heads and promised they’d make sure he behaved. He just knew they were going to be a pain in the arse about this.

---

### **Padfoot Manor (April 28th)...**

Remus padded barefoot across the floor of the library. He and Hermione had had their hands full trying to keep Harry in bed. The first two days hadn’t been bad. Harry had been genuinely sick and had no interest in leaving bed. But after the fever broke and he started to feel better, things had changed.

Harry had managed to convince them both that he was fine and then nearly relapsed again from exertion. Danni threatened to have him moved to Haven Hospital, but it was Hermione who came up with the solution that worked. She put her foot down in a most novel way. With the help of Dobby, they removed all the clothing in the bedroom, except for Harry’s boxer shorts and Hermione’s clothing. Then she charmed all of the remaining clothing to prevent it from being transfigured.

Harry woke up from his extended sleep and found himself confronted with Danni, Narcissa, who had been accepted as a healer-in-training, Remus and Hermione. The four of them made it patently clear that, for the next four days, he would remain in bed. To add insult to injury, they also informed him that, unless he behaved himself, he would receive no visitors. Harry was annoyed to discover that his little trip around the manor had earned him more time in bed.

Hermione also told him that if he didn’t behave, she’d move back into her old room. Harry quickly changed his tune.

Remus chuckled at the memory of Hermione. Her comment and handling of Harry was so much like Lily’s handing of James that he had to turn away and wipe the tears from his eyes.

Shaking the memories away, he leaned over and cracked open a case. He had received a shipment of rare books on his ongoing research project. Most of the books were spell books. He moved them aside to look at later. At the bottom of the crate was a large red tome with no label on the cover.

He pulled the book out of the crate, flipped it open and frowned. Latin, which was the language for most ancient books, he could read, but this wasn't Latin. It was Gaelic. Casting a translation spell, he began to read.

*Harken unto my words stranger and hear the tale I tell. I am Cathal Crobderg of Tullamoore and I am the last of my line. I am the last, for all my brothers and sisters have gone on. The last remaining Holy Knight of the Druidic Brotherhood.*

*I lay upon my death bed and know the end is quite near, and yet I can feel the guiding spirits sustaining me long enough to finish this accounting. And thus my beloved Brotherhood may not die with me.*

*Our beloved Master, Eochu mac Tairdelbaig, now gone these past two score years, had charged me with keeping the Brotherhood alive. Despair with me reader, bow thy head and weep, for in the past two score of years I have not found a single worthy candidate. The blight has touched this land with its evil symbols and its people are changing. I have walked the face of this earth and found the world changed. Everywhere the hand of Rome can be seen and the cursed gauls.*

*Now I lay, frail and dying. I have seen eight scores and twelve of years and my beloved Brotherhood stands on the brink. Within this book, I shall inscribe the Rite of Summoning. It is the basis of our Brotherhood, and without it, there can be no Brotherhood. Should thou, gentle reader, survive the judgment of the Summoning, the rewards of Brotherhood will be thine, and they are immense.*

*But take heed and harken unto this warning. Let none that hold fear and darkness in them partake in this Rite. To do so would mean thy death...*

Remus continued to read further, the words of Cathal drew him on. He spoke of his years combating evil wizards and of the joys of the Brotherhood. Remus became more and more excited. Finally he came to the Rite of the Summoning and he frowned as he read. The Rite was clearly detailed and he knew they could do this. But the risk of the trial would require it to be completely voluntary.

"It's real! We can bring them back!" he whispered in amazement, then he gently closed the book and placed it reverently off to one side where it would be safe.

---

## **Epilogue...**

The Queen was dead, the victim of a killing curse. Her husband, the Duke, suffered a similar fate. Balmoral Castle was a smoking ruin, as was the surrounding area. There had been no defense

against the Death Eater attack.

The scene was repeated throughout England and Scotland. Many fled, escaping to France first, then scattering to the Commonwealth Nations. Many more were left behind, either not believing the reports until it was too late, or having not the means to escape the coming storm. Regardless of their reason, those left behind quickly found themselves caught within the chaos. Those who survived the flames became slaves to the new, brutal regime. Locked away in holding camps, they were used for labor and sport.

In separate camps were those unfortunate witches and wizards unable to escape in time. Many had fled, only to be caught, their wands snapped and forced into 're-education camps', where they would later be given the choice to join the new order, or perish.

As the winds of change swept through the land, the Emerald Isle remained mostly untouched, though here, too, Voldemort's power was being felt. The Irish Ministry of Magic, alerted to the possibility of Death Eaters in their country, looked to Northern Ireland with fear. Being part of the United Kingdom, it was thought that it, too, would soon fall to the flames, leaving the Republic of Ireland to stand alone against Voldemort's infectious madness.

The muggle governments had been informed of the real situation and told to deal with their own populations, while the Wizarding World dealt with the problem of Voldemort. Voldemort's ambitions could drag the world into darkness if the United Kingdom's allies chose to involve themselves in the struggle, and that could not be allowed.

Their one hope rested on the shoulders of a man too young and inexperienced to face such a powerful wizard, and yet...

And yet, that young man had managed to do more in the struggle against Voldemort than any wizard or witch twice his age. Known as the Boy-Who-Lived, he had now become their last, best chance to end the reign of terror and destroy the darkness that now threatened their very existence. The legend of Harry Potter grew with each passing day. And with him, came hope.

The sun had set over the smoking ruins of Britain and Scotland, plunging the land into darkness so evil that many felt it would be everlasting. But in a small, little known town in Ireland, a young man stood, looking towards the Irish Sea and the island beyond.

Beside him stood a beautiful young woman, her hand clasped tightly in his. Behind him were witches and wizards of all ages and colors, so different from each other in many ways. Their commonality, their binding strength, was a single shared vow:

*The darkness would be beaten back. The light would return. The sun would rise once more over their homeland.*

**FINIS**

---

## **Author's Notes:**

And so we have come to the close of **Sunset Over Britain** and we hope you've enjoyed reading our story. We will pick up with our band of heroes in **Sunrise Over Britain** .

Normally we make witty comments here, but not this time. Sunset started as an attempt to write a dark, AU fiction in the weeks before the release of Half Blood Prince, and we think we've done a halfway decent job of it. It's hard to write witty comments when one's being retrospective about a seven hundred and fifty plus page novel.

It's been a hell of a trip for us. We hope it has been for you, too.

Bob and Alyx.