

When Vernon didn't miss

By

DrT

Table of contents

When Vernon didn't miss.....	1
Chapter I	2
Chapter II.....	10
Chapter III.....	18
Chapter IV.....	25
Chapter V.....	33
Chapter VI.....	42
Chapter VII.....	50
Chapter VIII.....	57
Chapter IX.....	65
Chapter X.....	72
Chapter XI.....	79
Chapter XII.....	87
Chapter XIII.....	95
Chapter XIV.....	104
Chapter XV.....	111
Chapter XVI.....	118
Chapter XVII.....	126
Chapter XVIII.....	134
Chapter XIX.....	141
Chapter XX.....	149
Chapter XXI.....	156
Chapter XXII.....	164
Chapter XXIII.....	172
Chapter XXIV.....	179
Chapter XXV.....	187

Chapter I

*

Mid-July, 1992

There are many times when a split second can cause huge consequences.

This was such a time.

Harry Potter had made a mistake. He had scared Dudley, pretending to do magic, and his aunt and uncle had reacted far more angrily than he had imagined. A year away from his abusive relatives had dulled Harry's memories of them. Harry had made the mistake of mildly talking back when they had screamed at him, and Vernon had lashed out. Normally, Harry would have avoided the blow, but this time he was not quite fast enough. The punch landed, breaking Harry's jaw. The fall afterwards had caused a severe concussion and a minor skull fracture.

Had Vernon's fist missed, as it usually had before, things would have been very different -- Vernon would have just locked the freak up for the summer, and decided what to do about his unnaturalness come late August. That, however, was now out of the question. Even Vernon had been shocked at the damage he had caused. If they took the freak to hospital, there would be questions, and Vernon was not stupid enough to trust getting away with any excuses. And, if the freak died while they were all there, they would have to have some really good story when the freaks came looking for the boy in six or seven weeks, a story which might have to satisfy the police as well.

Vernon had thought furiously, and decided he was likely already in too much trouble when he was found out.

Therefore, he decided to take a gamble, which Petunia had agreed to. Then he had pulled Harry's trunk out from the cupboard under the stairs and put it in Dudley's second bedroom. He put Harry's finger prints on the outside of the door and around the inside of the cupboard before dropping Harry on the bare floor, carefully closing the door, automatically locking Harry away without having to smudge the fingerprints. Then they placed Hedwig, still locked in her cage, with the owl fighting against that cage, into a plastic garbage bag and closed it tightly. They repeated the process twice more, making it nearly airtight.

Then they tossed the bags, cage and owl, out of the window of Dudley's second room.

Hedwig did not long survive the fall, in part because of the injuries and in part because of the lack of air.

They made certain the cage and owl were well-buried in the trash that was collected that afternoon. Then, two days later, the Dursleys left for an extended vacation in northern England, Petunia having taken notes from the report the freak's school had sent, where they mentioned the friends he had made. They would report Harry as a runaway the next day, and knew they had to give the police the name of someone from the freak's world to talk to. The dentists' daughter should be as good a bet as anyone.

*

It was the evening after the Dursleys had reported Harry missing that Dobby the house elf appeared at the Dursley house. He was bound to the House of Malfoy, but he felt a connection to the Boy who lived here. He wanted to protect Harry Potter, and he had sensed that things were not well with

the Boy for days. This was the first real chance he had to check on the situation since he had stopped the wizard's mail.

What he found appalled the elf, who had seen much cruelty in his life. "Dobby does not understand," he said aloud. "Dobby wished to help Harry Potter, to save Harry Potter. Yet Harry Potter is dying in house that should protect him."

Dobby puzzled this for a moment, then decided. "Does not matter. Dobby's plan does not matter. Dobby must save Harry Potter. But how? Who can Dobby trust to save Harry Potter?"

Everything Dobby thought of was quickly discarded. Every wizard Dobby knew of in Britain, every government, was considered and then he had to drop that part of the idea. Other species were considered, and then also dropped.

Then Dobby remembered an old story. He hoped that the story the old centaur had told his grandfather so many years ago had been true -- and that he could contact the people in the story.

It might be Harry Potter's only chance to survive the next few days, let alone what his Master had planned.

*

Shortly before dawn, a very broad figure of average height, his features well-concealed by a hooded cloak, shimmered into existence near the cupboard under the stairs. A wave of his hand revealed the state of the boy inside the cupboard. The man studied the results for some time, casting several more spells in turn.

Another wave opened the door, and a final one put the child into stasis. The figure stood still, sensing the magic in the house and around the property. A snap of the fingers and Harry's possessions floated down the stairs.

The figure paused in thought, and then magically multiplied the dried blood in the cupboard, spreading it around the corridor. Then, he vanished most of it, leaving just enough so that should any Muggles investigate, the blood would easily be revealed by their technology, just as it should be found by any magical investigators. A small splatter had been artfully left on a wall, in case those who came next were lazy or sloppy.

The man only then pulled out a wand. He carefully used it on the door, breaking it so that any Muggle would think Harry might have sprung the lock, while any wizard would think it was broken with wild magic. He, Harry, and Harry's possessions faded away.

Neither Dumbledore's monitors nor the Ministry's detectors noticed a thing.

*

While she was always up early at school, Hermione tended to sleep in a bit during the summer. Therefore, even though it was 7:50, she was just getting dressed when her mother came to the door.

"What is it, Mum?"

"It's a policeman," her mother said, puzzled. "It seems your friend Harry ran away from his family."

Hermione frowned, her quick young mind trying to process this data with what she knew and had deduced about Harry and his family. She slipped tennis shoes on her bare feet and went down to talk with the constable.

*

Harry Potter lay unconscious on a pallet in a bare but well-lit room. Three figures stood around him. One was the man who had rescued him, revealed in the light of morning as having dark hair, general Mediterranean coloring, and dark blue eyes. The second was a man of about the same height as the first, but built along thinner lines, and with the much darker features of much of North Africa, especially parts of Egypt. The third was much smaller and darker than the other two.

"Well?" the third man asked.

"I have fixed his recent injuries," the second man answered. "I have also confirmed our young colleague's analysis of the curse scar." The other two men winced slightly. "He needs rest, and could be awake after dawn tomorrow, but more likely in a few days."

"Did I miss something?" the first man asked.

"Yes, and yet no," the second man answered. "There are recent injuries, perhaps a little more than a month ago, which were well-healed with magic. There are numerous old injuries, healed by nature, perhaps assisted by Mundane means, including a very old compound fracture of the left arm and several cracked ribs. More importantly, he has been malnourished and generally mistreated." He considered, and then said, "Had I merely read a full record of his condition, I would have said I was reading the report on an unregarded slave."

"Well? What do you suggest?" the leader asked.

"If I can have two or three days, I can more fully heal his old injuries, and partially correct his stunted growth."

"Do so."

*

When the policeman had left, Hermione was convinced that the Dursleys had done something to Harry. The constable was not convinced, but was wondering.

Hermione's parents had to go into work. However, her father managed to get off work early, and he drove her to London. Hermione hoped to get into Diagon Alley and send an owl to the Headmaster, but Tom informed her that the owl post was closed. However, he agreed to send Hermione's letter on.

When Hermione whispered into the innkeeper's ear what the letter was about, however, Tom's face hardened. "Right you are, Miss. Leave it with me. He'll have the letter tonight."

Hermione nodded, and she and her father left. Mister Granger was conscious that many of the looks they had been given were not friendly ones, and he wanted to leave as soon as he could.

Tom quickly flooded through to the Hog's Head. A few hurried murmurs in Aberforth's ear, and Hermione's note was soon on its way via owl the short distance to Hogwarts.

Events were now in motion which were very different than they would have been, if Harry had just ducked a bit more quickly.

*

Alastor Moody and Kingsley Shacklebolt approached the Dursley house a little after midnight, both invisible to the Muggles in the neighborhood via disillusionment. They scoured the house in opposite directions, but both covering the same ground.

They met back in front of the cupboard. "Two scenarios?" Shacklebolt asked.

Moody nodded. "One, the boy was knocked out and left in the cupboard for dead. The Muggles left him, and made it look like he ran away, hid in the bloody cupboard, and locked himself in. Seems a bit daft. . . ."

"The lock is fairly new," Shacklebolt pointed out. "They'd have said he used to play in the cupboard or something, and that he locked himself in and died in there, unable to get out. Probably would have died of thirst before they got back."

"And any injuries could be blamed on his getting hurt after running away? Aye, that's possible," Moody agreed. "A stupid story, but fitting into the stupidity of these people, from what I could gather."

"If true, though, Harry woke up and broke out." Shacklebolt frowned. "And if that's true, then where is he?"

"I know," Moody admitted. "I don't like all this blood. The second scenario might be true."

"That Harry woke up and broke out while they were here, and they killed him? Could that really be what happened? Dumbledore doesn't think so."

"Dumbledore has some exotic toys set to track Potter," Moody agreed. "They've all gone out of wack. Could mean anything."

"Could Harry have been picked up by Death Eaters?"

Moody shrugged. "Could be, but remember your superiors mostly claim that all the Death Eaters are dead or in Azkaban. I'll meet with a friend of mine at the Met. He's a Squib, and will know how to get the Muggles in here and do a forensic sweep. They'll sweat the Dursleys, and if they don't break the bastards, I will. We need to know if Potter was left here injured or if they killed him."

"That sounds like a plan."

Moody nodded. "Why don't you come along. You need a contact in Scotland Yard."

*

It took a while for Scotland Yard and the local police in Surrey and the North to coordinate things, but the forensics team entered Number 4 late that afternoon (to the great interest of all the neighbors). It took them no time to find the blood.

The Dursleys were brought in for questioning less than two hours later. Vernon and Petunia were very careful in their answers.

Dudley was not, and soon had spilled the entire chain of events. His parents were charged with assault and child endangerment, with several other charges pending. However, until Harry was found, there was little more that could be done, other than to search for him.

*

Two mornings after the Dursleys arrest, The Morning Prophet broke the story to the wizarding world. This was also the morning Harry awoke.

Unsurprisingly, Harry's first words were, "Where am I?"

Harry's rescuer answered, "You are on a small island in the Aegean Sea. Does that help you in any way?"

Harry considered that, and answered, "No, not really. Who are you?"

"For now, you may call me Jason."

Harry considered that for a moment, and decided to move on. "Why am I here?"

"What is the last thing you remember?"

Harry flushed. "I didn't move quickly enough."

"You shouldn't have had to, you know," Jason pointed out. Harry said nothing.

"Now, your relatives have been arrested. The question is, what do you wish to do, young wizard."

Harry looked puzzled.

"You were brought to our attention, and you interest us. If you had not interested us, I would merely have rescued you and left you at Hogwarts, or perhaps St. Mungo's." Seeing Harry's puzzled look, Jason added, "That is the British wizarding hospital. You were injured."

"Oh." Harry looked at Jason. "And who are you?"

"We may get to that. You have a number of choices. First, we have mended your injuries, and adjusted your body, to help you recover from years of poor feeding." Harry again flushed slightly.

"So, if you wish, we can send you to one of your friends. Most likely, you will be temporarily housed with the Grangers or some other family with connections to the Muggle world. That is because you will need to testify at your relatives' trial for assault, if not attempted murder."

Harry looked away.

"I am sorry, but the news was leaked to both the Muggle and magical press. It might be possible to move the trial to the magical world, but under the first option, that would be up to your Ministry."

"And then?"

Jason shrugged. "As best we can tell, it was Albus Dumbledore who placed you with the Dursleys, although it went against the apparent wishes of your parents." Harry looked curious. "We have not tracked down all the details."

Harry looked confused. "What are my other choices?"

"You have a destiny, Harry Potter," Jason informed him. "We do not think you have been well-handled." He looked directly into Harry's eyes. "Tell me, do you think the Philosopher's Stone was well-protected?"

"Well . . . no, not really," Harry had to admit.

"There is little doubt that Dumbledore set up the conditions to test you. He wanted you to do what you did. We can give you a little training, and give you much information, before you head back to Hogwarts in seven weeks. It would not be much, but it should help you to a degree."

Jason looked at Harry and asked, "Have you ever heard of a magical discipline known as Occlumency?"

"No, sir," Harry answered.

"It means to cloud your mind, to prevent people from picking up on your thoughts, especially through a type of mind-magic known as Legilimency. If you were to take the second or especially the third option, you would need to learn."

"Why?"

Jason smiled. "Right now, all you could tell anyone is that a man who called himself Jason said you were in the Aegean. If you stayed a while, you would learn things that you would not wish anyone to know, not to mention things we would not want others to know. Albus Dumbledore routinely uses Legilimency. Quite likely, Severus Snape does as well, as do a number of other wizards. Voldemort was quite infamous for it."

"I see. And the third choice?"

"As I said, when I rescued you I learned that you should interest us, and we are a very powerful group of people. We have no need to use you, but helping you would help us to a degree. We have limited access to time magic. We would train you for perhaps six months to a year, yet you would still go back to Hogwarts this First of September, unless you would prefer not to. We would find you acceptable mentors to act as your guardians until you come of age, and by that I mean acceptable to you. And you will again face Voldemort at some point, no matter what you might like to think, for your fate seems linked to his. We can help insure your survival and victory."

"That's a lot," Harry commented.

"It is," Jason agreed. "And yet other than to work hard and not to follow in Voldemort's, or even Dumbledore's, footsteps, all we will ask is that you keep our secrets." Jason shrugged and admitted, "I wish I could tell you more."

"I don't think I have a real choice," Harry pointed out. "I'll keep your secrets. I think I need a lot of help."

Jason smiled. "Then let us start." A snap of his fingers, and there was a long white chiton on the bed.

"A dress?" Harry asked.

"A chiton, or if you prefer a Greek tunic. That and sandals are all you will need to wear, my apprentice." Jason smiled and pointed at the one closed door visible. "There are modern facilities in there. Find me when you are refreshed. We shall have warm bread, soft cheeses, and cold goat's milk to break your fast. Then, we shall fish for our lunch. A cold bottle of Santorini, well, diluted with spring water for you, and some bread and olives will feed us the rest of the day. I shall teach you the basics of Legilimency along the way."

Harry wasn't sure about the idea of goat's milk, and had no idea what Santorini was. He had never had fish, other than a few scrapes of Aunt Petunia's fish-and-chips (Vernon and Dudley never had leftovers from their double orders). Still, he was hungry.

Jason's smile left as he exited the room. He had been reading Harry's memories, and had been appalled. He had been a magical warrior, from a very ruthless culture, and he would never have treated the child of his worst enemy as Harry had been treated, nor allowed it from his people. He would never have treated a slave as Harry had been treated.

Harry's treatment offended every code Jason had ever lived by. He swore by every oath he knew that Harry Potter would be treated better if he had anything to say about it.

Although Jason would never know it, there were a few other people making similar pledges that morning. One would not have surprised Harry, as it was his good friend Hermione. Minerva McGonagall would have been a bit more surprising.

*

At the Burrow, Ron and the twins were glowering at their parents, who had refused to rescue Harry against Dumbledore's commands. Ron, everyone thought, was being a bit too smug about the whole thing.

*

That evening, as dusk fell in the mountains of Transylvania, the head of the vampire council was surprised to awaken surrounded by silent figures. "Who are you?" he demanded in his native early Koine.

"You know us," a voice intoned in more Classical Greek.

The vampire's eyes went wide for a moment, and then he said simply, "It has been just over three hundred years since you came to amember of the council directly."

"Three hundred and twelve," the spokesman agreed. "Who is your current representative in Britain?"

"A very silly youngster who calls himself 'Sanguini,'" the vampire leader admitted.

Several of the figures snorted in amusement. "Sounds like a pasta dish," one muttered in Italian.

"Never mind that," the spokesman snapped. He turned his glare to the vampire, who winced. "Are you prepared to exert some pressure for us, if necessary?"

There was only one answer. "Yes, Master."

Chapter II

The next morning, the first Unspeakable made his way into the Department. His eyes went wide as he made his usual casual check on the 'sealed' room, which only the elite members of the Department could enter.

The man rushed out, as he needed to call the heads of the Department. There was a message.

*

That afternoon, Minister Fudge was forced to meet with the head of the Department of Mysteries (Fudge still didn't know his name, to his disgust), the head of the Department of Vampire Relations (actually, the witch was the only member of the Department of Vampire Relations, but she was still technically a department head), Amelia Bones, and Albus Dumbledore. Dolores Umbridge was there to take notes.

"What is so bloody important?" Fudge demanded. He had had to cancel a meeting with Lucius Malfoy and several important Pure-Bloods, leaders of the Wizengamot.

"Do you remember who the Old Ones are?" the head Unspeakable asked.

Fudge looked at Dumbledore.

"Some say they are a solidly of powerful warlocks," Dumbledore answered. "Others say they are a band of immortals, which seems improbable, to say the least."

"Whoever they are," the Unspeakable said drily, "the group has existed since at least the early Bronze age." Seeing the mostly blank looks, he said, "More than three thousand five hundred years ago." That made them all blink.

"The last time they fully involved themselves in our affairs, they helped train a Romanized Celt named Myrddin." He sighed, as only Dumbledore got the reference. "Merlin, if you prefer."

That got through, even to Fudge and Umbridge.

"And?" Fudge demanded.

"The vampires also believe this group was involved with their creation," Dorothy McKnight, the head of the Vampire Office, added. "The vampires may or may not take orders from them, but they are influenced by this group."

"Exactly," the Unspeakable agreed. "In any event, they have sent you a message. They sent it through both us and the Vampire Council."

"And the message?" Dumbledore demanded.

"Harry Potter is their apprentice. Shift the Dursleys' trial to the wizarding world, or delay it until September. He will be spending his vacations with them. There will be a vampire living in the Forbidden Forest, and there may be others sponsored by the Old Ones near by. They are not to be interfered with, and their relationship with Harry Potter must not be interfered with."

"Who do they think they are, dictating to us?" Umbridge said with a sniff. "They are not above the law."

"They are not subject to our laws, they are a sovereign force," the Unspeakable pointed out.

"And no matter who or what they are, they are powerful," Dumbledore pointed out in turn.

"They are," the Unspeakable agreed. "They can be very frightening. I suggest we watch and wait."

*

The current leader of the so-called 'Old Ones' watched as Harry Potter, nude and up to his knees in the surf, happily cast a net into the sea under Jason's direction. The nutrition potions and other medical care, not to mention the food and sunlight, had already improved the lad's condition. Deciding to make the boy more comfortable, and to shock Jason, the leader stripped off and walked onto the beach, shaking his head.

He shook his head, because despite the healing, he knew what the marks on the lad had meant. He had often seen them, on proud slaves and on prouder captives, beaten but never submissive.

In no time, the slightly embarrassed Harry was seated near the fire pit, as Jason cleaned the fish and placed them on spits to roast. "First of all, young Harry," the leader said, "I have given you no name. For now, you may call me Mo." Unseen by Harry, Jason rolled his eyes.

"Yes, sir," Harry answered.

"We have had little time to really research you, although we knew some of your story before. Would you like to know it?"

"Yes, please, sir!"

For the next twenty minutes, Mo gave Harry a very condensed version of Voldemort's rise to power, the opposition of Dumbledore, and the stand off between the Order and Ministry on the one side, and Voldemort and his supporters, Marked and otherwise, on the other. Then Harry got an even more condensed version of what had happened that October, back in 1981.

"But . . . but why?" Harry asked. "Why did Voldemort target my parents? How did I survive?"

"Anything else?" Jason asked.

"Well, why did Sirius Black betray my father?"

"All good questions," Mo acknowledged. "We know there was a prophecy made, one which is now believed to concern you and Voldemort. As the families of two infants about the same age were attacked, yours by Voldemort and the Longbottoms a few weeks later by his followers, it probably could have alluded to either of you. It is in the nature of such prophecies to be vague. However, Voldemort chose you, a Half-blood like himself, and like Dumbledore for that matter, to attack first." Harry nodded his understanding.

"You survived for several reasons. The first, the Headmaster told you."

"My mother's blood protection?"

"Exactly. The second we will get to, I promise."

Harry nodded.

"As for Sirius Black, well, I can not say with total assurance if it was he who betrayed your parents or not. All the evidence pointed to his being the Secret Keeper. However, I had some allies of ours check with the guards of Azkaban."

"Those dementor things you talked about?"

"Exactly. They do not care about guilt or innocence, only feeding. They claim that the other Death Eater prisoners have taunted Black with being innocent, and that by his killing Pettigrew out anger, he killed the only person who could have gotten him off."

"So Black didn't do it?"

"Betray your parents? Possibly not. I cannot say for certain. If not, he is still the one who blew up a street full of Muggles in his efforts to kill Pettigrew."

"Oh," Harry said, disappointed.

"We will look into it," Mo promised.

"But who are you?" Harry asked. "Your group, I mean."

"Ah," Mo said, "now we come to it. You have met ghosts, correct?"

"Yes, sir," Harry agreed.

"So, unlike most Muggles, you need not believe in a soul, you know it exists."

"I suppose," Harry acknowledged.

"Well, it is possible to split your soul. You can then store it magically in a container of sorts. There are numerous names for this, but the current favorite is 'Horcrux'."

"Why would you want to?" Harry asked.

"Because as long as part of your soul exists in this world, you cannot pass on. Your original body is immortal, but not invulnerable. . . ."

"Eh?" Harry was confused.

"The body won't age or die a natural death, but you can kill it," Jason provided.

"Oh, I see."

"And, if it is killed, there are several ways of re-embodying yourself, as the primary part of your soul cannot pass over so long as there is an intact Horcrux," Mo said. "There are several ways of doing the splitting, but they all involve one thing in common, besides magical ability and the desire to split one's soul."

"And that is?"

"You have to kill someone during the ceremony," Jason answered.

"Murder?"

"Not necessarily," Mo answered. "It can be an execution or a mercy killing or any other thing. But it must involve the death of a sentient being."

"And Voldemort did that?"

"He did, multiple times," Mo said. Seeing Harry's confused look, he went on. "The more Horcruxes, the more insurance."

"If you say so."

"Having two or three is best," Jason said. "More than three, and you start losing your humanity."

Harry looked at them.

Mo nodded. "We both have three Horcruxes. My name is Tutmoses. The Horcrux was discovered in the land you would call southern Egypt, over six thousand years ago. The magical priesthood of Osiris created a new magical priest on average once every eight years for nearly four thousand years, and has created perhaps a dozen since. For the first two thousand years, we were all from the Southern Kingdom, and then just from Egypt. We have allowed others since then, including Jason."

"I am just over three thousand, three hundred years old," Jason said quietly.

"And I am over five thousand, four hundred," Mo added. "I am currently the High Priest for the third time. We serve fifty year terms, and may not serve more than two consecutive terms, but that is the only limitation."

"So, as we said, we each have three Horcruxes. Voldemort, however, seems to have created at least six," Jason said moving on. "We only know what one of them is."

"What is it?" Harry asked.

"You, I'm afraid," Mo answered.

"ME?" Harry nearly squeaked. After a moment's thought, though, he pointed at his scar.

Mo nodded. "It seems to have done several interesting things to you, besides helping you survive the Death Curse," Mo stated. "It has enhanced or created some abilities and skills, suppressed or interfered with others. For example, I believe you can communicate with snakes?"

"Yes, sir," Harry agreed.

"This is called Parseltongue in Europe. It is a not uncommon gift in North American shamans, and a little less common in parts of southern Asia. It is rare in sub-Saharan Africa, and almost unheard of in the rest of the world these days. Only a family called Gaunt had the gift in western Europe these last four hundred years, and that was Tom Riddle's, or Voldemort's, mother's family."

"So I can do it. . . ?"

"Because Voldemort can," Jason agreed.

"The gift called being an Animagus, or the ability to change into an animal is more common than Parseltongue, but still rare. You have both a natural ability and Voldemort's. However," Mo went on, "the forms are currently in conflict, and so you can not use either. Changing your physical appearance is called being a Metamorphmagus. Housing the Horcrux is interfering with your ability there."

"The headaches you told me about, when you confronted Voldemort, were caused by the connection overloading," Jason added.

"What . . . what can be done about it?" Harry asked.

"Well, there are three answers. Voldemort, if he is aware of this, could kill you while reabsorbing his Horcrux. If anyone were to hit you exactly in the scar with a Killing Curse, it would destroy the Horcrux and likely kill you. Hit you in the body, and the Horcrux would likely survive. Fortunately," Mo quickly added, "we can break the Horcrux without hurting you."

"We are the only ones on Earth who can," Jason added.

"True," Mo agreed. "However, unless you object, we would like to try and destroy the Horcrux while allowing you to keep the enhanced powers, while allowing your natural powers to grow. This may take a few more months of study, but we hope to solve it more quickly."

Stunned, Harry merely nodded. Then he asked in a small voice, "Do you think Professor Dumbledore knows?"

"About the prophecy, and what it may say? Yes, as it was made to him. About Voldemort making you a Horcrux? Almost certainly. Beyond that, I could not really even guess."

"He does have the reputation of knowing more than anyone else, and about the most unlikely things," Jason acknowledged. "Still, he is no more truly all-knowing or all-seeing than any other wizard."

"True," Mo agreed. He turned back to Harry. "We will train you. It will be up to you if you go back to Hogwarts for your second year, or if you stay with us. In either case, we will use our time powers to fit in months of study into the remaining weeks before your school starts. After that, you should follow normal time."

Harry nodded.

"You will spend two weeks with many of our members, and meet others on your school's summer breaks if you go back there. As we are all over the world, so you shall see the world, especially the great deserts of Africa and the mighty Himalaya -- we spread there more than three thousand years ago. You will even spend time in Antarctica." Jason looked very surprised, for the member who made his home there was very powerful even by the group's standards, and very very reclusive.

"Yes, from this beautiful sea to the Americas and Australia, you shall see the world, young Harry."

"But only this island in the Aegean," Jason growled.

"Of course," Mo agreed. He grimaced and looked at Harry. "The other member who owns an island, Agathon . . . let us just say that he enjoys the company of boys your age too much."

Harry looked confused for a moment, then remembered all the warning his Muggle teachers had made about strangers. "Ah. . . ."

"Let us speak no more about Agathon," Mo state dismissively.

"Do you know where Voldemort is?" Harry asked.

"We believe he is back in Albania, although we cannot be certain," Mo said. "His disembodied spirit, in its current form, cannot be harmed. While it could be voluntarily confined, it cannot be forced into any prison we know of."

Harry thought about all this new information for a few moments, then a puzzled look came over his face.

"Yes, Harry?" Jason asked kindly.

"Why . . . why was I sent to the Dursleys?" Harry asked in a quiet voice. "Wasn't there anyone else?"

"For the blood wards Dumbledore established to work, you needed houserom with a fairly close blood relation of your mother. Other than your aunt, no, there was no one. Now, your parents did have several friends you should have been placed with."

"Black and Pettigrew?"

Jason nodded. "They were numbers one and four on the list. Your father's other close comrade, one Remus Lupin, was not considered as he is a werewolf."

Harry blinked at that.

"Werewolves, well, the condition will enhance certain aspects of their personality. Many have their worst characteristics become predominate. Many also become followers, true pack animals. That is closer to this Lupin, from what we have learned so far."

"There was another couple," Mo went on slowly. "Your friend Neville Longbottom's parents. Fortunately for you, but not them, they were attacked a short time after the attack on your parents. Neville's parents have been hospitalized since." He shrugged. "We have not yet gotten any details."

"Any other questions for now?" Jason asked.

"How did you find me?" Harry asked.

"Do you know what a house elf is?" Jason asked. Harry shook his head. "Long ago, they were free wood elves, but most of the wood elves were hunted down and destroyed in a war with the goblins. Some wood elves still survive these days, deep in the Urals. However, most of the survivors sought refuge with wizards. There were not many of them, a few hundred. This was deep in what you would now call the Bronze Age. The wizards collected oaths from them, enslaving them and their

descendants."

Harry looked horrified.

Mo nodded. "Yes, it was wrong, even for the time. Now, all house elves must serve wizards, although they do not necessarily have to be enslaved. Anyway, one enslaved house elf, named Dobby, knew of a plot against Hogwarts and against you. He stopped your mail from your friends, to make you think you weren't wanted. He looked in on you, and found you, injured. He had heard of an associate of ours somehow, and managed to contact him. He contacted me, and I sent Jason to look in on you."

"What's the plot?" Harry asked.

Mo smiled slightly. "We have no idea. He has to be loyal to the letter of his oath. We could have taken the information from his mind of course, but that would have injured, even killed him, which we would not do."

Harry looked relieved for a moment, but then asked, "Do you know who he works for?"

Mo and Jason smiled slightly. "Lucius Malfoy," Mo said drily. Harry made a face. "Exactly. Perhaps the leading surviving member of Voldemort's inner circle of Death Eaters."

"Death Eaters?"

"That's what Voldemort called his sworn and Marked followers." Jason held up his hand to forestall Harry's next question. "Voldemort created a black mark, a snake coming out of a skull. It marks the Death Eater and binds him to Voldemort. It could also be projected, in an oily smokey form. It usually marked a murder, if not a massacre."

Harry nearly shuddered, but then he stopped. He thought for a few seconds, making the two men curious.

Harry squared his shoulders and looked Mo in the eye. "In that case, if Malfoy's father is plotting against Hogwarts, then I have to go back next year, one way or another."

"Despite the fact that Dumbledore may have manipulated you?" Mo probed.

Harry shook his head. "I'm not going back for him, let alone for me. I'm going back for my friends, and everyone being used."

"Then we shall help you," Mo stated. Jason merely nodded. They were both telling Harry the truth, but they, and the members of their Order, were also looking forward to more excitement and fun than they had had in centuries.

*

Vernon Dursley scowled as he was led to an interrogation room the following afternoon. His expression lifted a bit when he saw Petunia was already sitting there, as they had not seen each other since their arrest.

They didn't even have time to really greet each other, however, before two men came into the small room. One was a very distinguished looking man, with greyish hair and a trim tooth-brush

mustache, dressed in what Vernon recognized as a very expensive hand-made suit. The other man was a younger, brawny bald black man, who was nearly as well-dressed. The guards left at the younger man's nod.

"Please, sit down," the older man said as he sat. The younger man turned his back on them for a moment and then stood with his back to the door. "I am Bartemius Crouch, and I am here to inform you of your sentences, and your options."

"Sentence!" Vernon roared. "We haven't even been tried yet!"

"I assure you, you have," Crouch stated.

"You're one of them, aren't you?" Petunia snarled.

Hearing the soft snort behind him, Crouch answered, "I suppose you could say we are two of them, Mrs. Dursley."

"Just who do you think you are!" Vernon shouted.

"I am the magical equivalent of your Foreign Secretary," Crouch answered calmly, which made the Dursleys blink in surprise. "However, for many years, I was our version of your Home Secretary. I still do quite a bit of the work when go-betweens between our two branches of Government -- magical and Muggle -- are needed. Now, Vernon Dursley, you have been found guilty of the physical abuse of, the improper care of, the improper imprisoning of, the grievous assault upon, and the attempted murder of Harry James Potter. Petunia Dursley, you have been found guilty of the physical and mental abuse of, the improper care of, abetting the improper imprisoning of, complicity in the grievous assault upon, and conspiring in the attempted murder of Harry James Potter. You have both also been found guilty of causing the death of a magical post owl, which was also a wizard's familiar. You are also facing additional charges from the Muggle Crown Prosecutor. Vernon Dursley, you are condemned to death."

Vernon paled, while Petunia let out a slight squeak. "Yes, yes, very upsetting, I'm sure. The next time you fall asleep, Mister Dursley, you will not be waking up. Petunia Dursley, you will serve a minimum of fifteen years in prison. Any time not served in a Muggle prison will be served in ours. I suggest you reject any option of parole before that time, but that is up to you. In addition, one half of your financial resources will be paid over to Mister Potter as blood money. A further ten percent will be collected by the Ministry for judicial costs, and fifteen percent will be paid to Gringotts Bank in processing and discovery fees. Mister Shackbolt?"

The Dursleys recoiled as Kingsley's wand bathed them in a cold pinkish light. "Now, neither of you will ever be able to say, write, or otherwise inform anyone about the magical world. The knowledge has also been suppressed in your son."

"All finished, Mister Crouch."

"Good, good." Crouch had his own wand out, and with a few muttered incantations, cursed Vernon Dursley with a curse designed to execute Muggles painlessly. "That concludes our business with you. Have a pleasant afternoon."

Chapter III

Harry stayed on the island with Jason until his birthday. In the just over two weeks he spent there, getting heavy doses of nutrition potions, plus good food, and plenty of exercise and sun, Harry went from an inch and half under the average height for British boys of his age to half an inch above it. He didn't have the genetics to be heavily-muscled, but his frame filled out and he could never be considered scrawny again.

Harry learned the meditation techniques he would need to learn Occlumency. He did no actual magic, although he flew twice a day, for at least half an hour each time. He also listened as Jason told him about the ideas and theories that underlay magic.

The only other magic Harry experienced was magically learning Classical and Mycenaean Greek through a combination of potions and sleep-learning. Harry would learn many more languages before fully learning Occlumency, as that ability would render the process impossible.

Tutmoses came for Harry the evening of July 31. "Good evening, Harry," he said in Greek.

"Good evening, Lord," Harry responded.

"There is no need to be formal with me," Mo answered. "Did you enjoy your birthday?"

"Yes, Lord," Harry answered. "It was even better than last year."

Well aware that Harry could only remember semi-celebrating one birthday, Mo merely smiled. "Good. Now you get to celebrate five more times."

Harry looked confused for a moment, and then smiled. He bowed formally. "I thank you," Harry stated, meaning every word. He knew he would relive the past few days or more five more times, no doubt in part just so he could have five more birthday celebrations.

"You deserve all this and more. Now, I must tell you that your uncle died in his sleep from a heart attack. Your aunt is in prison, and will be for some time. Your cousin does not remember your magic at all, not because we removed the memory, but because he is so stupid that when we repressed his memory to a degree, he actually forgot."

"I hope he can have good life," Harry said. "Is there anything I can go for them?"

"Why would you want to?" Mo asked, puzzled, and a little worried about Harry's self-esteem.

"They never liked me, and they hurt me," Harry managed to say. He could not have admitted that before. "And I don't like them. Still, they are my family, and it is my duty."

"I shall look into it," Mo replied, impressed. "Jason has explained portkeys?"

"He has," Harry agreed.

"Good." He handed Harry a gold necklace with a gold ankh. "Do not remove this, let alone lose it. Two hours before the next portkey activates, it will ring in a clear tone."

"Yes, Lord. When does this one. . . ." Harry disappeared.

"Sneak," Jason teased. "Good thing I already sent his trunk on. Where is he going?"

"Brother Mak is in the Grand Tetons. He will complete the next section of Harry's language training. . . ."

"Latin, French, Italian, Modern Greek, and Old Egyptian?"

"And Old Norse, which will give him training equal to the Third and Fourth year of Hogwarts' so-called Runes course. He will finish off at least twelve more languages before he returns here, if he is able, so that you can pick up the second stage of his Occlumency training."

"And in the mountains?"

"In those mountains, he can fly to his heart's content, and exercise his body. They will continue his magical training with some exercises. The other eight weeks will be in various places down the mountain chains, all the way to the southern edge of South America. There, he shall become as proficient as his current level of magic will allow. He will grow into the theory later. After he leaves you the second time, he will spend at least three two week segments doing some basic fight training and then four two week segments in our different outposts in the Himalaya, perfecting his Occlumency, starting his Legilimency, practicing his languages, and, of course, flying."

"And the last set of segments?"

"Ah, the longest and hardest set. The first will take him to the Temple. There, we shall separate and destroy the Horcrux within him, and then send him to the Antarctic."

"Is that really necessary?" Jason asked, nearly pleading.

"That is where Harry will quickly learn to manage his form or forms. Brother Cobra is both a Parselmouth and a cobra animagus. Brother Zara will also be there, and he is the only full metamorphmagus in the Order."

"And Zara is the most open and compassionate of us," Jason admitted.

"You have done well with young Harry," Mo pointed out.

"Thank you, Lord." Jason bowed. "I had forgotten what it was like to work with a boy his age. Despite all the abuse and likely manipulation, he is still a good, kind, decent, young man. The abuse has kept him from being as scholarly as he otherwise might have been, but I believe we can inspire that in him."

"Yes, he could not often show up his cousin," Mo agreed. "It seems that Dumbledore or his agents often interfered with the Muggle authorities, otherwise the Dursleys would have been investigated for neglect, although not necessarily abuse."

"Perhaps we shouldn't be so divorced from the regular magical society," Jason mused.

"The temptations to power would be too great, and we would likely end up destroyed, along with magical culture, and the Mundanes as well," Mo stated firmly. "We cannot risk it."

"At least not too often?" Jason asked.

"At least not too often," Mo agreed.

The two men smiled, and then Jason said, "I'm off to deliver some letters for Harry." Mo's eyebrows went up in surprise. "He allowed me to read them." Mo smiled, and Jason suddenly knew he would feel very foolish. "What?" Jason demanded.

"I'll just wait for Harry then, unless you'd prefer I deliver the letters?"

"Wait for. . . ?" Jason rolled his eyes and held out the letters. Mo smirked, took the letters, and disappeared.

*

When Ron went to his room that night, he didn't pay much attention to the sealed bit of parchment on his pillow until he laid down. Thinking it was likely yet another of the twins' pranks, he tossed it on the floor without seeing Harry's handwriting.

When he woke up the next morning, the letter was shoved under his bed, where it would remain for more than two weeks, which was the next time his mother made him clean his room. The letter was upside down, so again, Ron did not notice Harry's handwriting, and Ron had forgotten where the parchment had come from. He tossed it in with the scraps of parchment that he had cleaned from his trunk, which were used for jotted notes and such, or even for starting fires.

Percy, harassed by the twins, paid no attention to the parchment he was wading up to start a fire (fires started by magic could cause ashwinders). The parchment was spelled only to be really noticed by the person addressed in any event.

Therefore, Harry's letter to Ron went unnoticed.

*

When Hermione went to her room that night, she instantly saw the sealed bit of parchment on her pillow. She approached it warily, until she recognized Harry's scrawl. Forgetting that if this was a trap, there would likely be magical ways of imitating handwriting, she picked up the letter and examined the seal. It had clearly been made with some form of magic, as Muggle wax and seals could not produce such fine detail.

Vowing to decipher the hieroglyphs later (she would conclude they meant 'acolyte, beloved of the beloved of Osiris'), Hermione carefully opened the letter, leaving the seal intact.

Dear Hermione

I'm writing to let you know I am fine. Really. The summer started off pretty bad, as you may know. Now, things are better. I am having fun, and learning a lot. Yes, I have my summer homework done. I wish you were here, since I always learn more when you help.

I wrote to you and Ron. If you want to write back, you need to write on the empty half of the parchment. These were spelled so that only you (or Ron for his) can really notice them, so only you can use it to write back. When you're done, tear the parchment at the crease, fold it in half (going the opposite way to the first crease), hold it to your mouth and say (so your breath hits it) TAKE THIS TO HARRY and then burn it.

*your friend, always/
/Harry*

Touched, for this was positively gushing for Harry, Hermione did as instructed. She was not surprised to see the ashes disappear as they formed.

*

In the mean time, about fifteen seconds after Tutmoses disappeared, Harry (and his trunk) appeared. Harry smiled and bowed.

"Forget something? Or are you back?" Jason asked. It was a rhetorical question, as Harry was obviously wearing heavier clothes than when he left, had added a few pounds of muscle, and had lost much of his tan.

"I am back, if you will have me," Harry answered formally.

Jason nodded, and answered, "Harry, you are what your culture would call my squire. Wherever I am, you are welcome. Now, how do you feel?"

"A little tired," Harry confessed. "Brother Hotep had me exercising all day, so that I would be tired enough to make the time change without any problems."

"Other than that?"

"I feel like all the information and languages are going to start leaking out of my ears," Harry admitted. "I don't know if I can really learn all that I've been told I'm going to. In fact," he went on, "I don't know if Hermione could."

"Harry, my friend, it is time to talk about power and brains. There is no absolute way of measuring power, but there are ways of measuring potential. Voldemort has slightly more potential than Dumbledore. You should have had close to the same potential as your Headmaster. However, the Horcrux has augmented some of your powers, while hindering far more. Your family hindered your ego's development. You are actually quite intelligent. Even if your Hermione could learn slightly more than you, slightly more quickly, she could not utilize what you will learn nearly as well. She may indeed be powerful, but when we have removed the blocks on your magic, you will be the most powerful regular wizard in Europe since Merlin."

"Regular?"

"I was once a regular wizard," Jason pointed out.

"You mean before, well, some three thousand years ago?"

"Exactly," Jason agreed. "I'd guess, from your descriptions, I was probably as powerful as your Professor McGonagall or Hermione, although my gifts, like yours, were more in charms and combat than in transfiguring things. Your basic power and control both stabilize between the age of nine and eleven, which is why your magical training starts after your eleventh birthday. Both will increase along fairly predictable curves over six or seven years. After that, if you work at it, your power and control will both continue to increase, albeit in very tiny ways. Generally, regular wizards are at their most powerful between the ages of forty and eighty or so, and then their

physical age starts them going down hill faster than their magic can improve."

"But you don't go 'down hill'," Harry said in understanding.

"Exactly." Jason shrugged. "I cannot prove that my power is really all that much greater than it was five hundred years ago, or perhaps even a thousand. I do know it has increased slightly over time. I am probably almost as powerful, more or less, as Dumbledore or Voldemort . . . or you." He smiled. "Although I was a superior wizard in terms of my power and abilities, I am probably fairly average for the Brotherhood. Still, some were brought in because of their faith and their other skills, such as in potion research. Tutmoses was likely his age's version of Dumbledore, very powerful and skilled at most magics. There are perhaps a dozen like him in the Brotherhood. Three of them, including the First Acolyte, he who started us, were more like Merlin in terms of their power, knowledge, and goodness. There is also the High Master, but he will decide if he will meet with you later on."

"Are they still alive?" Harry asked.

"They are. None of us have been completely destroyed by outsiders, and only one of us turned so Dark we had to destroy him. A few have let themselves die for various reasons. The rest of us are alive. And yes, you will meet some of them when you go to Egypt, if not before or after."

Harry pointed at his scar. "When they deal with this?"

"Precisely." Jason again smiled. "You might wish me to teach you many things, from throwing a fishing net to fighting with a short sword, but you would NOT want me working on that."

Harry grinned in understanding agreement. He could imagine feeling much the same.

When Harry woke up the next morning, he was pleased to see there was a letter from Hermione waiting for him. He reminded himself that it had not been ten weeks for the rest of the world, and, after a moment's more thought, figured that Ron would also write back soon.

*

Dear Harry:

Thank you so much for your letter. Yes, I've read about your life before Hogwarts, and earlier this summer in the papers. I cannot tell you how this made me feel, other than for the first time, I felt ashamed that I am still part of the Muggle world. My parents were horrified to read both the Muggle and magical newspapers. Also, I need to apologize. I know you would never lie to me, but I had thought your dislike of your relatives might have been exaggerated. I now know that if anything you understated the problems. I also need to tell you how sorry I am about Hedwig.

I don't know where you are, or who you are with. I would like to know, but I understand why you might not be able to tell me. Harry, I hate to think this, but it seems as if the Headmaster placed you at your relatives and neglected to check on you. The revelations this summer have also made me wonder about the events of last year, if perhaps Dumbledore did not just allow you to confront Voldemort, but managed to encourage us.

In any event, remember that I remain,

*your friend
with love
Hermione*

*Harry smiled at the letter. Friendship was such a rare thing in his life that he actually felt warm and secure just hearing from his friend, even if he did feel sad as well, as any thought of Hedwig made him feel.

Understanding that Ron would not be as quick at writing as Hermione, Harry shrugged off his bad feelings and wrote back on the same type of enchanted paper as the first letter.

Dear Hermione

Thanks for the quick response. I am having a good time, and learning lots more than I thought I could. I wish I could tell you more.

Believe me, I know I can trust you. However, there is a type of mind-magic called Legilimency, which allows access to another's thoughts. Both the Headmaster and Snape are supposed to be very good at it, especially the Headmaster. There is a counter, called Occlumency, which I am learning. If you want to learn all of the non-magical part, you need to learn deep meditation. Is there ayoga school or something near you? Maybe Parvati could help you find one? I was told that something Transcendental (thanks for the pocket spelling dictionary you gave me at Easter, by the way)Meditation works even better.

Write back when you can.

your friend

Harry

*

Harry and Hermione wrote back and forth every day during Harry's stay, during what he thought of as 'normal time'. Although disappointed Ron had not written back, Harry found himself growing closer to Hermione, sharing insights with her as they both learned meditation and yoga.

During the evening before Harry was to leave the island the second time, Jason disappeared, saying that others needed to talk with Harry privately. A thin, dark man about Jason's height came to talk with Harry first. The man bowed, and started waving his wand around Harry.

"I dealt with your injuries when you first arrived," the man said. "I am a healer. I am Asclepias."

"Nice to meet you, Brother," Harry said simply.

Asclepias sighed. He had never claimed to be a god, but had sometimes rather enjoyed being worshiped. "You are now a very healthy young man. Stay this way, and we can take care of your scar problem."

"As the modern Muggles would say," a deep voice said in English, "you have a rotten bedside manner."

Asclepias bowed to the powerful-looking stranger. Tutmoses was standing respectfully behind the man. "You may leave." The stranger turned to Tutmoses. "You may as well." Both men bowed deeply and scurried off.

"Excuse me, sir," Harry said. "Are you the First Acolyte?" This was the first member of the Brotherhood.

"No, I am the one who initiated the First Acolyte, more than six hundred years after my death and rebirth, more than six thousand years ago. I am Ahk Shir-rusch, or if you prefer, Osiris."

Harry blinked. Even he knew the major Egyptian gods, from a report he had done two years before. He peered closer.

Osiris pulled off his tunic, and Harry could see the scars crisscrossing the man's dark body. "I was once a wizard, born in acity -- buried under the shifting sands nearly four thousand years ago -- in what you would know as Chad." The man smiled. "Well, to us it was a mighty city. To you, it would appear a large village made of mud brick. I was powerful, and the traders who knew magic said that the greatest center of knowledge was in what you would call Iraq, on the Euphrates River. So, I made my way there when I was twenty-two, and studied there for more than twenty years."

He smiled again. "Your friend Hermione would not be happy in that time, for writing itself was nearly fifteen hundred years in the future. In any event, I returned to Africa, but stayed along the banks of the Upper Nile, in what you would call the Sudan. I experimented with the power I had, and the power I had within myself. I did not know it, but in one of those experiments, done after executing a criminal, I had created a Horcrux. A few months later, a fellow wizard, jealous of my greater knowledge and power, tried to kill me, cutting me into pieces, as you know."

Harry nodded.

"But my spirit did not escape to what lies beyond. It was anchored by the Horcrux. Instead, I used my power to rejoin and reanimate my body." Osiris shook his head. "If Voldemort, or Tom Riddle, as he once was, was as wise and knowledgeable as he thinks he is, he would have remade himself that night he confronted you. I was no more powerful than he. I would say that he, and I, and Merlin, and a few others, including you, are right at that upper limit of natural power."

Osiris shrugged. "I was proclaimed a living god, a reborn one, in fact. I enjoyed my power, and became a harsh god-ruler. I came to my senses a few centuries later, and I founded the Priesthood, and Brotherhood, to extend part of my message and maintain some of my influence, while giving up true power."

Harry swallowed nervously.

"No need to worry, young wizard. We had thought that this Voldemort was of no concern of ours. We were wrong. The elf that brought you to our attention stirred our compassion, and finding you were a living Horcrux stirred our interest. We shall help you, my young friend, but it is, as Jason would say, your fate to confront the self-proclaimed Lord Voldemort. Will you allow us to train you more than we have?"

"Yes, sir."

"Would you like us to totally eradicate the Horcrux and its effects, or keep some of the power inside you, while destroying the effects?"

Harry considered. "I don't know. Whichever you think best."

Osiris nodded. "Very well."

Chapter IV

Albus Dumbledore straightened up in his large chair and stretched, tired from all the paper work.

He stopped in mid-stretch, when he realized he was not alone. To his shock, there were three men sitting quietly, motionlessly, in front of him.

Dumbledore blinked.

Then he blinked again.

One man was very broadly built. One was very short, slight, and dark. One was nearly as dark, but much taller, and broadly built, although not as much as the first man.

The shortest man spoke. "We have come to speak to you about Harry Potter."

Dumbledore was fully that the three wizards before him were very powerful as individuals. That was in addition to the fact they had somehow appeared in his office. He could feel their power surging against his, surrounding it, cutting him off from any escaping.

"You are a very stupid man," the muscular wizard growled.

The tallest man held up a hand, and the other two again went still. He looked at Dumbledore, and for the first time in decades, the Headmaster was afraid. "We rescued Harry. We broke his connection to the Horcrux contained in his scar."

Dumbledore nearly fainted. "But . . . but . . ."

"But you felt you, or Voldemort, would have to kill Harry to break it? That is because you know so little about death magic," the man said. "We broke it. Do you know where any other of Riddle's Horcruxes are?"

Dumbledore managed to shake his head. His worldview was reeling. He did not notice the subliminal nudges infiltrating his powerful Occlumency fields.

"Using time magic, we are giving Harry up to a year's training, as he would like to return here. Obviously, we cannot allow him back unprotected. Therefore, we tell you we have given him Occlumency training. If you or your pet traitor try to read his mind again, he will hurt you, and be totally within his rights to do so, as we have taken over his guardianship. We have also made up for the abysmal potions training he had. If your pet hurts him, we will kill him. Do you understand?"

Dumbledore frowned, and started to object.

"Don't try and bluster," the man said. "Reign in your pet. Have him teach his Snakes proper behavior instead of the spoiled nature he has been nurturing since you gave him free reign. Harry will be fully prepared to protect himself. Should he need help, we will give it." More subliminal suggestions poured in, making connections throughout Dumbledore's subconscious mind. They could not force him to do anything, but they could make him rethink his positions.

"We are fully capable," the shortest man chimed in. "We are here, after all."

Dumbledore could not deny that.

"And remember, some of us will be in the forest, along with our minions, the vampires," the shortest man reminded Albus, who swallowed nervously.

"If you are lucky, Harry will forgive you for placing him in a loveless home," the leader stated.

"Remember, we will be keeping watch on you and your people, as well as Harry," the muscular man growled. "Help him, but do not hinder him."

"One of the three of us will be there at all times, along with others, who will indeed be keeping watch, as will our subjects, the vampires, day and night," the shortest man stated. Considering the shock the old man was in, he had decided that the repetition was needed. "Beware, Albus Dumbledore. The Eye of Osiris is upon you."

"And the Eye guards Harry Potter," the leader stated firmly. "And, before we leave, I should tell you that we believe Sirius Black may have been innocent. You might wish to look into that before we do." To Dumbledore's shock -- amplifying his bewilderment from the rapid fire delivery of the men and the (unfelt) assault on his mind-- the three men simply faded away, without the slightest ripple in Hogwarts' wards.

His mind was in turmoil, from what they had said and from the suggestions they had slipped into his subconscious. Dumbledore would spend the rest of the day, and much of the night, in deep thought.

*

As soon as the portkey effect left Harry as he traveled to a new destination, he screamed in agony for three seconds, which seemed a lot longer time than that.

When the pain left, Harry collapsed.

"That is the Cruciatus Curse, the torture curse," a light voice said. "Shall I do it again?"

"No!" Harry managed to exclaim.

"Not a bad recovery time," the voice commented. The voice hardened. "Sit up!"

Harry managed to sit up.

"Obedient. . . ." Harry glared with anger. "Well, perhaps not. Now, boy, pick up that wand over to your left."

Harry saw the wand, some three feet away, but hesitated. "I will hurt you often these next two weeks, Potter," the voice stated dispassionately. Harry could now just make out a robed and hooded figure some ten feet away. "However, I will never lie to you. Snap the wand at me and say 'hurt,' and you can Crucio me for three seconds. Now, pick up the wand, if you have the guts."

Harry looked confused. "You won't get many chances to hurt me, Potter." The figure stepped a little closer. "Afraid you'll miss?"

"What's the trick?" Harry demanded.

"We still don't know the prophecy, but it likely says you're the one who must stop Voldemort. It's unlikely you'll be able to do that with some minor hex. You'll need to kill him. Can you do that? Can you deliberately kill? Well, we can't let you practice that, so this is the next best thing."

The figure loomed over Harry. "And you must want to hurt me after I hurt you," the man sneered, reminding Harry of Snape. "Get it out of your system, boy!"

"It's wrong," Harry said. "And I can kill, if I have to."

"Really?" the voice demanded, dripping with skepticism.

"I killed Quirrell, didn't I?" Harry asked, a little frightened of the answer.

"You were trying to kill him?" The man sounded a bit surprised.

"No," Harry admitted, "but I thought I might, and I did."

"You're likely correct. But can you really hurt someone?" the man demanded. Suddenly, his eyes crossed as Harry's shin connected with the man's testicles, not once, but three times.

The man collapsed, moaning. Harry rolled out of the way, grabbing the man's wand and the one that he had been directed to. When the man stopped moaning some minutes later, Harry said, "I may have to kill. I may even have to hurt people. I will not torture."

"Please give me my wand back," the man gasped. "We're done for today."

Harry considered, and then handed the man back his wand. He used it on himself, and sighed with relief. Then the man pulled back his hood, revealing rather nondescript Middle Eastern features. Then the man smiled at Harry. "I think we'll get along fairly well, Potter." The smile hardened. "But I will still have to hurt you to train you. I will not deliberately inflict pain on you again, but what you will be doing will be painful. I am Scorpion, master of painful magics."

"More painful than cramming over twenty languages into my head, forced Occlumency training, and the physical exercises I've been doing for weeks?" Harry demanded.

"Yes, although perhaps not what you will learn these two weeks." The man sat up. "The Brotherhood members tend to fall into three groups, Potter. One group slowly fall into depression and let themselves die after a few hundred to a thousand years. One group congregates either at the Temple or in some of the monasteries we control in Asia. They run the Brotherhood. The third group tend to be loners. I have not had direct physical contact with another person in over two hundred years. I have not trained another person in over two thousand."

"I'm sorry I was sent here," Harry apologized. "I didn't know I was bothering you."

The man smiled, almost warmly. "You aren't, and I volunteered. We all volunteered. You are stirring up powers which had grown complacent, even lazy. We suspected Riddle was making Horcruxes, and did nothing about it. We should have. Opening ourselves up to you will refresh us, and we needed it."

The man stood. "I will show you to your room. Before you eat, I will show you how to fall properly, keeping control of your body and your wand at all times. Do it right, and you will be tired in less

than an hour, since you are in decent shape. Do it wrong, and you'll also have more bruises than you can count. Once you learn how to fall, then I will introduce you to blade fighting. Hopefully, I have enough salve for healing your cuts."

Harry sighed and followed his next teacher.

*

The morning after Dumbledore's confrontation, Severus Snape sat staring at his employer, who had been speaking nearly twenty minutes. Finally, he said, "You have kept too much to your self, Headmaster."

"It is likely true that I kept too much from you at least, not to mention Harry. In addition, I have indeed allowed you too much leeway." Dumbledore sighed. "Perhaps I have not cared enough for the students under your care." He looked directly at Snape. "These people are not to be trifled with. I think it is time you started considering Harry Lily's son, rather than James' heir."

Snape made a face.

"I believe the odds of Voldemort's being destroyed when he returns may have grown greatly in our favor. I would like you see his true end, Severus."

It was clear that Snape was conflicted.

"You will still have a role to play. It is time that you bring more than your endurance into play. You have had the chance to influence your students towards the Light. You have failed, just as I have failed to encourage you. Perhaps I have too easily fallen into the stereotype of believing ambition being Dark." He sighed. "It was certainly a Darkness within me, and still is. I fear these Old Ones will not be forgiving to any of us."

"Who are these people, Albus?" Snape nearly whispered. He had seen fear in the Headmaster's demeanor. He had never seen that before.

"I will indeed need to find out more about them," Dumbledore agreed. "I need to leave in a few moments to discover what I may."

*

Nurmengard was a place of horror. The last of the horrors may have been perpetuated in 1945, but to the magical, especially to those with a touch of the 'inner eye' the very stones shrieked with pain.

None could enter or leave, or do magic within, save the holder of the Elder Wand. Only the Master of the Elder wand could make serious changes. The sole prisoner, confined to one small segment of the prison, had once been the Wand's master, but now he was confined by the magic he had called into being.

Gellert Grindelwald looked up from his desk where he was reading when the wards announced the current Master of the Wand was coming. With effort, he managed to stand, and hobbled towards the room Albus had set up for their meetings.

Dumbledore winced. He reminded himself why he usually visited only in the twilight, so that he wouldn't see how frail, how decrepit, Gellert was becoming. When Grindelwald smiled,

Dumbledore noticed that another tooth was missing.

"Twice in less than two months? That is a record not matched since 'Forty-six," Gellert said. "And in full daylight, too. Not since what? The early Seventies, I believe."

"I could repair some of the damage. . . ."

Gellert waved that away. "You won't kill me. Let me fade away. You must want something, old friend. What is it?"

Dumbledore sat on his side of the warded room. The two could not physically touch. Dumbledore knew that despite Gellert's frail condition, his only lover would happily physically attack him given the chance. He told Gellert everything which had happened since Harry Potter had been reported missing. "So what, if anything, do you know of these Old Ones?" he finished.

"They are an old Solidity," Gellert said, willing to share his knowledge to break the monotony. "They come from Egypt, but how far back they go, I cannot say. Some say they date back to the early Bronze age. Some say before Upper and Lower Egypt were united, some fifty-one or two centuries ago. In any case, they call themselves the Brotherhood, or even the Priesthood, of Osiris." He shrugged.

"They are also found in the Himalaya. I don't know if the Egyptian group spread there, or if two or more groups merged. Their secondary temple was destroyed by Roman mages soon after Augustus' conquest, but the original temple, the Great Western Temple of Osiris, has never been found."

"And the vampires?"

"Vampires emerged from Anatolia and the Himalaya some three thousand years ago. They served the Brotherhood, and are still beholden to them." Gellert looked at Albus with a bit of malicious glee. "There are powers in the world I took care not to disturb, my friend. The Brotherhood was the most dangerous I know of. It appears as though you have disturbed them."

"Possibly, although I prefer to think their attention is on Voldemort," Dumbledore stated firmly, and to Gellert's ear, a bit hopefully.

"Nonsense," Gellert retorted. "Their eye is on Potter. Some say the Brothers are immortal. Maybe, maybe not."

"You can't be serious!"

"I saw several of their members, but only one of them more than once. The first time I saw him was in the spring of 1899, in Istanbul. A rather nice sodomite orgy." Dumbledore shuddered. He had been denying that side of his nature for nearly a century.

"One man had the Eye of Horus, or as they prefer to call it, the Eye of Osiris, tattooed over his heart. A vampire friend had told me of the Brotherhood soon after I left England, and told me that was an identifying mark. The same man surprised me in my sauna in 1937, warning me to stay away from certain parts of the world, should I succeed in having the Muggles destroy themselves. He had not aged a day."

Dumbledore thought about that, and did not like where those thoughts led.

"In any case, the point is, does this Brotherhood still recruit members? If they are immortal, maybe, maybe not. Either way, if they do recruit, then your Harry might be the perfect candidate. You have betrayed the boy, Albus. You allowed him to be in a place where he was abused. You trapped me here, because I did not care to see what my minions were doing to my prisoners. That those prisoners were tortured past insanity. I imprisoned my enemies, adults who opposed me, for what I thought was the Greater Good. You imprisoned an innocent child, something I never did, for what you thought was the Greater Good. You think me evil because I talked the Muggles into killing so many of their own, and allowed many of our own to be abused. Yet you did so to a small child. Do not think you will be forgiven that much easier than I, if we can be forgiven."

"You may be right," Dumbledore admitted. He sighed. "Is there anything I can do for you, which you think I might actually do?"

"If you could tell the elves who send my food in to make things a bit softer, and perhaps just a little more spicy, I would appreciate it," Gellert answered.

"I will do so." Dumbledore stood.

"I wouldn't mind more frequent visits," Gellert then said softly, admitting his loneliness for the first time.

"I will do what I can . . . old friend." Albus left, with even more on his mind than when he arrived.

*

That night, Tutmoses met with Jason and Osiris. "I have turned up a new wrinkle," he said.

"What is that?" Osiris asked.

"Did you know that Harry has an invisibility cloak?" The two men nodded. "Did you know it was one of the so-called Deathly Hallows?"

That made the two men blink.

"The poor boy is already under one Prophecy," Osiris said. "Do you think he is the one Prophesied to reunite the Three?"

"He has one. Dumbledore has another," Tutmoses said. "If Voldemort has any connection with the Resurrection Stone, then yes."

Jason sighed tiredly, pinching his nose.

"Why tell me?" Osiris asked. "You head the Brotherhood."

"I am the current elected head," Tutmoses agreed. "You are still the High Master, the true leader. I hesitate to take the next step without your advice."

"What next step, if I may know?" Jason asked.

"The Deathly Hallows, and the Prophecy, are Druid magic," Tutmoses pointed out.

Jason winced. "I suppose we might have to involve them," he said unhappily.

"I will speak to the Tuatha," Osiris said. "Jason, you will tell Harry the story of the Deathly Hallows tomorrow."

"I suppose I must," Jason agreed reluctantly. "We don't want to treat him as Dumbledore did."

"Exactly. Does he keep up his daily correspondence with the girl?"

"He does," Jason agreed. "It may be good for him."

"As she is not part of the magical culture, it may be," Tutmoses agreed. "We don't want him distracted by the so-called Pure Blood's attitudes towards arranged marriages."

"Don't tell me he's under a contract, too!" Jason pleaded.

"No, and we don't want anyone suggesting he should have one made, either," Tutmoses said. "We don't want him used by any force other than fate."

"That has usually been enough," Jason sighed unhappily.

*

Dumbledore shivered as he stepped onto the shore of Azkaban. He loathed the place. He smiled when Fawkes appeared on his shoulder, softly singing. That would keep up his spirits, and drive the dementors from their immediate vicinity.

In his cell, Padfoot's head snapped up. The ever-present chill was receding somewhat, and he could hear noises in the distance. He transformed himself back into Sirius Black before the visitor arrived.

"Dumbledore?" Sirius was surprised to see the Headmaster, with a Bubblehead Charm in place, at the door to his cell.

Sirius no longer really noticed the stench.

"Sirius," Dumbledore intoned. "Tell me everything that I need to know about that Halloween night and after."

"A bit late, don't you think?" Sirius demanded.

"Perhaps," Dumbledore agreed. "Should I just leave?" He held out a potion bottle, nearly a full pint. "Part of this is a stimulant, part a nutrition potion. There is also a mild truth serum. You cannot be forced to tell the truth, but you cannot lie."

Sirius gave the Head of the Order of Phoenix a dirty look, but took and drank the potion. He just managed not to demand why this hadn't happened years before.

*

An hour later, Dumbledore handed Sirius another pint bottle. "This doesn't have the truth serum in it, and is lighter on the stimulant. I believe you, of course."

"And?"

"If your wand has not been snapped, we shall have you out soon, as that would prove you did not send the curse into that gas line. You may have suppressed the knowledge that you did so, or done so accidentally, after all. If it has, well, in any event, you shall be moved to the low-security end of the island. Better food and no dementors."

"That will help," Sirius admitted. "But why all this interest in me now?" He frowned. "When exactly is now, any way?"

"Today is the Fourteenth of August, 1992." Dumbledore sighed. "Let me tell you about Harry."

Chapter V

There are many large and impressive rooms in Malfoy Manor. This was not one of them. No room in the Manor could be called cosy, but this study was at least comfortable and intimate.

Lucius Malfoy sat before the unlit fireplace, staring into an untasted glass of brandy. Something, or worse, some things, were going horribly wrong, and he was not sure what they were.

The Minister was not taking his firecalls, or even seeing him, despite being reportedly in a panic over a meeting just a few days before. All of his best sources of information, and those of his allies, were drying up fast -- something had put a scare into the Ministry, and Lucius had no idea what had happened. Several members of the Hogwarts Board of Governors also seemed to be growing some backbone. Worst of all, his three top agents in North America had been killed over the last week. When he inquired, their Department of Justice had merely said, "Justice has been served."

Lucius frowned. It must somehow go back to Potter. The boy had been abused by Muggles, and that should have provided Lucius and his Pureblood allies with some chance to win points. Somehow, it had all been handled before they could emit so much as a peep.

The only thing that seemed to have gone right lately was getting rid of that stupid Muggle day diary his Master had left in his care. It had been pressing on his mind for years, and finally, without really knowing why, he had managed to slip it into Arthur Weasley's daughter's books that morning in Diagon Alley.

All it had cost him was a black eye and bruised ego. Who would have thought a desk jockey like Weasley could still pack such a punch?

He hoped he had done the right thing.

Lucius sipped a bit of brandy, while Dobby silently watched. The elf had met with his hero, Harry Potter. The Great Harry Potter had actually thanked him! He wondered if he could ever get free of this master. . . .

Dobby quickly stopped that train of thought before he had to punish himself.

*

The pompous witch, nervous as she was, managed to pull together her arrogance. "We cannot support any interference with magical cultures outside of our borders. The Muggles may interfere with other Muggles, but we stick to our own. You will do whatever you want to do, and we cannot stop you. Just don't expect any aid." With that, the Vice Premier of the North American Confederation of Magic withdrew with what little dignity she had left.

The three Druids who together made up the Tuatha, the leaders of the Druid cults, looked at each other and shrugged. "Hardly unexpected," one said.

"And irrelevant," another agreed. "The question is, do we really want to get involved?"

"We do," answered the first.

"You think this boy is the one of the prophecy," the second one demanded, "the one who reunites

the so-called 'Hallows' and creates the climate where we can start returning the faithful to our homelands?"

"The faith, not the faithful," the third one stated, startling the other two. He was old, wise, and powerful in nearly every sense, by anyone's standards. "We now know Potter holds one, while of course Dumbledore holds another. That blasphemous would-be immortal does not know, at least not for certain, but the Resurrection Stone was stolen by Salazar Slytherin, and passed on to one of his bastards. That line ended with Riddle. His grandfather held the stone, set by Slytherin into a ring. Riddle knows of the ring, but since he did not use its powers, does not know exactly what it is."

The powerful wizard held the younger two in his gaze. "I believe we must be there. The Brotherhood is opening up a number of wedges. Tutmoses, and Osiris, wish to get at least some of their Brotherhood into the current era, reversing recent trends. Potter must be an engaging youth to interest so many of those blase ancients. In doing so, they are opening up wedges at Hogwarts, for themselves and their damned vampires, and offer us an opening as well."

"They would use us," the second Druid said scornfully.

"I do not like what Osiris stands for, but he, unlike some of his Brotherhood, has always treated us with respect," the third Druid reminded his colleague. "Will they use us? In a sense. Are they willing for us to use them, and Hogwarts, and perhaps even Potter to an extent? Yes. If both sides respect limits, it would be to all of our advantage."

"We were once rivals in many senses, but we do not have to be enemies," the first druid reminded the second one. "They no longer preach their blasphemy. I don't even know if they all believe much of it any more. They are willing to help us preach our beliefs in the Homelands in return for our helping Potter if needs be."

The second Druid thought about all this, and then glared and stated. "If we do this, we should all be agreed."

The other two reluctantly nodded.

The second Druid smiled. "Good. Then I agree. It is time to return the Faith home."

*

Jason watched Harry, just returned from what was hopefully his last set of training visits, step confidently into the sea and toss the net three times further than he had during his first sojourn here. "Is his preliminary training over?" Jason asked Tutmoses softly.

"It is," the Egyptian responded. "The young man has responded splendidly. No matter what the task, he managed to achieve it, and asked for more. Some things he achieved with ease -- he should be both a Charms and a dueling master in the future -- others took him more time. Still, he surpassed nearly any goal we might have had for him when he started."

"What were his most difficult areas?" Jason asked. "IS there something he didn't succeed at?"

"Well, he did not achieve two animagus forms, but that is very rare. He could have, but taking the snake form would have precluded his keeping the Parseltongue in his normal shape now that he is disconnected from the Horcrux."

"How odd."

"Yes, well, neither the snake form nor the Parseltongue were his native magic, so we are thankful he even had the option. Cobra advised keeping the Parseltongue, and he does not give advice lightly. Harry kept much of the other power, of course. Oh, he may not have been a full Metamorphmagus. Still, while he cannot change the shape of his body at all, he can do enough to change his face a bit and his hair, if needs be. It will just take him a few minutes."

"I am glad the brothers in Nepal were able to adjust his eyes."

"Yes, that will give him an advantage, as he will continue to wear his glasses for a while."

"Are the camps set up in the forest?" Jason asked after a few moments of silence.

"They are. The Druids are established at the spring in the mountains, which is the headwater of the main stream feeding the loch."

"Isn't that at the opposite side of the valley from Hogwarts?"

Tutmoses nodded. "True. However, the vampires are established to the south, while we will be to the west. The Druids have spoken to the merpeople in the loch. They will watch the north, while the Druids watch the east." He shrugged. "Remember, they do not overly care for us, but have agreed to work with us. They hope to get a toehold into Hogwarts, and bring their faith back to Britain. Overall, I think things are well covered."

"Do I have a contact in London, when we go there tomorrow?"

"Not really," Tutmoses admitted. "We have had so little contact with Britain since Myrddin's time, we really have no one there."

"Will any of the Druids help us in London?"

Tutmoses shook his head. "No. They only have marginal ties with the few remaining Welsh clans, and only a bit more with the Highland clans. They cursed the site of London over nineteen hundred years ago, and will not approach it."

"Perhaps we should just go to the goblins and then go to Hogsmeade," Jason suggested.

"Won't his friend be waiting?"

"That's right," Jason admitted. "She was supposed to go and meet up with that boy who never wrote back and his family, but decided to wait for Harry. He should tell me tonight where we'll meet them."

"Are you nervous about moving through Muggle London?" Tutmoses asked. "You, one of the most feared magical warriors of the bronze-age Mediterranean, who now calls himself after his grandfather, the legendary Argonaut?"

"When was the last time you were in a modern Muggle city?" Jason asked. "Not a village or small town, but a large city."

"I was in Cairo in . . . 1902."

"Go there now, for an hour. Then you can tease me."

"Very well. Anything else before I go off and face the dangers of the modern world?" he teased.

"Any word on Sirius Black?"

"No, other than most of the charges have been dropped. That's still being kept quiet. He has been moved to the secure ward at St. Mungo's."

"Well, then, off with you," Jason smirked. "I'll have some strong wine waiting for you."

*

Tutmoses was back in less than fifty minutes, looking very shocked.

"Master Mo?" Harry asked, looking up for the small fire where he was grilling fish.

"Think nothing of it, Harry," Jason said jovially. "He just got ataste of the late twentieth century."

Mo shuddered. "I have seen automobiles, of course, but never have I seen such a . . . a . . . I have no words for what I saw." He took the goblet of wine offered and only then stripped off to join Harry and Jason in the buff, warming himself in the sun.

"Hermione said we could appear at her parents' house," Harry said, ignoring the interruption. "Her mother has the day off and will drive us."

Jason gave Harry a wan smile. "Well, I supposed I had to ride in one of those contraptions sooner or later."

"And I will go speak with Dumbledore," Tutmoses said.

*

Albus Dumbledore walked into his office after breakfast and saw he had a visitor. "You know, you could announce yourself," he complained.

"I could," Tutmoses agreed. "Is there anything we can do to help you with Sirius Black?"

"Not unless you can prove he didn't accidentally send that hex into the gas line," Dumbledore admitted. "Do you know the Marauders'secret?"

"We have managed to access the reports, so yes, we know about their being animagi."

"If Pettigrew is still alive, he must be found," Dumbledore pointed out.

"We agree."

Dumbledore frowned, and asked, "And did you manage to break the Horcrux without harming Harry?"

"We did. He no longer has any direct connection to Voldemort."

"Now answer me this. Did breaking the Horcrux break the Prophecy?"

Tutmoses sat back and thought. "Interesting question. We have not yet finished deciphering the copy of the Prophecy we made. Would you care to tell us the full Prophecy?" Tutmoses quoted most of the Prophecy, although the phrases were out of order. Taking the phrases from the copy of the prophecy sphere they had obtained was not easy.

Dumbledore sighed, and gave him the full text.

"If the 'power' Voldemort doesn't know about came from Voldemort himself, it is possible it is broken. However, the Mark has not been totally destroyed. It is still a Horcrux, but no longer connected to Harry. We wanted to wait, in part until we had the Prophecy before totally destroying it."

"Then why disconnect it from Harry?"

"Because we promised him we would." Tutmoses smiled grimly, "You believe that the power Harry has is connected directly with the scar. We believe it was the power which drew us in." He shrugged. "We have a great amount of experience with prophecies. There are usually any number of ways of fulfilling them. We will destroy the Horcrux on Harry tonight. Once all the Horcruxes are destroyed, Harry or nearly anyone could destroy Riddle, at least in theory. But we shall help him as needed."

"How will you find them?"

"How would you?" Tutmoses retorted. "We at least now know what they are. There were echoes in the sixth one.* The first was some sort of small booklet, like a Muggle appointment diary. The second was Ravenclaw's diadem or tiara. The third was a ring used by the Gaunt family. That one we have recovered and broken." He did not mention that they had given it to Harry, giving him two of the three Deathly Hallows. "The fourth was a locket held by the Gaunt family. The fifth and final one was the Cup of Hufflepuff. The goblins helped us track that down. We have broken the Horcrux and they restored it to the vault it was held in, for a consideration, of course."

"So, three down?"

"Three down, three to go." Tutmoses glared at Dumbledore. "Has your pet spy been reigned in?"

"I believe so."

"For his sake, and perhaps yours, let us hope so." Tutmoses faded away.

"I wish I knew how they do that," Dumbledore grumbled. He had one more trip to make before school started, and he was now running late.

*

*Since canon holds that Nagini was only made into a Horcrux in Albania after Voldemort killed Bertha Jorkins, there are only six Horcuxes.

*

"HAAAARRRYYYYY!" Hermione flung herself on Harry and hugged him. To her shock, Harry hugged her back.

Hermione stepped back and looked at him. She had been nearly an inch taller, in part because of her ten months age advantage. Harry was now an inch taller than she was (and now nearly two months older instead of ten months younger, although of course Hermione did not know that), and fully muscled. The other version of Harry had really only entered adolescence just before leaving his Third year. This Harry was already there.

"Did Ron ever get in touch with you?" Hermione asked, still holding Harry's arm.

"No," Harry answered, not caring all that much. His experiences that summer had given him more than enough male bonding to replace Ron in his life.

"I know you can't feel much for what happened to your relatives," Hermione said, "but like I said when I first wrote, I am sorry about Hedwig."

Harry's face fell. "I don't know how they could do that to such a sweet being," Harry said. "Maybe they had some reason for their, well, their hating me. I was forced on them. But Hedwig. . . ." He shrugged helplessly.

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't have mentioned it."

Harry shrugged again.

"Are you going to get another owl?"

"No, no I don't think so," Harry said. "Not right away, anyway. It just wouldn't be the same."

"I understand."

Harry smiled wanly. "Shall we go buy out a bookstore?"

Hermione's eyes went up in mock shock.

"I learned something this summer, Hermione."

"What's that?"

"For nearly ten years, I couldn't excel. THEY" (he spat the term) "couldn't stand me outdoing their precious. I might not be quite as smart as you, but I don't think there'll be many others in our class ahead of me."

Hermione beamed at him, but then her smile faltered.

"I know, Ron won't like it," Harry said. "Either he didn't feel like writing, or he somehow didn't notice the note. That would mean he really wasn't my true friend. Those notes were spelled so that my true friends could see them."

Hermione could see some possible flaws in Harry's arguments, but was too happy with Harry's full attention to bother pointing them out.

"Well, if you two are ready," Emma Granger said, "It's not a short drive into London." Hermione and Harry blushed as they realized they were still touching. They would stay a few inches apart the rest of the day.

Jason rolled his eyes.

*

"You've come a bit too early to gloat over my corpse," Nicolas Flamel spat. "I just buried my wife. Are you happy?"

Dumbledore straightened his back and started to intone, "To a well-ordered mi . . . AAHH!!"

"I can still whip your hide, Dumbledore! We were perfectly content. We should have given you a fake stone and gone into hiding. Now, bugger off!"

"But. . . ."

"Oh, what do you want now? My life's blood, since you managed to destroy my life's work?"

"I was hoping for some information."

"On?"

"The Old Ones, or the Priesthood of Osiris?"

"Are they after you?" Flamel asked with real relish in his voice.

"I hope not," Dumbledore admitted. "However, they have taken possession of young Harry. . . ."

Flamel cackled with glee. "The last time they took anyone under their wing, at least in Europe, his name was Merlin. I've met a few. Who did you meet?"

Dumbledore described the three men, as they had not given him names.

Flamel grinned. "The one you met today? Very high up in their priesthood. Named Tutmoses. Met him twice, once in . . . 1607 and the other time was in 1926, when the wizarding community was allowed to look over the King Tut material."

Dumbledore's jaw dropped.

"What? He was a magical priest of some sort in Upper Egypt, just before the Old Kingdom came together. There are powers on this earth you will never understand, Dumbledore. Do you think beings who created vampires to help their Muggle lovers live centuries are mere mortals? Now, bugger off, so I can die in peace!"

"But. . . ."

"But nothing! Oh, and I changed my will. You'll get nothing but my left-over dragon blood. Now, get out!"

Dumbledore left, confused on many levels.

"Is he gone?" Perenelle asked quietly, a few minutes later.

"He is. Now, let me fake my death, too, before he realizes I did give him a fake stone last year. We'll announce our deaths, send him his inheritance, and be well-hidden in the Yukon."

*

"We cannot be seen by the non-magical here, so now would be a good time to talk," Jason said, once his charges were near the door of the Leaky Cauldron. "Now, as you might know, there are many in the British wizarding world who do not like Muggles, as they call them, and some are not thrilled about first generation magic users, either."

"How bad is it, really?" Mrs. Granger asked.

"Should Voldemort or someone like him stage a take over? Then I would say this was Germany back in 1935, and Hermione is a Jew."

"Really?" Hermione asked in a frightened voice.

"Really." Jason snorted. "There are even some who believe that there must be a way for Muggle children to 'steal' magic, that that's why there are Squibs."

"You mean, they think I stole some other child's magic?" Hermione demanded, appalled.

"Exactly. 'Don't allow your children to play with Muggles' doesn't just mean because the Muggle child might discover there is true magic, but because your child might lose his magic."

"That's not how it works!" Hermione protested. Then she shuddered. "Is it?"

"Of course not," Jason said. "I'm told it's absolutely genetic." He shrugged. "I don't know about such things. Those in the Brotherhood who do, claim it's a dominate trait of the Xchromosome, whatever that means." He held up his hand, as both Grangers were taking deep breathes so they could inform him. "And I don't need to know. The point is, as soon as we enter the pub, I will transfigure our clothes to look less drably mundane."

"Assimilate and pass?" Mrs. Granger asked.

"The moderate bigots appreciate the effort. It reassures them. Most won't notice you dressed as they do."

And with that, they entered the pub. Mrs. Granger watched several patrons glare at them, especially a rather toad-like woman. Then Jason, with a wave of his wand, transformed their clothes. Mrs. Granger's smart tan business suit flared into robes which were akaleidoscope of brilliant blues for the top and blues and purples for the pleated bottom. Hermione quickly matched her mother's style, but in yellows and greens. Mrs. Granger thought they looked like garish versions of a mid-medieval style.

Harry's and Jason's outfits also looked medieval to Mrs. Granger's eye, except there was little doubt they were kited out as warriors, with more close-fitting robes. Harry, unrecognizable under afloppy hat, placed his wand conspicuously in a holster on his belt. Jason's belt also held a wicked looking

knife and an empty scabbard for a short sword.

"Thank you, dear," Mrs. Granger said, in the same tone all wives use to their husbands when they manage to do an expected task to her near-satisfaction. The patrons relaxed, and the quartet moved quietly through the tavern and into Diagon Alley.

The quartet spent an enjoyable morning and afternoon in Diagon Alley. Harry needed a multi-compartment trunk, but other than that, a visit to Gringotts and a few quick stops to pick up basic supplies and lunch, they spent most of their time in Flourish and Blotts and some used bookstores.

Hermione did notice that Harry avoided looking towards Eelops or the pet store.

"Do you know anything about this Lockhart?" Mrs. Granger asked with distaste, looking at the garish covers of his books.

"Opinion differs," Jason said. "He was a seemingly mediocre student at Hogwarts, who worked as an Obliviator in the early Seventies. When the war got hot, he quit and left Britain. Now, if he did all the things he claimed, well, it would be impossible. However, the main things he's claimed to have done, were done. So, some really significant magic and a lot of puffery equals Gilderoy Lockhart."

"Really?" Hermione asked.

"Seemingly. A few people have suggested that he may have paid off the people who did the actual work, or even Obliviated some of the people who did these things. If so, there's no evidence of either, and some Ministries have looked into him. If he did all these things, then he's a braggart, a prima donna, but quite powerful and perhaps even dangerous. If he didn't, then he's possibly even more dangerous."

"Why would Hogwarts hire him, if there's any doubt?" Mrs. Granger asked.

"Because who else wanted the job?" Jason asked. "For over thirty years, no one has held the job for more than a year, at least not consecutively. If Lockhart is gone after this year, one of us might ask for the job."

"That would be so cool!" Harry said.

"We'll see," was all Jason would say.

Chapter VI

Tuesday, September 1, 1992

Escorted by Jason, Harry and Hermione arrived at Platform 9 3/4 forty-five minutes early. Hermione, on the verge of full adolescence, was overwhelmed by Jason and intrigued by the now-lean, muscular, and studious Harry. Hermione may have already read through all of Lockhart's books, but he would never stir a heartbeat.

The pair settled into their compartment quickly. Neville found them some ten minutes later. A number of other students in their year came by to say hello to Hermione, and then to Harry as well. Harry was impressed that Hermione seemed to know everyone in their year. Even two Slytherins, Tracey Davis and Daphne Greengrass, said hello politely.

The Weasleys surged onto the train with just a few minutes to go. Ron looked through the cars until he found Harry. He was trailed by his sister and a tiny nervous blonde with long hair. "Hey, Harry!" Ron said, dragging his caged rat in. "Neville, Hermione." He looked back at Harry. "Why didn't you ever write?"

"I did," Harry answered tightly.

Ron frowned. "Hedwig never showed up."

"My relatives killed her," Harry said pointedly while the others glared angrily at Ron. The Dursleys' killing Hedwig had been in the news reports, along with the stories about Harry. Ron, however, had not really read them. "I had a letter delivered to you in mid-July. It was placed on your pillow and spelled so that only you would really notice it."

"Really?" Ron concentrated for a moment. "Oh, I remember now. I thought it was some joke of Fred and George's. Sorry." With that, Ron dismissed the summer and turned around. "Don't you two have someplace else to go?" he demanded.

"No," Ginny retorted. "I don't want to sit with Percy, or Fred and George for that matter, any more than you do."

"Mum said you should sit. . . ."

"With one of my brothers. If you aren't my brother, say so now," Ginny pouted.

"That doesn't work on me like it does Dad, Bill, and George," Ron retorted. He glared at Luna. "And what's your excuse, Loony?"

Luna recoiled slightly. "I don't know anyone else," she said nervously. She had not been away from her father for more than a few hours since her mother's death. She had hoped she might find some friends.

"Ronald, don't be a prat," Hermione commanded. "Come in, you two, there's room."

Luna sat next to Hermione (who was next to Harry), while Ginny sat next to Neville. Ron came in last, as both girls had kicked him on the shin (Ginny twice) and it took him a minute to recover.

After everyone introduced themselves, Luna asked, "If you don't mind, are the stories about you this

summer in The Daily Prophet?"

Harry shrugged. "More or less. I really don't want to talk about my relatives, and I can't talk about most of the rest of it."

"I understand," Luna said. She looked at Ginny, who was alternating between gazing at Harry and glaring at Hermione, before going back to Harry. "I was sorry to hear about your familiar."

"Thank you," Harry managed.

From there, the group relaxed. They spent the trip talking, mostly aimlessly, although Luna ruthlessly pumped the second years about the staff and the classes, which Hermione enjoyed. Harry treated everyone to snacks from the cart, although Hermione made them eat their sandwiches first. Harry was kind enough to trade one of his chicken Panini for one of Ron's corned beef sandwiches.

Only Hermione and Luna noticed Harry glancing at times in Ron's general direction, a puzzled look on his face.

*

Harry was not totally surprised when Draco and his two bookends showed up about two thirds of the way through the trip. Also not really surprisingly, Malfoy was smirking.

After a few moments, Harry asked, "Did you want something, or did you need help getting your face unfrozen?"

Malfoy's smirk faltered for a moment, but he quickly recovered. "I never thought Muggles had many uses. Now I know they can't even do something simple, like get rid of you."

"They came a lot closer than your father's master did," Harry said, holding his temper. "I guess that makes Muggles superior to your Dark Lord Voldifart."

Ron, Neville, and Ginny all stopped mid-wince, while Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle stopped mid-outraged expression.

Luna giggled, while Hermione rolled her eyes.

Malfoy couldn't quite recover, as he both needed to deny that his father followed the Dark Lord, and yet had been offended by the term Potter had used. He couldn't figure out which to do first, and so was making inarticulate noises.

"Yes, yes," Harry said dismissively, "we know. Your father didn't really follow Moldifart, he was so weak-minded that the great evil sorcerer whose magic couldn't kill a toddler could control him and about twenty others, all at the same time, even though it's impossible to use the Imperius Curse on more than one person at a time. And we know that the Great and Evil Dark Lord, who was really a half-blood named T. . . ."

"SHUT YOUR FACE!" Malfoy screamed.

"Malfoy, I've heard five year old girls scream with more balls than that. Why don't the three of you go follow each other's butts in a circle somewhere else until someone finds you who cares." Harry stood, pushed the confused Malfoy out, and shut the door.

While Hermione started to say, "Harry," Ron broke in with, "That was bloody marvelous!"

"It was not!" Hermione insisted.

"Moldifart?" Neville asked. The other version was too close to the real name to say.

"Being afraid of him makes some sense, but to be afraid of a name?" Harry asked.

"Maybe," Hermione said. "Still. . . ."

"I didn't start it," Harry said firmly. "I am not a pacifist, Hermione. I'll never let myself be abused again." Harry's voice hardened, and Hermione and Luna could detect the underlying pain. "Ever."

"Not even by Snape?" Ron asked.

"No," Harry answered firmly. "If it's someone I can't handle, I have people I can turn to now, who will listen to me."

"The Headmaster. . . ." Hermione broke off when she saw the look on Harry's face.

Harry looked at Ginny, who nearly squeaked. "What did your other brothers say about Snape?" Harry asked.

"That he's mean, nasty, and unfair," Ginny allowed nervously. "Well, Percy says he's unpleasant, but Bill, Charlie, Fred, and George all have said how nasty and unfair he can be."

"Supposedly, the Headmaster knows most of what goes on, so he must know how Snape pretends to teach. And some parents must have complained to the other Heads of House or Dumbledore. If they haven't stopped him before, why would they stop him now?" Harry shook his head. "But now I can go over his head if I have to, to outside people who might be able to put some pressure on Snape."

"Harry," Hermione said warningly.

Harry laid his hand over her wrist. "I know, I can't be petty or anything. But if I have a real problem, this year I have people I can turn to who might be able to do something about it."

Harry didn't notice the reactions he had caused as he sat back and picked up a chocolate frog. Hermione was blushing slightly, while Ginny was glaring at Hermione and Neville was looking confused. Luna was looking at Harry and Hermione with a thoughtful look, while Ron was looking at the chocolate frog card hopefully.

"Is this one you needed?" Harry asked Ron.

"All right! Agrippa!"

*

The rest of the trip was quiet. The quartet found their new places at the table, leaving room at the bottom for the fifth year prefects and up to fourteen new first years.

Ron was quickly fidgeting, wanting the feast to start. He only sat quietly when Lavender, seated

next to him, threatened to hex his hair purple. Hermione, seated between Harry and Neville, and across from Lavender, gave her a smile of encouragement while ignoring the whispers about the strangers at the head table.

Nearly all the students were Sorted quickly. Only two students took some time. Both Luna and Ginny could be seen concentrating, and Ginny had even muttered objections. In the end, both were Sorted into Gryffindor.

After the Feast, Gilderoy Lockhart was introduced, and his wide smile elicited numerous sighs from many of the female students, and a few of the males. The other three wizards at the table, in long white robes, were given a different introduction.

"While the Forbidden Forest is still that, forbidden and off-limits to students, there will be a group of Druids from the North American Confederation also living there. I assure you, and with no insult intended, that their presence there does not make the forest any less dangerous."

The three figures bowed.

"They or others of their group will be here on Saturdays and Sundays, sharing their view point of magic and metaphysics for those interested in learning the Old Ways." With that, the School Song was sung, and the students dismissed.

"Wait for me outside the painting," Harry whispered in Hermione's ear. She nodded and he made his way towards the white-robed figures, one of whom was actually Jason, although the other two were actually Druids.

"Potter! begone! You have no business here," Snape commanded with his usual (less than) pleasant tones.

"Pardon me, Professor, but I was told to report. . . ."

"Nonsense! That's one detention. Now, begone."

"I am sorry, Professor, but I have my orders. And I will have to protest your detention."

Snape opened his mouth, but found himself shoved into the base of the Hufflepuff table with a powerful hip-check. He swirled around to demand satisfaction over the bruising he had just received, but the threat died on his lips. Snape had nearly two inches of height over Jason, but Jason packed at least fifty more pounds of muscle. He had also been successfully threatening people for over three thousand more years than Snape, or the Dark Lord for that matter.

"Listen, you piece of Death Eater shit," Jason growled, "if you give Potter one detention, take off one point, or mis-grade one potion, I will cut your balls off and stuff them down your throat while pouring salt on the little gash they occupied."

To his surprise, Snape found himself believing that this was not a threat, but a statement of fact.

"Greater potion masters than you have found his work excellent, and you had better as well. If you have reason to discipline the boy, tell us first. We will be objective," Jason continued.

"Is there a problem, Severus?" Dumbledore asked, hurrying over.

"No, Headmaster," Snape answered shakily. He withdrew, with the realization that there actually were beings more dangerous than the Dark Lord.

"What is it, Harry?" Jason asked quietly, steering Harry away from the hovering Headmaster.

"Something occurred to me on the train," Harry said.

"What's that?"

"Ron's rat, Scabbers . . . it matches the description Black gave you of Pettigrew."

That managed to surprise Jason. "Really?"

"Really. Percy Weasley found it near his father's office at the Ministry back in December, 1981. It was missing a toe on the same forepaw Black claims Pettigrew cut his finger from." Harry frowned. "Or do I mean hand?"

Jason considered the information and then nodded. "It doesn't matter, I know what you mean. We'll look into it, so you ignore the rat. Now, scamper off to bed. Don't forget to get up early to do your exercises."

"Yes, sir."

*

Needless to say, two days later, Ron complained that his rat had gone missing. Scabbers was never heard from again, but in mid-September, the Ministry was rocked when Sirius Black was declared innocent. Fudge, who had been the lead official in the case, and Crouch, who had sent Sirius to Azkaban without a trial, fought a tough political fight of blame and counter-blame. Backed by Lucius Malfoy's money and some ruthless operators, like Dolores Umbridge, Fudge nearly won.

However, Umbridge went too far when she tried to blackmail one powerful member of the Wizengamot, who admitted having a Muggle mistress, but proved she did not know about magic. ("If I want a Muggle for a pet, what business is it of that cow-frog?" he had demanded at the end of his impassioned speech to the Wizengamot, after denouncing Umbridge, Fudge, and even Malfoy.) When another scandal blew up after the Equinox, Fudge was dismissed and Madam Bones was named Minister, leaping over several more senior people, as she had been the highest person in the Ministry not touched by the scandals. Crouch kept his position, but was seen to be very haggard, apparently from the stress of the political infighting.

In truth, it was because the stress and time involved in the fight had made him to forget to reapply the Imperius on his son, who had escaped.

In all this, Ron often bemoaned his lost rat, and Percy berated him for being careless.

As for Harry, Snape was, for the moment, content to growl and snarl but nothing more. That left Harry with three other irritations the first month of classes.

The smallest of the three, in every way, was also the most constant. First year Colin Creevey was stalking Harry, camera in hand, the first two weeks of term. In the end, Harry, Hermione, and (to their surprise) Luna came up with a plan which made everyone happy.

Percy Weasley started a two year project for his history class, documenting all of the public areas of Hogwarts. Colin was enlisted as his photographer/sidekick. This kept the two of them mostly out of other people's lives, which made them all happy.

Meanwhile, Professor Lockhart was trying many people's nerves, especially Harry's. The first day, Lockhart had unleashed a cage full of Cornish pixies. Harry and Hermione had quickly dealt with them (to the admiration of the Ravenclaws they shared the class with), but the pixies had destroyed the classroom in the next period, with the second year Slytherins and Hufflepuffs. Susan Bones and Tracey Davis had been bitten rather badly, and Hannah Abbott had suffered a broken wrist.

At Luna's suggestion about the value of building friendships across House lines, Harry had gotten the location of the kitchens from Fred and George. He, Hermione, and Neville had taken the three girls some chocolate cake (Ron had stayed in the kitchen, and served a detention with Filch for being out after curfew when he was caught three hours later).

After that, the second years (and the first and third years for that matter) had to do recitations from Lockhart's books. For some reason, Lockhart especially liked Harry to act out little skits with him.

All this was annoying, but both Harry and Hermione had to admit that the books were moderately well-written, and if they ignored how full Lockhart was of himself, they could still learn something.

Most annoying was Draco Malfoy. He, and usually Crabbe and Goyle, and sometimes Pansy Parkinson and a few of the older Slytherins, had taken to shadowing Hermione and simply glaring at her during the first week. Malfoy, of course, did the same to Harry.

That first Saturday, the Slytherin Quidditch team had confronted the Gryffindors, trying to claim the practice field. Out of this, it was discovered that Malfoy was the new Slytherin Seeker -- if only because Lucius Malfoy had bought the team new Nimbus 2001 brooms.

To the surprise of both teams and their hangers-on (Parkinson, Crabbe, and Goyle, plus two older girls who were dating two of the players for the Slytherins; Hermione, Neville, Luna, Ron, and Ginny for the Gryffindors), Harry had burst out laughing.

When Harry had calmed down, Harry turned to Wood. "Oliver, we have to send Mister Malfoy a thank you note."

"Why?" Wood asked, confused.

"The way Malfoy flies? The Slytherins have been eliminated from taking the Cup for the next six years." Harry smirked at Flint. "No matter how much they cheat."

The Slytherins were stunned. Never had Potter really talked back to them when he was taunted.

"There's no use fighting for the field," Harry went on. "Snape doesn't have the right to override the schedule, but since he babies the Slytherins so much, we might as well let them have it. It won't do Malfoy any good."

"You only got on because of your name," Malfoy shouted in desperation.

"And yet he caught the Snitch in both games he played," Hermione snapped. "We'll see how well you do."

"Keep to your place, you filthy little Mudblood!"

Harry's wand was instantly under Malfoy's nose, faster than most of their eyes could follow. "Apologize," Harry growled, trying to imitate Jason.

"I'll tell my father," Draco whimpered. Behind him, the Slytherins tried to draw their wands, but were easily out-drawn by the Gryffindors, led by Ron.

"Of course you will," Harry said, in a voice that actually was becoming very frightening to everyone but Hermione and Luna. "You're too much of a coward to fight a battle on your own. Now my mother was Muggle-born, and Hermione is my best friend. You insult my House when you use that term. I, Head of the House of Potter, hereby declare that Hermione Granger, having no House of her own, is under the Protection of the House of Potter. Now, apologize."

Harry's voice had dropped, and all of the students could actually feel the power coming off of Harry. It wasn't caused by anger, but by determination.

"Apologize," the Slytherin Keeper, who was also a prefect, ordered. The other Slytherins looked at him in surprise. "Potter is the Head of an Ancient House, just as I may be, and just like some of you might be. No matter our opinions on certain matters, some lines should not be crossed, at least not lightly. Now, apologize."

Flint had considered his options. "Apologize," he agreed. "Beat him on the field, and then you can crow." He liked the brooms, but didn't like having an untested Seeker.

Draco swallowed, nearly in tears and terrified that the slight urine stain would soon become visible under the Quidditch robes. "I apologize for using that term."

Harry's wand disappeared. "Apology accepted," he said. Harry bowed to the Keeper and then to Flint. "Gentlemen, we will meet on the field of play." Flint, the Keeper, and another of the Seekers returned the bow.

When the Slytherins were out of earshot, Hermione turned on Harry and hissed, "And just WHAT did all that mean?"

"Err . . . well . . . you see . . ."

"You had better KNOW what it meant," Hermione stated firmly.

"It's a very old custom, Granger," Wood said. "There are magical families, and then there are important magical families. Now, you'd learn all this the summer between your fifth and sixth years, if you continue with history. All of the great families used to have patron/client relationships, more like the Romans than the medieval nobility. In that respect, Harry claimed you as a client, something he couldn't have done until you were seventeen if you were from a magical family. He will defend you as if you were family. Unless you deny him, you will aid him as if you were family."

"So they're brother and sister?" Ginny asked hopefully.

"Oh, no, they can even get married if they want, although that's not common," Wood said, making Ginny scowl and Harry and Hermione blush.

Meanwhile, Draco Malfoy was sounding off. "I can't believe you allowed Potter to call us cheaters!"

"Of course we're cheaters, idiot," the Keeper sneered. "Nearly every chance we think we can get away with. It intimidates the Puffs and the Ravenclaws, and drives the Gryffies crazy."

"Notice what he said," Flint snapped. "If you get caught, deny it, but remember you shouldn't have tried. Breaking the rules only works when you get away with it."

The two Beaters slapped their palms with their bats. "So either don't cheat," one said.

"Or don't get caught," the other added.

Chapter VII

Professor McGonagall called Harry into her office that evening after dinner. After glaring at him for a moment, she stated, "I am curious about something, Mister Potter."

"Yes, Professor?"

"Tell me, do you believe might equals right?"

Harry thought for a moment, and answered, "Honestly, Ma'am? I don't think it should. However, that is how things seem to work in magical society. At the very least, I intend to make certain that I have the power on my side, so I won't be abused again."

"Would you be willing to explain that to me, Mister Potter?"

Harry sat back and considered. Learning meditation from the Tibetan masters had forced him to really look at himself. He knew himself better than any young person should have, and knew his inner demons better than most contemplative religious.

Therefore, Harry told McGonagall about growing up in a family of bullies, the center of their hatred. When he was finished, he told her about how he viewed his first year at Hogwarts, the treatment Snape had dealt out, and what he suspected of Dumbledore's manipulations.

At the end of what had been well over an hour, McGonagall was wrung out. She also knew that Harry was more right than he knew.

When she had been at school, Gryffindor and Slytherin had indeed been the most antagonistic towards the other of all the Houses. However, except at Quidditch and some of the other, now ended, competitions of the time, it had been a largely teasing antagonism. There had been as much cross-House dating between those two Houses as any other two.

Thinking hard, she could not recall a Gryffindor-Slytherin marriage since the early 1970s, or a dating couple since the middle of that decade. Slytherin-Hufflepuff relationships were also almost unheard of these days.

Then she remember not arguing more with Dumbledore over leaving Harry with the Dursleys, and the arguments she or the other Heads had had over Snape's treatment of their students.

She remembered her vow less than two months before to see that, if Harry was alive, he was treated properly.

In a voice partially broken by the tears she had shed, McGonagall said, "I need to speak with Professors Sprout and Flitwick. I fear you are correct, Mister Potter. We have been lax."

While this was going on, the Headmaster was in his office, leaning back in his chair, daydreaming. He was remembering that glorious, horrible time, that time when he was in love, when he thought he and Gellert would rule the world and improve it.

His dreams, he now knew, were Darkness disguised as Light. As the world had found out, Gellert Grindelwald's dreams had brought horrors -- two Muggle World Wars and numerous revolutions in between, and warfare in the wizarding world unlike anything encountered before or since.

All out of twisted love and ambition.

And how had his own ambition manifested itself since 1945? Refusing to take direct power as Minister, yet operating in the Wizengamot and under the shield of the paper tiger known as the International. Never confronting Tom Riddle directly, but always trying to pen him in, almost always more unsuccessfully than with any real success.

'And,' a voice in his head said, 'punishing those Sorted into Slytherin, the House of Ambition, by letting Severus Snape coddle them and defend them when they were in the wrong. Allowing them to think they were more important than the others, spoiling them, hoping the Dark among them would be drawn to Voldemort. Why? So that when they turned Dark you could say to your self that you were better than they? Or is it because you still, in your heart of hearts, believe the Old Families are the best?'

Dumbledore opened his eyes and was only slightly surprised to see that it was the taller North African from the Brotherhood who had somehow broken into his thoughts.

"Who are you?" Dumbledore demanded.

"I am Osiris," he answered.

"Named for the god?"

Osiris smiled slightly. "No, the god was named for me." That made Dumbledore swallow nervously. "And I can tell you that because you will not be able to tell anyone else." The smile grew. "No, I am not going to kill you, or remove the memory. I'll just suppress it to the point that you will know it, but no one will be able to pull it from your mind. You certainly won't mention it."

"You put similar thoughts in my head last month, didn't you?" Dumbledore accused.

"If you mean about the Slytherins, and your guilt about desiring power, I made those connections for you," Osiris corrected. "The thoughts were there, you just refused to make those connections."

"What is it you want?" Dumbledore demanded.

"In general? For now, we want to negate Voldemort. We should have interfered in the 1970s. For that matter, we should have interfered by 1916 or so, coming in against Grindelwald."

"Why didn't you?" Dumbledore asked.

"We mostly withdrew from western Europe some thirteen hundred years ago, and from most contacts with the Muggle world, as you would call it, by the 1820s. It is the job of the High Priest to appoint contact men to see what happens in the wizarding world. The High Priest serves a fifty-year term, and may serve two in a row. Then he must skip at least three terms before putting himself forward again. The two High Priests from what you would call 1834 through 1984 were both strong believers in isolation. I myself was in deep meditation and other mystical exercises from what you would know as the 1820s until the late 1970s."

Osiris seemed to look inward. "Imagine my surprise at how the world had changed. Even before my inner searchings, I had been largely disconnected from Europe since the time of the Emperor Claudius. I certainly had no inkling of the beginnings of industrialism."

Dumbledore merely nodded, numb with shock.

"I managed to turn my attention to Europe around 1982. I was disappointed that the Brotherhood had not played a role. I therefore encouraged Tutmoses, the man. . . ."

"I managed to find out his name, although no one else's," Dumbledore put in.

"Ah. In any event, Tutmoses could be seen as the leader of the most liberal grouping within the Brotherhood, and had managed to keep some connections despite official policy. He is the current High Priest."

"And will I. . . ."

"No, you will retain this information, but be unable to communicate it."

"What happened to the last High Priest and his followers?"

"Last two. I scolded them, they disagreed with me, and they are waiting to see how well our interference works out. If it has negative effects, I am sure one of their faction will be elected next time. If it is successful, then Tutmoses or one of his friends will win."

"And this third man who was with you? The one who was here at the feast with those Druids?"

"Jason?" Osiris smiled. "In terms of our politics, he is a true independent. We recruited him during what you might call the mid-Bronze age, when we were having some problems with the Babylonian magi, the first of the twelve various Greeks we have admitted."

"And is he Jason?"

"Of the golden fleece and such? That is mostly a much garbled tale of his grandfather. Medea in fact did not kill all of her children by Jason, but saved our Jason's mother, who was the only magical child. It was Medea who introduced him to us. He was, and still is, a magnificent warrior, crusty and harsh as befitted a Greek hero. The centuries have only slightly mellowed him. He last fought in the central Asian wars of the Twelve and Thirteen-hundreds. He has spent the last six hundred and sixty years or so training and learning whatever new battle magic which has been developed."

Osiris paused for a moment. "I am not certain why Tutmoses sent Harry to Jason. I would not have thought of it, but it was brilliant. It was as if all of Jason's remaining bitterness dropped off his soul."

"And just how much time did Harry actually spend with you? He seems to have matured remarkably for less than two months. Was it a full year?"

Osiris nodded. "It was. He spent a full year with various members of the Brotherhood, plus what he considers the rest of his summer with Jason. He has met over a hundred of us, and he impressed all of us." Osiris smiled and took a deep breath. "He has given us new life, new purpose. We must not interfere too often or engage in your politics as such. Still, we must not be as aloof as we have been, either."

"I see."

"Do you? Perhaps. More importantly, do you see what you must do? Like us, you have neglected your duties, in your case, to your students."

"I will not sack Severus," Dumbledore said firmly.

"Then you had better watch him carefully," Osiris stated. "The Druids will be reactivating an ancient circle on the Equinox."

"What is that supposed to mean?" Dumbledore demanded. Osiris, however, merely faded away.

Dumbledore sat, thinking hard, and then he remembered that most such Druid ceremonies required the sacrifice of at least one enemy or criminal. No doubt, they could consider any Marked Death Eater both.

*

While the British wizarding world was being rocked that September with the news out of the Ministry concerning Sirius Black and the political battle between Fudge, Crouch, and their supporters, life in Hogwarts mostly went along expected lines on the surface, at least in three of the Houses.

The Slytherins were being very quiet, although Malfoy and Parkinson were still sneering at Harry and Hermione. No one knew what to make of it in the other Houses, as no information was leaking out of the Slytherin dungeon.

The truth was, Severus Snape was a very frightened man. Running into Jason was enough to frighten, even terrify, anyone. For someone as hardened as Snape, however, that could have just been a momentary shock, rather than a permanent one.

Jason, however, had not been the first shock Snape had received around September 1. News of the Old Ones, the vampires, and the Druids settling in to watch the school, to watch over Potter, had been given to the staff on August 31, while the information that the Druids, and possibly one or more of these so-called 'Old Ones' disguised as Druids, would actually be in the castle every weekend had only been shared right before the students arrived for the feast.

The Pure-bloods of England and Southern Scotland had long held the Welsh and Gaelic Scots magical communities in even greater contempt than their Muggle counterparts, and often still did so as the twentieth century came to a close. Unlike the Muggles, however, the Pure-bloods were also slightly afraid of them. Their Scandinavian and northern French ancestors had lost most direct contacts with older magical traditions, and had developed their own out of the Muggle middle ages, although they would never admit that.

The Welsh, the Highland Scots, the Irish, and the Cornish (for unlike the Muggles, the magical Cornish still survived, speaking their own Celtic language as well as English) in the British Isles, and in France the Bretons, and the Gauls surviving in the southern mountains, all kept their connections to the Old Magic, and the Old Religion.

In both Britain and France, it was the 'newcomers' who controlled the magical governments, just as their cousins dominated the Muggle governments, while the Celts were pushed to the fringes. Yet the magical Celts were never quite conquered, as their Muggle counterparts had been. Over the previous millennium, many of the most powerful and/or influential had ties to both camps.

More seriously, the Masters of the Old Magic, the Druids, who had sailed away for the Americas more than 1200 years before the Muggles followed, kept tenuous ties to their Celtic relatives. The North American magical community was large, very powerful, but very insular -- except for those ties between the Druids, who dominated the inner workings of the North American Confederation of Magic, and those small Celtic groups.

And now those Druids were near Hogwarts. There was a Coven of vampires close by as well. Not to mention these so-called 'Old Ones'.

Forces were obviously in play which Severus Snape could not control, could not frighten or intimidate, and possibly could not even understand. In fact, Snape wondered if even the Headmaster could really understand what was going on around them. His warnings were somewhat clear on effect for once -- get his Slytherins to toe the line of proper behavior, as there would be no more indulging their self-proclaimed superiority, no more toleration of the Claims of Blood and Culture over mere learning, no more baiting of what Snape and his Slytherins still called the lesser Houses.

What was not really clear was why these changes had occurred.

Then, on September 20, the fathers of Draco's followers Crabbe and Goyle disappeared. Their blood-out bodies were found in the atrium of the Ministry the morning of September 23, the Dark Marks on their forearms clearly showing for the first time since 1981.

There was now no doubt that they had been Death Eaters, even though they had been cleared by a special committee (known simply as 'the Committee', headed by Cornelius Fudge, with Dolores Umbridge as the Committee secretary). People quickly started wondering, loudly at times, if others cleared by the Committee, like Lucius Malfoy, might also be Death Eaters, with hidden Marks.

Lucius and the others found it prudent to stay out of the public spotlight, which was another way of saying they were staying on their own warded properties, while this discovery of the Dark Marks had been the final straw leading to Fudge's ouster.

As for Crabbe and Goyle, many wondered if the two had not been sacrificed by those very Druids now camped around Hogwarts, as they had died over the Equinox.

No one really had the guts to go and ask. Snape did notice, however, that in addition to the many Ravenclaws and several Gryffindors, many Hufflepuffs started meeting with the Druids after the bodies had been found.

All together, it was enough to quiet even the most arrogant of the Slytherins (like Draco Malfoy). For the first time since Snape had been put in charge of Slytherin, the most strident Pure-bloods were quiet and the moderates feeling towards control.

Worst of all, of course, was the fact that this all centered around Harry Potter, something that was making Snape grind his teeth even in his sleep.

Severus Snape had known he would have to treat Lily's son with disdain he really did not feel at the time. What he had not imagined was the atavistic hatred he had felt the first time he had laid eyes on the Boy-Who-Resembled-His-Father.

Last year, Snape had resented the attention paid 'the Boy'. Now the Headmaster had opened up, and Snape understood both the role Potter might have had to play, and the role he might still have to

play. Snape still resented that Potter's son would become the Magical World's savior (if anyone did), just as he greatly resented that Potter's son was Lily's son as well.

Resented that Lily's son was not his.

These past few weeks, Dumbledore had made it very clear that Snape was to treat the Boy as Lily's son if he could, as just another student if he couldn't. That he was expected to get his Slytherins to toe the line in proper behavior. To stress their cunning and ambition, not their superiority. (Dumbledore had actually said 'their misconceived, self-assumed airs of superiority', but Snape did not remember it that way.)

The penalties would be severe if they failed to blend in. Severus had brought these hard truths to his Slytherins by meeting each year. He thought for a moment about his second years' reactions, just before the Equinox.

Predictably, Crabbe and Goyle had stared dumbly, as had two of the girls. Parkinson and Malfoy had sneered. It had been Nott who had quietly asked, "What exactly does all that mean, sir?"

Snape had glanced over the group, seeing who might answer, who might have fully understood. It had Bulstrode who had said, "It means that from now on, we don't call the Mudbloods or Blood-traitors Mudbloods or Blood-traitors, no matter what we think of them."

"Scum is scum," Parkinson had sneered. "They should know their place." Snape noticed that Davis and Greengrass had rolled their eyes at that. Zabini had stayed neutral.

Bulstrode had merely said, "Then you're on your own. The goal is first to stay alive, then to come out ahead. I intend to do both." Snape had seen the two dullard girls edge away from Parkinson, towards Davis and Greengrass. Power had shifted in the second year girls' dorm towards at least neutrality, just as it had in the other girls' dorms. The exclusivist Pure-blood agenda was stronger in the boys' dorms, and Zabini's silence showed he at least sly enough to survive.

Crabe and Goyle's fathers had disappeared that very night. Since their fathers' bodies had been found, young Crabbe had clung more closely to Malfoy. Goyle, on the other hand, had turned to Bulstrode and Zabini.

So far, he had kept his Slytherins within the newly-created boundaries. It had not been easy, but fortunately McGonagall had been keeping a close eye on her hooligans, and there had been no serious incidents. Still, at some point, someone would break, and Snape was uncertain of what the fallout might be.

He had also managed to keep away from the temptation to use Legilimency on Potter, as he had so often the year before. Brown, Patil, Finnigan, and Thomas were still not close enough to Potter to know what he might be up to, and Longbottom would never look him in the eye. Weasley would, but he was not as close to Potter this year as he had been the year before.

The previous year, Granger had been a good check on Potter and Weasley. Like most young students, the boys' surface thoughts in class had been clear, but everything underneath was often a jumble, and impossible to sift through. Granger had a very clear-cut mind, if in Snape's mind more lacking in imagination than she would ever understand. It had often been easy to pull thoughts from her.

Not this year. Like Longbottom, she was rarely allowing eye contact. Unlike Longbottom, who was

terrified, Snape had been shocked to learn that she was avoiding eye contact precisely because she believed him likely to use Legilimency on her, and she was not confident enough of her meditation shields to take him on.

It was aggravating that that was the only useful thought he had gotten from her so far that year!

Potter was worse. He seemed to stare Snape in the eye, as if daring him. (This was actually Snape's imagination.) Snape did not dare use active Legilimency on the Boy under these circumstances. And his passive Legilimency detected nothing . . .if he hadn't been looking at Potter, he would have sworn there was no one there.

He had assumed, as had the Headmaster, that Voldemort had been vanquished and Quirrell killed by a feed-back loop, and that Voldemort had in fact supplied most if not all the power of the loop, Potter only the conduit.

Now Snape was beginning to wonder.

How powerful was the little brat?

Snape winced, and forced himself to rephrase the question. How powerful would the son of Lily Evans and Potter be, if he had inherited both of his parents' abilities?

He feared he might someday learn the answer to the question.

Chapter VIII

Saturday, October 30, 1992

October was wet and cold. Numerous students came down with minor ailments, and the sixth and seventh years were set to brewing Pepper-Up in Potions. Luna, in her quiet way, pointed out that Ginny was looking tired and pale.

The twins' solution was to play the fool for her (that failed to cheer her up). Percy's solution was to force her to accept several preventative doses of Pepper-Up, but it didn't seem to pep her up at all.

On the last Saturday of the month, Harry, forced to spend the early morning getting soaked in one of Wood's madder practices, had decided that since he was soaked through he might as well keep flying for fun. So, he had cast a warming spell he had learned that summer and flown for another ninety minutes.

He had come into the castle through a side entrance, but only noticed he was trailing puddles when he saw Mrs. Norris streaking away. Had he not had his summer training, he would have been in a great deal of trouble, as Filch was likely between him and any escape routes.

As it was, a few flicks of his wand had mostly dried him (his underclothes were still damp and his socks were still very wet) and then he dried the puddles up.

"Where do ya think yer goin', lad?" Filch growled.

"I had hoped it had let up outside, Mister Filch," Harry said politely. "It hasn't."

"No, it hasn't."

Filch in general did not think much of the students (or most of the staff, for that matter), but the Potter boy was a bit different. His mother had always been nice to him and to the kneazle he had owned before Mrs. Norris. It had been a shame the boy had taken up with a Weasley the year before, but that seemed to have died down. Instead, he was with the Granger girl most of the time, and sometimes the Lovegood girl, both of whom were also kind to Mrs. Norris.

Filch approved when older students looked out for the younger ones, rather than getting them into trouble, like the Weasley twins often did. Potter also seemed friendly to the Druids who were in the castle on the weekend mornings, and the folks pretending to be Druids on the weekend afternoons. Both groups went out of their way to solicit his opinion, and to help him along with some of his duties. He knew it was mostly to become acquainted with the castle, but it was a polite way of doing so, and they were open about it.

Filch appreciated polite and honest. In his opinion, that was rare among the fully magical.

He knew that Potter wasn't being completely honest, but he also knew no student would admit to using magic in the corridors to him. "Well, someone missed a spot over there by the corner. Clean it up. No! Don't bother getting a mop. If I tell you that you can use yer wand, yer allowed."

"May I then, sir?" Harry asked.

'Smart lad,' Filch thought. "Yes." He nodded with approval as Harry moved to the corner, and

cleaned up not just the visible puddle but no doubt the rest of the water to the outer door. "Go on with ya, then, Potter. Nothing to do here."

"Yes, sir," Harry said, hurrying away. 'He's not as bad as I thought,' Harry thought.

He had only gotten a few yards away when Nick floated up next to him. "Well handled, young Harry."

"Thanks, Nick." Harry frowned. "You don't seem your usual happy self."

The ghost sighed. "I had thought to join a confraternity, known as the Headless Hunt. You see, I had rather hoped one of your two sets of friends might help me become, well. . . ."

"Fully headless?"

"Precisely."

"No luck?"

Nick shook his head, which made it wobble in a rather nauseating way. "Apparently not. And I so wanted to join tomorrow night."

"Halloween?"

"True, but it is also the five-hundredth anniversary of my execution." He looked at Harry. "Some of your visiting friends are coming. You, and any of your school friends, would be welcome."

"Really?" Harry was surprised.

"I am quite serious," Nick assured Harry. "I would enjoy having living friends present, and you and Miss Granger, and now Miss Lovegood, are marvelous students."

"I'll ask them," Harry said, a bit doubtfully.

"Good," Nick answered, cheering up a bit. "I'll see you and any of your friends tomorrow night."

*

That night, after dinner, Harry made the offer to his friends. Neither Neville nor Ron looked very interested, and Ginny had run off as soon as she could. Hermione and Luna, however, were interested.

"It should be very interesting," Luna said. "Few people are acceptable to the dead, and few of the living wish to associate with them."

"Yes, it should be fascinating," Hermione agreed. Harry shook his head. He wondered how Luna, who he had learned had lost her mother just over a year before they had met and who had been very lonely, would have acted if she had not latched onto Hermione as a sort of big sister/mentor. "Did you talk with the Druids about it?"

Harry saw there was no one within earshot. "No, but Brother Hotep-Kon said that the actual Druids weren't invited. They tend to try to persuade ghosts to cross over. He did say that at least one of the

Brothers would be there, and probably a vampire or two."

Hermione and Luna both looked rather nervous at that. Other than being Harry's guardians, they did not really know who the Brothers were. Hermione did know that they and the Druids, whom she rather liked, had as much of a truce as an alliance. "I'm sure it's safe," Luna said.

"We'll be safe there," Harry said. "Oh, and he said we should eat something light before going, as the food won't be fit for us, whatever that means, and that we should dress warmly."

"Speaking of that, didn't the Pepper-Up help Ginny?" Hermione asked Luna.

"I don't believe so," Luna said thoughtfully. "She is becoming very withdrawn, and I don't understand why. I don't think she's ill at all, but I know she's not sleeping well."

"We'll try to keep an eye on her."

*

Harry was surprised to see that the Brothers who were going to the Deathday were Tutmoses and Osiris himself. "I am Tutmoses," the High Priest said. "You may call me Brother Mo. This is Brother Oz."

Hermione and Luna followed Harry's lead and bowed deeply to the two, and followed them down into the deep dungeons. Very quickly, the white ever-burn candles were replaced by black ones, which gave a darkish eerie blue light. The air became chilly as well, and Harry, who had worn a heavy cloak he had been given in the Himalaya, wrapped it around his two friends, who huddled close.

Soon, they heard a screeching sound. "Is that some sort of . . .music?" Hermione asked.

"The dead exist on many levels," Osiris said. "They often do not fully engage in this realm, and so what they see, hear, feel, and even taste or smell, touch our senses oddly. The blue light is brighter to them than the candle light we normally see. What we hear are overtones of the music they hear. It will become clearer, though still odd to our ears, as we come closer."

"Ah," Luna said. "I had first thought we had to eat because there would be no food, and then I was just uncertain."

"Very good," Osiris said. "There will likely be rotting food, especially fish, meat, and eggs. Disgusting to us, but enough to tickle the noses of the dead."

Sir Nicholas greeted them, pleased that three of the students from his House were there. None of the other House ghosts had managed to coax students to celebrate their Deathdays in over 400 years. The ghosts also knew who the other two were. To have the being once worshiped as the god of death at your party was even better than being a member of the Headless Hunt. There was also a trio of vampires present. Nick felt his friends had come through for him.

More impressively to the living, there were literally hundreds of ghosts present. "Wow," Harry said, which was more than Hermione or Luna could say.

Osiris turned to Nick. "I see you are a ghost of some importance."

Nick turned a bit darker shade of silver, the ghostly version of ablush. "Well, many of us do not last five hundred years. . . ."

"Really?" Hermione asked.

"Some of us became ghosts because we felt we had unfinished business," Nick said. "Should they consider that business finished, they easily cross over to whatever lays beyond. Some feared death itself. Should they become reconciled to passing over, or become bored enough to commit a version of suicide, they also exit our world. Some merely become so bored they fade away. About a third are gone within two hundred years or so, and only about a quarter make to five hundred years. After that, only a few more disappear in any given century."

"So should we say 'congratulations'?" Luna asked.

"I am as I would wish to be, given all my options, and I am certainly where I would wish to be," Nick answered.

"In that case, if you wish to, I hope you know my descendants for many centuries to come," Luna said with a curtsy.

"Thank you, kind lady," he returned with a bow, almost dislodging his head.

Afterwards, as the trio of students, Tutmoses, and the vampires were talking to a group of ghosts, Osiris whispered into Nick's ear.

A while later, just as the trio was thinking about making polite excuses to leave, as they were cold, there sounded a long wail from a hunting horn. A dozen ghostly horses, ridden by a dozen ghostly headless riders, came into view, as most of the ghosts made as loud a round of applause as ghosts could make.

The largest rider, the one blowing the horn even though his head was detached, rode up to Nick. He hooked the horn on the saddle and placed his head between his hands, moving it around to view Nick. "Nicky!"

"Patrick," Nick said politely.

"Head still hanging on?" Patrick teased.

Nick lifted his head completely off his shoulders. "No, why?" Patrick, and three other riders, dropped their heads.

Nick replaced his head, which again was just barely attached and stooped over. "Allow me, Patrick. Oh, I do beg your pardon."

Nick, in bending over, had 'somehow' managed to kick the head across to floor, to where Peeves had been cowering from the horses.

Peeves giggled, picked up the head, and made a commendable hook shot, landing the head into a bowl of slimy punch.

That seemed to start a great deal of yelling. Osiris, Tutmoses, and the vampires herded the three children out of the dungeon.

"You did that, somehow," Tutmoses accused his leader.

"It was only an illusion," Osiris said with a smirk.

As they exited the dungeons, the three vampires stopped. "Do you hear something? Something moving?" the female vampire hissed softly.

"A voice?" Harry asked. He couldn't quite make out the words.

"That way?" a tall, thin vampire said softly.

The three vampires took off like a pack of hunting hounds, Tutmoses trailing them, while Osiris and Harry kept pace with the slower Hermione and Luna. In only a few seconds, however, they had caught up.

"Whatever it was, it changed direction, doubling back here when it heard us or caught our scent," the thin vampire said. "Then, it disappeared. We caught no sight or scent, other than chicken blood." He nodded towards the far wall.

THE CHAMBER OF SECRETS HAS BEEN OPENED ENEMIES OF THE HEIR, BEWARE.

"Is that a cat?" the third vampire asked.

"Mrs. Norris," Hermione said, feeling ill at the sight of the cat hanging stiffly by the tail from a wall bracket.

"The students come," the female vampire said.

"Hurry away," Osiris commanded.

The three vampires transformed into bats and flitted away just as the Slytherin and Ravenclaw students coming from the feast appeared in the corridor. "You three, say nothing. Understand?" Osiris said, before blending back into the shadows. Harry nodded, and Hermione and Luna took their lead from him.

Within seconds they were surrounded by babbling students. "Enemies of the Heir, beware? That means you, Mudbl. . . ."

Tutmoses prevented Harry from cursing Malfoy, while all the students took a step back when Osiris drove the shadows away from him, his magical aura becoming visible, his expression fierce.

"Silence!" Osiris commanded, and the students went quiet, as was Filch, who had just realized that something was wrong with Mrs. Norris, and Lockhart, who had been speculating pointlessly about what had happened.

"Ravenclaws and Slytherins, be off, except for you, Malfoy," Osiris commanded.

"Who are you to order. . . ." Snape started, stepping towards the front, as he had been skulking in the back. The look Osiris gave the Potions Master shut him up immediately.

"I said, BEGONE!" The students scattered. Osiris turned to Dumbledore, who had been one of the last to appear. "We were coming from Sir Nicholas' Deathday Party, going to see if the feast was over, when we came across this. Professor Lockhart, please make certain all the other students have left the area." Lockhart swallowed nervously, but did as he was told.

"The cat has been magically petrified, with a Dark Magic I must admit I do not recognize. The blood is chicken blood, reinforced by Dark magic -- it was cast by whoever killed the chicken. The significance of the puddles of water, if any, I do not know. Do you grow Mandrake here?"

"We do," Hermione said, not being able to help herself.

"It will need fresh Mandrake, which means waiting until the spring, but she should be fine. Professor McGonagall? You and Professor Snape would be best suited to handling the cat." He turned to the nearly hyperventilating Filch. "Your magnificent cat will not suffer, and will return."

McGonagall and Snape looked at Dumbledore, who nodded. They took the petrified feline and Filch off.

Osiris turned his attention to Malfoy, who promptly, and very visibly, wet himself. After a few moments of eye contact, Osiris commanded, "Begone."

Malfoy fled in terror.

"He still only knows that his father laid a plot against the school," Osiris said. "He will no doubt write a very biased and inaccurate description of tonight's events, but only knows that the Heir is the Heir of Slytherin, as the Chamber of Secrets was supposed to be his sanctuary. His threat against Miss Granger was merely his bigotry."

"I see," Dumbledore said. "Anything else?"

"We had a trio of vampires with us. They heard something in the walls, which fled as we approached. That led us here, where whatever it was disappeared."

"I see. Would you walk our friends to the entrance of their House?"

"Of course."

The five turned and moved in that direction. When they were well out of hear-shot of Dumbledore or any painting, Osiris said, "Say nothing beyond what I told the Headmaster. We will discuss this Saturday evening." The three children agreed, and they continued on to the entrance of Gryffindor in silence.

Tutmoses did not ask the questions he wanted to ask since the cat had first been found until they had disappeared back to their camp. "What happened? Do you know?"

"Know? Not really."

"But you suspect?"

Osiris nodded. "The vampires heard sounds. Harry heard a voice. What does that tell you?"

"Assuming Harry didn't mishear, you mean? After all, the vampires have better hearing."

"I do not believe Harry misheard."

Tutmoses thought for a moment, and then frowned. "A snake?" Osiris nodded. "What kind of snake petrifies things?" Tutmoses demanded.

"I am not certain there is one. If there is not, what kind of magical serpent is there, whose eyes can kill as easily as its fangs?"

"A basilisk?" Tutmoses asked, confused. "You think the cat saw the serpent's reflection in the water, and that could petrify it?"

"I don't know," Osiris admitted again. "It might be possible. A young basilisk petrifies, but after a week or so its view would kill a kneazle, let alone a cat. And a basilisk that young could not move that fast. Still, we must consider the possibility."

"What do we do?"

"Summon Brother Cobra."

"He has not left Antarctica for centuries," Tutmoses protested. "After you and perhaps the First Acolyte, he may be the most powerful of us all. I cannot command him to do so."

"You do not. I, Ahk Shir-rusch, Giver of Death, Lord of Nile Waters, Master of the Desert, command it."

Tutmoses bowed. Nearly all the time, Osiris did not interfere with his followers, suggesting rather than commanding.

But not all the time.

*

The next morning, Dumbledore held Harry back after breakfast, taking him to a room behind the staff dias. "Yes, sir?" Harry asked.

"Harry . . . Mister Potter, I am concerned about your continued and even growing relationship with this 'Brotherhood'."

"In what way, Professor?" Harry asked politely, although his heart-rate was speeding up. He had long expected this conversation would happen.

"Whatever their good points, and I am certain there are many, you do realize they claim to practice one on the Darkest of magics, don't you?"

"They do?"

"They must all have what are known as Horcruxes. Those are. . . ."

"I know what they are, Headmaster," Harry broke in.

"You do? And do you know how they are made?"

"In detail? No, of course not."

"Then you may not know you must murder someone to make one."

Harry gave the Headmaster an odd glance, then said, "Would you say a legal execution was murder? Or killing in self-defense?"

"Is that what they tell you they do? To first answer your questions, certainly no to the second, when that is truly necessary. It rarely is, however. As to the first, I do have some qualms about it. But Harry, creating a Horcrux is the Darkest of magic because it requires murder, and preferably for the killer to enjoy committing the murder. That is why it is considered so Dark."

Harry gave the Headmaster that same look again. "So, you know that creating a Horcrux requires a murder, because it is considered Dark magic. And you know it is considered Dark magic, because it requires a murder?"

"Exactly, Harry."

Harry rolled his eyes. "Hermione was right. Wizards have no logic." He glared at the now-confused Headmaster. "Leaving your circular argument behind, since you can't seem to see a problem with that, let me point this out, sir. You illegally placed me in an abusive household, forgot me there for almost ten years, and then forced me to go back into a situation where they tried to murder me. Last year, you tricked me and two twelve year olds into confronting a weakened version of the most powerful dark wizard of the last five or six hundred years and a fully-trained wizard. You allowed Professor Snape to insult me and unfairly punish me by taking points for no good reason. And you are asking me to believe your claims over a group which rescued me, cured the results of the abuse you allowed, protect me from Snape, and told me the secrets you've been keeping from me?"

"Well . . . yes."

"Why would I?"

Dumbledore sought an answer.

"That's what I thought. Now, I'm late for class. May I have a pass?"

Chapter IX

The story of the Chamber of Secrets quickly circulated throughout the castle. Speculation ran rampant over what the monster might be and who the Heir was. Both the Brothers and the Druids were certain that they knew who the last Heir had been -- Tom Riddle. They, and Dumbledore, were agreed that Voldemort had to be behind this.

Harry, knowing that Lucius Malfoy had been plotting against the school, reminded his mentors of that, and was rewarded by the discomfiting information that Voldemort would somehow be behind Malfoy. However, Lucius Malfoy was still hiding from the public, staying on his estates. While there were ways of drawing him out or forcing the information out of those who might know, those methods were too Dark to justify themselves -- yet. Instead, the Brotherhood started to study the wards on Malfoy Manor.

A number of the younger students, especially those of Muggle or mostly-Muggle background, were especially nervous. Since Harry was the only Head of House or Clan currently a student at Hogwarts, Luna quietly suggested that he offer his protection to those without House, like he had for Hermione.

Harry considered it, but after talking with Tutmoses and Jason, he decided that doing so would bring up the worry that he was building a counter-army, not against the Dark, but against the general wizarding culture. When Harry had explained that to Luna, worried that she might be hurt he wasn't following her suggestion, she had merely thought the matter through.

Finally, Luna said, "You know, Harry, considering how complaisant and bigoted wizarding society in Britain is, that might not be such a bad thing."

That made Harry rethink his position. Still, "You might be right. Don't say anything, but if you hear of anyone Houseless saying they wish they could be under my protection, you might hint they should ask."

"You don't want to make the offer, because it could seem like empire-building, but you'll consider it for anyone who asks, because you want to protect us all," Luna judged.

Harry nodded.

"You are a good person, Harry Potter." Luna hesitated, but said, "People think me odd, don't they?"

"They think your father's paper is odd," Harry carefully countered.

"I have a Gift," Luna said. "I can often See, not the future, but auras and even emotions. It is not consistent, it is a Gift which will either slowly die off or become stronger when I start menstruating." Harry blushed. "I sometimes blurt out truths people don't want to hear. You, however, listen to me. Thank you."

"You're welcome." Harry looked into Luna's wide gray eyes. "We both value truth. That's one reason why we're friends."

"So we are. Thank you for being my friend. I don't think they would have been so nice to me in Ravenclaw or Slytherin, the other Houses the Hat suggested for me."

"Probably not Slytherin, although they aren't as nasty this year as last year. I don't know enough about Ravenclaw to say."

"Be that as it may, you do believe me?"

"Of course," Harry answered.

"Then I also thought I should tell someone. . . . Ginny's aura is acting oddly."

Harry frowned. "In what way?"

"I'm not sure yet, but I don't think it's good." Luna made a face. "There's very little in the library about aura reading, and none about this sort of thing."

Harry again understood why the Hat had suggested Ravenclaw. "Why me? Why not, well. . . ."

"One of her brothers? Percy would merely ignore me, Ron already refuses to even see I exist, and I would hate to think what the twins might do about anything they don't immediately perceive as a threat." Harry could hardly disagree with any of that. "Professor McGonagall discounted it already, saying that such gifts are very erratic, and not to be trusted until the Gifted have years of training and experience, and I think the Divination professor had a bit too much sherry."

"But you think there is a problem, right?" Harry asked.

"I do, but I am not certain."

"Then why don't you keep an eye on it, and let me know if anything more happens."

Luna smiled with grateful relief, "Sharing a burden more than halves it," she said.

Harry smiled back, and his mind went back to thinking about the upcoming Quidditch game.

*

Harry went into the first Quidditch game (against Slytherin), confident that he could have outflown Malfoy even without another year of practice under his belt. With that extra year, flying the entire time other than the two weeks he had spent in Antarctica, and even having been tutored in flying by a few who enjoyed flying brooms and two whose Animagi forms were birds of prey, Harry was more than ready. Unless the Snitch appeared right in front of Draco's nose, Harry was sure he could win.

Fortunately, the Snitch did not even appear for the first twenty-five minutes of the game. In that time, Harry had managed to get Malfoy, who had been shadowing him, to crash into the stands twice, although unfortunately not too hard.

After the second crash, a pale Luna had turned to the very pale Hermione and asked, "Does he always fly like that?"

"Just about," Hermione had answered wanly, as Harry went into a power dive/barrel roll which caused Malfoy to crash into one of the Beaters and Flint to fall off his broom.

From then on, the two friends merely hugged each other and held on, because it appeared as if

Harry wasn't. For connoisseurs of fine flying, it was equal to all but the very best professional Quidditch flying. The several ex-professionals in the stands, when polled later by The Daily Prophet, declared that Harry, as far as pure flying skill went, was probably one of the top fifty flyers in Europe.

Harry managed to plow Malfoy into the ground at just past the forty-five minute mark, and caught the Snitch before Flint could call for a medical time out, since this time Malfoy was more than just bruised and humiliated. Gryffindor had won, 270-30.

Harry was not the only one who laughed when Lockhart removed all the bones in Malfoy's shattered left leg. Many of the girls were not happy when Snape stunned the Defense teacher when he tried to repeat the miscast spell on Draco's left arm, shoulder, and ribs.

Although it was not at all within the rules, after Harry had gotten cleaned up, Jason escorted Harry not back to the castle but to the Druid camp.

When Harry saw which members of the Brotherhood were waiting along with the Druids, he forgot himself for a moment and hugged one of the Brothers.

In life, he had been born into a minor noble family on what was now the border of Egypt and Sudan. A number of his family had been magical, and his magic, and great power, had clearly manifested itself when he became a cobra Animagus without formal training in his early teens. He had become the third member of the Brotherhood, and had been known simply as Cobra ever since.

He had also been the first to leave the temple to become a hermit in the desert, some three hundred years later. Nearly three hundred years after that, he had become an explorer, first of Africa south of the desert. Then he had sailed the east coast of Africa and beyond, to India, Indonesia, China, and Japan. He had explored the west coast of the Americas nearly 4000 years before the Spanish.

He had discovered Antarctica some 3500 years before the present, and after another 1000 years of exploring the interiors of the Americas and Siberia, he had returned for a short time to the temple. When Ptolemy laid claim to Egypt, he had again left, going to the most remote place he knew of -- the Antarctic. None save the First Acolyte, who had brought him into the Brotherhood and who had known him slightly before hand, had ever seen Cobra display a strong emotion, except perhaps disdain.

To see this stern being not only allow Harry to hug him, but to hug Harry back, to kiss the top of Harry's head as a son, moved the Brothers, although they took care not to display it. The look Cobra had given them immediately afterwards reminded them that of those present, only Osiris had a right to comment.

The six Druids present wondered at the by-play, but said nothing. They merely brought the group into a magical tent where they could eat in warmth. "You flew very well today, Mister Potter," was all the elderly head of the Tuatha said, before they sat down to dinner, where conversation stayed light.

Towards the end of dinner, the Druids tried to sound Harry's out about his beliefs. They of course espoused a form of pantheism as well as human reincarnation. Harry was well able to sympathize with the pantheism, although having now met several individuals who had been proclaimed divinities at some point made it difficult for him to believe in any set of religious stories, as opposed to their underlying dogma.

He was less enthused about reincarnation, since he rather hoped he might meet his parents in whatever afterlife there might be. When told that the reincarnations were not likely to be immediate, he was happier with their system.

"Ask him what you really mean," Cobra growled. He was not as bulky as Jason, although he was well-muscled. No one who saw him, however, mistook him for anything but dangerous.

"What do you mean?" one of the younger Druids asked.

Cobra turned to Harry. "They hope you will convert to their beliefs, so that you will inspire others to join. Failing that, they hope you will not oppose their becoming more active in Britain, if not all of western Europe."

"Why would anyone care what I think or believe?" Harry asked, confused.

"You are a nexus," the senior member of the Tuatha said simply. Seeing Harry's confused look, he added, "As your Greek friend would say, the tentacles of fate surround your life. Where you move will move others, even if you dislike it."

Harry made a face, and after a moment's thought, he asked, "How strict a church are you?"

"We are not a church as such," another Druid said. "If you mean how strictly do we enforce our rules, that depends on the sect. There numerous sects within the Faith, running from the very strict to the rather liberal. For those who break our most basic beliefs, we might remove them from our group and prevent them from calling themselves Members of the Faithful."

Harry frowned in confusion. Cobra broke in. "As with any group of believers, including our Brotherhood, there may be fanatics, but they are not as a whole by any means. Some groups are, but they do not control the Faithful."

"Oh. Then I would hardly oppose you," Harry said. Then he smiled. "It might even do wizarding Britain some good to hear about older traditions than the pure-bloods'."

Everyone at the table smiled at that, for if there was one thing they all agreed on, it was that they did not like the establishment which ran wizarding Britain and a few of the other European ministries.

*

"Why are you here, Cobra?" Harry asked as the pair walked back to Hogwarts.

"The brothers believe it is possible that the so-called monster of Slytherin is a basilisk."

Harry frowned. "What's that?"

"A magical snake, which can be killed, but which otherwise will not die. Its venom is one of the most toxic poisons known. However, to look into its eyes means death for nearly every living creature, even some of the most magical."

"But Mrs. Norris was petrified, not killed," Harry pointed out.

"True. If it is a basilisk, then that means it's very young, as in newly hatched, or there was

something which either reflected or interfered with the direct line of sight. Was there any such thing?"

Harry thought, and then said, "There were puddles of water."

"So, it is possible, but not proven," Cobra said. "The good news is, if it is true, that there are just two types of wizards immune to the stare of a basilisk."

"Snake Animagi and Parselmouths?" Harry hazarded.

"Exactly. However, neither of us is immune to its venom. And if this creature really was Slytherin's, and is therefore about a thousand years old, then it could be anywhere up to a hundred feet long and easily able to swallow your friend Hagrid, let alone you."

"That big?" Harry asked nervously.

"If it has been awake and hunting all that time, yes. More likely it has been hibernating for at least part of that time. Still, a four foot basilisk could kill Hagrid with its venom."

Harry nearly shuddered. "And?"

"And so, did you know there has been a mysterious decrease in the number of roosters at Hogwarts?"

"I didn't know there were any," Harry admitted.

"Hogwarts is also something of a working farm. Three of the six roosters have been killed. The crowing of a rooster will kill a basilisk, although I would prefer not to think of approaching a hundred foot specimen with just a crowing rooster. Now, I want you to keep a look out for spiders."

"Spiders?"

"Spiders fear basilisks, and can sense them when they are within range. Inside of Hogwarts, that could be very close. Keep an eye out. Until the weather warms next spring, they will be fleeing to whatever the further reaches of Hogwarts are."

"Yes, sir."

With that, Cobra put his arm around Harry's shoulders and hugged the first person who had touched his heart since his younger brother had died millennia earlier. Harry would be his protegee, his heir, if he desired it. And if he didn't, he would still be Cobra's connection to this new time. "I am sorry I missed the game, Harry. Tell me about it."

Harry happily talked Quidditch for the rest of the walk to the castle.

*

"Harry."

Harry rolled over and buried his head under his pillow.

The pillow disappeared. "Harry!"

Harry jerked awake. "Hermione?" He rolled over and squinted in the light. "What are you doing here?"

"Oh, Harry!" Hermione hugged him.

Harry hugged her back, confused. "You know I like you, too, Hermione, but what's going on?"

"Professor McGonagall sent me to check on you. You were the only one who didn't come down."

"Come down?"

"Something awful's happened. Throw your robe on, and come on."

Harry shrugged and did as he was told, adding his slippers and astop in the lavatory.

"Mister Potter! May I ask why you ignored the call I sent to all the rooms?" Professor McGonagall demanded.

"I was tired and Ron was snoring," Harry said. "I had a silencing charm up."

"Very good. Mister Weasley, either cease snoring or make certain Potter is awake should there be another alarm."

"Yes, Professor," Ron said, his face red.

"Now, the reason why I called you here. There was another attack last night. This time, a student was petrified." There was not even the slightest movement now. "It would appear that Mister Crabbe was out last night, perhaps trying to visit Mister Malfoy. If so, he became lost, as the location he was found, near that large mirror at the end of the corridor on the third floor, was not on any direct path between the Slytherin common room and the Infirmary. In any case, from now on, you are not to go outside of the common area alone. The penalty for the first offense will be points, but for the second it will be total confinement to the common area outside of class time."

That brought a slight stir. "In addition, some of the Druids camped nearby will be patrolling the corridors from sunset to sunrise. This morning, however, there will be a buffet set up from now until one. No one is to leave Gryffindor until I return. Understand?"

The group muttered their shocked agreement, while Percy puffed up proudly. He decided he would move a chair to in front of the exit.

"Very well. I shall be back this afternoon."

*

That evening at dinner, something odd started to happen. Tracey and Daphne were waiting near the Gryffindor table, and made some friendly small talk with Harry and Hermione, despite the glares from Ron. A few Ravenclaws and the Slytherin Keeper did the same. It was only after Ernie Macmillan dragged Justin over "Just so we're properly introduced" that George hit on what was happening.

"Hey, Harry, are you the Heir of the Chamber of Secrets, no matter if that's Slytherin or some other bloke?"

Fred caught on immediately. "Yeah, Harry, if you have some monster which goes around petrifying people, can I make a few suggestions for who's next?"

Harry turned to Ron, Hermione, Luna, and Ginny. "They can't be serious, can they?"

"They rarely have been before, but they could be correct," Luna pointed out.

"Crabbe is Malfoy's friend, and, no offense, you and Malfoy don't get along," Seamus pointed out from up the table.

"Well, I have witnesses to where I was when Mrs. Norris was petrified," Harry pointed out in turn. "Besides, the Chamber is supposed to be Slytherin's, who hated the Muggle-born, and Crabbe is supposed to be a Pure-blood."

"Maybe Crabbe was doing something with the monster for Malfoy?" Hermione suggested.

"Crabbe would be dumb enough to make a mistake," Ron said gleefully.

Ginny, who had seemed on the verge of tears all day, left the table in a hurry.

"Something serious is bothering her, but she won't say what," Luna pointed out.

"Ginny has always talked a lot, at least before term started," Ron said, reaching past two first year students and taking Ginny's barely touched roast beef onto his plate, "but she's never talked about anything that really bothers her before she's ready. Leave her alone, and she'll either get over it, or tell someone when she's ready."

"We hate to say it. . . ." George said.

". . . but Ronnikins is right," Fred concluded.

"Poorly but accurately put," Percy said from further up the table.

And with that, the group let the matter drop.

Chapter X

Draco protested loudly about the idea that Harry could be the Heir of Slytherin, or anyone else important. Many ignored his protests, claiming that Malfoy would disparage anything which raised the status of Harry Potter. For Harry and Hermione, it illustrated the fact the Malfoy was a silly, stupid git, who should have been throwing suspicion in Harry's direction.

The twins, of course, seemed to enjoy the whole situation. Percy and Ginny seemed to be the only members of Gryffindor who did not get a laugh at the expense of the Slytherins every time the twins spouted off their nonsense, proclaiming Harry 'King of Snakes' and such, although a few, like Luna, Hermione, and Harry himself, tried not to show their amusement.

Harry was the only eligible Gryffindor who did not attend the announced Dueling Club. Harry went through three different training exercises twice each week, and so was maintaining his conditioning. While he could not yet command most powerful spells, there were a few he could, and the Brotherhood had competed with each other in coming up with low-powered but 'interesting' hexes and curses for Harry to learn.

Harry had learned them all.

They also had Harry casting most of the lowest powered spells silently, usually a sixth year skill. He had even managed to a few wandlessly, although they were still pretty erratic, and was working on Parsel-magic.

Harry had wanted to attend the new club's first meeting, but heeded his advisors' advice, which was to keep his talents hidden. When he found out afterwards that the whole thing had been a disaster, with Lockhart making a fool of himself and the students involved more in a brawl than a meeting, he was happy he had skipped.

The next day, a strong snow storm raged outside, forcing most of the outdoor classes, Herbology, Care of Creatures, and Flying, to stay inside. Hermione managed to convince Harry to spend most of the afternoon in the library.

He was glad he had spent the afternoon with witnesses before dinner, as there was another attack later in the afternoon, just before the Druids came to patrol. This time, it was the Muggle-born Hufflepuff Justin Finch-Fletchley and, more oddly, the Gryffindor ghost Sir Nicholas who were Petrified. Harry had been sitting with Susan Bones and Tracey Davis, as well as Hermione the whole time, so when Justin had been found by Professor McGonagall's last class of the day no one could blame him.

As Crabbe and Finch-Fletchley had nothing in common other than being second years, this made everyone even more nervous -especially most of the other second years. Unsurprisingly, when the list went up for those staying over the winter holidays, no one was interested. In the end, only a few would wind up staying, including the Weasleys. Hermione had been planning on going home, but her parents had been invited to attend a seminar in Australia, and Hermione preferred staying with Harry than flying over the holidays. The Weasleys claimed they were staying because they did not wish to travel to Egypt to visit Bill, but in actuality, of course, they could not afford to all go.

Malfoy found himself alone in Slytherin. Crabbe was petrified, and Goyle had refused to stay. Daphne told Hermione about the loud dust-up the two had had on the subject.

Harry just hoped it would be a quiet holiday.

*

Harry had a busy holiday, not even counting his homework. He celebrated the evening before the solstice with the Brotherhood and the morning of the winter solstice with the Druids. He celebrated the evening of Saturnalia with the one Roman member of the Brotherhood, Brother Marcus.

Harry liked the solstice celebrations. From Brother Marcus, Harry had picked up the idea of giving silver presents. He gave Hermione and Ginny (and sent to Luna) a charm bracelet with a little silver pot, and had sent the silver charm to the Brotherhood members he knew.

The afternoon after the students left for the holidays, Sirius Black and his friend Remus Lupin showed up. (Several members of both the Druids and the Brotherhood could perform the Homophus Charm, to instantly change the werewolf back into his normal form, so it was safe to visit around the full moon.)

Harry had never thought he could feel sorry for Snape, but he and Black were at it from the moment they laid eyes on each other, with Black usually coming out ahead. Dumbledore and whichever members of the Druids or Brotherhood present had to separate the two several times.

Black also taunted Draco Malfoy, but only when there were no other adults present. Now that he was exonerated, he was the official Head of the House of Black. Harry wasn't sure if Black really could dissolve the marriage of his first cousin Narcissa to Lucius Malfoy, but obviously Draco thought it possible, from his reactions.

When Harry woke up Christmas morning at his usual time of 5:45, he saw a huge pile of presents at the foot of his bed. He went through his morning exercises, showered, and made it back to his dorm a little after 7:00, just as Ron was waking up.

"Wow," Ron said when he came back from the loo, looking at Harry's pile with envy. "Quite the haul!"

"Well, let's open the best present first," Harry said.

"What's that?" Ron asked, wondering how Harry could tell.

Harry held up a squishy package. "Our jumpers from your Mum, of course!"

"Oh!"

They had just pulled their jumpers on when Hermione knocked on the door and then came in, levitating her presents. "Ginny wants to sleep in, and the twins are fighting with Percy in the Common Room. May I unwrap my presents here?"

With that, the three abandoned their burgeoning teenage dignity and ripped into their piles. Harry was disappointed, although not totally surprised, to see the envious looks Ron continually cast at both Harry's and Hermione's presents.

Hermione's parents had mostly sent clothes and some technical Muggle books on astrophysics and linguistics that were beyond Harry, and seemed to depress Ron. Neither was Ron happy with the earrings Harry gave Hermione, which matched her charm, especially when he learned that Harry

had not sent copies to Luna or Ginny. Neither Ron nor Ginny knew that Harry had his mentors layer protections on the charms given to Hermione and Luna.

Sirius had sent Harry an old book on wizarding matrimonial customs, which had made Harry and Hermione blush and Ron pale. The Brotherhood had not loaded Harry down with presents but had sent some interesting books, which pleased Harry, interested Hermione, and rather depressed Ron even more. Some of the Druids had also sent books on their religion to both Harry and Hermione as well.

Ron and Ginny for whatever reasons seemed rather down for the rest of the morning and afternoon, but none of the other Gryffindors really paid much attention. Percy was busy reading a thick book on international wizarding conventions, while the twins were playing with an advanced mixed potions/chemistry set Sirius had decided to give them once he had met them a few days before. Harry wasn't sure why the older men's nicknames for each other had so impressed the twins, and on the whole he suspected he was better off not knowing.

Sirius, Remus, Jason, and Cobra joined the small group gathered for the holiday feast. Snape and Malfoy were not present, mostly, Harry correctly suspected, so they would not have to put up with Sirius. Harry liked both of the friends of his father's, but he was rather leery of Sirius Black, in part because he had more mischievousness than the Weasley twins combined and in part because he was worried his godfather might try to take him away from the Brotherhood. Harry had little doubt that Dumbledore would be happy to help, if it were possible.

Without any Slytherins, this left the others at the table as the targets of Sirius' barbs. He seemed to take delight in teasing Hermione and Ginny about Harry, and Harry about the two girls. Sirius spent most of the end of the feast telling tales of Lily, which Harry would have liked to have enjoyed, except that it seemed at the end of each story, either Hermione or Ginny (or both) wound up being subtly being put down. Harry was glad Luna was not there to be teased as well.

In the end, Hermione excused herself after Sirius made one remark too many, and Ginny had muttered something which made Ron snort and Hermione tear up. "So," Sirius asked Harry before Hermione was even ten feet away, "are you going to be the gallent knight and follow one lady, or the gallent squire and entertain the other?" Hermione ran at that point.

Harry heard a soft sob from the retreating Hermione, and saw the trembling lip of Ginny. He glared at Sirius. "Perhaps I should be the ancient hero, who silences the monster who hurts school girls." With that, Harry stood, patted Ginny on the shoulder, and took off after Hermione.

Remus, Jason, and Cobra exchanged looks. "Go ahead," Remus said. "He doesn't listen to me."

Jason and Cobra stood and pulled the protesting Sirius from the room to have a talk with him.

Meanwhile, Harry had quickly caught up to Hermione. "Sorry," she sobbed. "I forgot to take my potion last night, so I'm a bit over-emotional because I had to take a stronger dose this morning."

"Potion? Are you all right?" Harry asked, concerned.

Hermione colored. "Can we just say it's a woman's issue, and that it's normally not a big deal?"

Harry frowned in confusion for a moment, and then semi-comprehension dawned. "Ah. What did Ginny say to you?"

Hermione shrugged.

"Come on. Sirius was teasing her about being too young, but that she could grow up very pretty, and she said something to you. What was it?"

Hermione scowled, but said, "Let's just say she made a remark about my teeth, and leave it at that, okay?"

"Weasleys are the envious sort, aren't they?" Harry said. He took Hermione's hand and led her to one of the walls that looked out over one of the courtyards, and sat her next to him on the wide window ledge. "Hermione, you're my best friend."

"Thank you, Harry. You're my best friend, too," Hermione said thankfully. She realized that Harry was still holding her hand, and she squeezed his a little.

"There are things I think I need to tell you, but you'd have to learn proper Occlumency. If I can, may I arrange a tutor for you next summer?"

"I'd like that."

Harry looked at his friend. "Hermione. . . ?"

"Yes?"

Harry took her other hand and leaned towards her slowly. Hermione looked surprised for a moment, but squeezed his hands, shut her eyes, and puckered slightly.

Harry very lightly kissed her lips, and both young teens held hands more tightly. "You're very special," Harry said, "and I think you have a very pretty smile."

That made Hermione smile a little. "We're too young to, well, be more than special friends," Hermione said, a little regretfully.

"Then you're not just my best friend, but my special friend." This time, when they kissed, they held on just a little bit longer.

"Now there's something I wish I didn't have to see."

Hermione jumped, but Harry merely turned and glared at Malfoy. "What exactly did you say?" Harry asked politely.

"I said," Malfoy snipped, "seeing the two of you kiss is something I wish I never had to see."

Hermione heard Harry hiss something as Malfoy sneered, but she didn't understand it. Her attention went back to Malfoy as he shrieked.

"Something wrong, Malfoy?" Harry asked politely.

"Where are you?"

"Whatever do you mean?" Harry asked with an innocent tone which would not have fooled a toddler.

"Stop it!" Malfoy shouted again, this time pulling his wand.

"Accio! Naughty, naughty, Malfoy." Harry caught the wand.

"What did you two do?" Malfoy cried out from the floor, where he had landed after the hex took his wand.

"What do you mean?" Hermione asked, puzzled.

"I can hear you, but I can't see you!"

"It sounds like you got your wish," Harry said. "An alleged pure-blood like you should know better than to make a wish with your hand on your wand, even if it was in your pocket. Come on, idiot, let's see if the Headmaster can straighten you out."

*

After Harry told his story, Dumbledore asked, "Mister Malfoy. . . ."

"I did nothing I tell you!" Malfoy shouted. "Potter or his Mudblood whore did something to me!"

"Temper, Mister Malfoy!" Dumbledore snapped. Seeing all the eyes on him. "That will be ten points. Oh, and one point from both you and Miss Granger for being alone in the corridors. You both know better. Come, Poppy, Professor McGonagall. Let us see what we can do for Mister Malfoy."

Hermione took Harry's hand and mouthed the word, "Summer?" Harry nodded. The pair ignored the sick looks on Ron and especially Ginny's faces.

"I don't know how you get your self into these situations, Harry," Percy said mournfully.

"It runs in the family," Remus put in.

"Believe me, I rather these things didn't happen to me," Harry said.

At that point, Jason, Cobra, and a rather chastised Sirius came into the hall as well. "Did we miss something interesting?" Sirius asked, brightening.

*

The other Gryffindors, save one, were back in their common room, and that one student was in her room, hurting. Harry and Hermione had been holding hands. Ginny was still in a temper about it.

She took a deep breath and pulled out the diary. It was a disturbing object in many ways, and she often had bad dreams, even during the day, when she used it. Still, she had to complain to someone.

She inked a quill, and wrote: *Dear Tom. I'm sorry it's been so long since I've written.*

Meanwhile, Cobra and Jason had escorted Harry to the classroom the Druids and the Brotherhood used on weekends.

"Do we need to clear your wand before Snape makes Dumbledore check it?" Jason asked, concerned, "or did you already do it?"

"Neither," Harry answered with a smirk.

Jason glared at Harry and then at Cobra. "What did you teach him?" Jason demanded.

"Why me?" Cobra asked, unexpressive as he usually was.

"You're the only person who's been teaching him whose magic I don't know fairly well."

"Do you think you know all the Master's secrets?" Cobra asked.

"Of course not," Jason retorted, "no more than he knows all of mine. But I think he would have mentioned teaching Harry something along these lines. You wouldn't."

Cobra concentrated for a moment, and both Jason and Harry felt wards going up around them. "You must remember, it was the original builders of the stone circles in western Europe who created the wand, although many other cultures created staffs, some even before the wandmakers. I grew up with neither. I mastered my magic, although I could not be as versatile with it as a wand or staff user, before the First Acolyte started my staff training when I was in my twenties. I based my magic on snake magic, Parseltongue as Harry's culture would call it. Harry took to it like a natural, and not just because of the talents he took from Voldemort."

Cobra looked at Harry. "Would you care to share, my disciple."

Jason was startled by that term. Cobra looked at Jason, which made even the warrior a tad nervous. "I know, you would consider Harry your apprentice or squire or novice or pupil or whatever term you might wish to use. Marcus and Khufu and Zin and perhaps the Master himself think of Harry here the same, while Tutmoses, Zara, and dozens more may soon as well." Cobra smirked. "I think even Scorpion thinks of Harry as his apprentice, although not for his Darker spells."

"Scorpion! He's, well. . . ."

"He's even more antisocial than I? Perhaps," Cobra agreed. "He liked Harry within five minutes, I believe."

"How did you get through his shell?" Jason asked Harry.

"I kicked him in the balls three times," Harry admitted.

"The last person who tried that, well, it wasn't pretty," Jason said, impressed. He sighed, "All right, so I can't consider Harry my exclusive student."

"No, you cannot," Cobra agreed. "Still, Zara believes he is best off under your primary care, and I learned millennia ago to trust his judgements on people."

A horrid thought hit Harry. "You . . . you'll still be around, though, won't you?" Harry asked.

"While you live, I shall be with you," Cobra said simply. "Should any harm you, I shall tear down the world, if needs be, to avenge you. Should you choose the natural order of things, I shall be with you as you cross over if I can. Should you be offered the Brotherhood and accept, I shall mentor

you." Cobra placed his hand on Harry's shoulder. "We cannot be killed, Harry, even if our present bodies might be destroyed. Some of us could come back to help you within days, nearly all of us within weeks."

"That includes me, lad," Jason said. "If I were not able to reanimate this body -- which I have done before -- I would be back with you within a week or so."

Harry smiled wanly.

"Now, why not tell your guardian what you did," Cobra said.

"Draco made a wish," Harry said. "Parsel-magic helped create Hogwarts. So, when he repeated the wish, I was able to tie that wish to Hogwarts' magic." Harry frowned. "I think it actually worked in part because Malfoy is in Slytherin, if that makes any sense. I really wasn't sure what I was doing, but somehow, that's what it felt like I did."

"I'm sure you're right," Cobra agreed. "It is old magic, our snake-magic, and it often plays on desires. Unless you find a way to release him, I don't think he will be able to see you or Miss Granger within Hogwarts' wards, unless the spell wears off over time."

"Really?"

"Really," Cobra agreed. "Although that might only be if the two of you were together, as you were then."

"What were the two of you doing?" Jason asked.

Harry blushed. Jason and Cobra looked shocked.

"What?" Harry demanded hotly. "I was just holding her hand!"

"And?" Jason prompted.

Harry mumbled.

"What was that?" Cobra asked.

"I said, I was kissing her," Harry ground out.

"By some British wizarding standards, she is not appropriate," Jason said, "but by any other standards, she is. I approve."

"She or Miss Lovegood, of your current close circle, are indeed appropriate," Cobra agreed. "I believe you were holding hands when we came into the hall, so it may be that Malfoy will not see either of you, will not see you if you are near each other, or will only not see you if you are in physical contact."

"Have fun finding out," Jason said.

Chapter XI

As Christmas ended and time moved on towards the New Year, there were many puzzled or confused minds in and around Hogwarts. Tom Riddle, or what part of Tom Riddle was contained in the diary Horcrux, was both puzzled and confused.

The consciousness inside the Horcrux had been mostly dormant for nearly forty years, when it had awakened with a shriek of pain as the body which it had been hived off from had been destroyed. It had not been fully aware for what turned out to be nearly another eleven years, but the magic Voldemort had added to the diary when he had entrusted it to Lucius Malfoy was reinforcing the desire of the semi-conscious Horcrux to come forth once Voldemort's body had been lost. The diary, in short, had been used by Voldemort as a fail-safe.

Voldemort had added copies of some memories to the diary between 1942 and 1981, but not many. These included the locations of and protections around the other four Horcruxes he had made before 1981, and copies of some locations where Voldemort had stored treasure or important items.

These memories had not been integrated into the Horcrux mind at the time. That was one of the things the Horcrux mind had been occupied with during August and September, after Ginny Weasley had first written in the diary, fully awakening the copy of the mind of 16 year old Tom Riddle. In addition, besides of course befriending the Weasley girl, Tom had managed to get the story of how 'He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named' (how he enjoyed the fact that the girl did not even dare write Voldemort!) had been defeated.

When Tom had learned the dates of the various events, he had been disappointed, no, shocked even that by 1981 he had not succeeded in at least taking over magical Britain. Even more shocking was the tale that he had been somehow defeated, physically destroyed even, by a fifteen month old toddler. Knowing he had been defeated, Tom had anticipated having been brought down by a mighty international coalition, or at least a powerful sorcerer like Dumbledore, not a child barely able to walk!

Fortunately perhaps, his correspondent was obsessed with Harry Potter, and happily wrote in every bit of data available to the public and what she had gleaned from her brothers. The information seemed conflicting -- the boy had nearly been murdered by his Muggle relatives yet had apparently defeated a version of himself the year before, with some help from his correspondent's braggart brother and a Mudblood.

Once Tom had made it into Ginny's head a few times, his views of Harry was even more conflicted. The scrawny scarecrow Ginny had seen at the beginning and end of the boy's first year had been less than impressive. The more fit boy who had come to school this year was at least impressive for his age.

More worrisome were the people around Hogwarts. Individually, Tom cared nothing for any Druid. Collectively, however, he had to acknowledge they were dangerous. Tom also knew enough about the Druids to recognize that many of those Ginny had seen wearing Druid tartans were anything but Druids, but some sort of mages from Africa or the Middle East. Voldemort would have had a good guess, but Tom did not. Still, he did know enough to be wary.

Tom was also not exactly happy with the girl his diary had been given to. Ginny was just too strong-willed to be easily controlled for long periods, at least so far. She had actually managed to set the diary down for the period between the last attack and Christmas night, worried about the

'visions' she was experiencing. Only the sight of Potter holding hands with the Mudblood had driven her to him.

Tom wondered how the boy had managed to curse the Malfoy brat. He didn't want to admit it, but he couldn't convince himself that he would have been able to do that bit of magic even at 16. But then, to Tom Riddle, as to the later Voldemort, Parseltongue was just a tool and a symbol, not a totally different field of magic. Voldemort had always been mostly self-educated. So, while he was widely and deeply read, there were some significant gaps in his knowledge.

Riddle decided he might have to push and take over the girl as soon as possible. It might be too dangerous to seek detailed information about The-Boy-Who-Lived.

*

"Tell me, Severus, what do you think would happen should we try to expel Harry?" Dumbledore asked, sitting back in his chair and folding his hands in his lap.

"I don't know what you mean," Snape hedged.

"Nonsense," Dumbledore nearly snapped. "In any sort of fair hearing, the Board of Governors would not uphold the expulsion, even if Minerva or I agreed to it, which I do not. If you wish to ask Minerva, you may." Snape made a face at that suggestion. "In any event, there is no evidence that Harry did anything, let alone anything Dark."

"Malfoy doesn't have the imagination to create such a tale," Snape pointed out in turn.

"Perhaps not, but perhaps he did somehow manage to invoke some sort of oath upon himself. The magical signature is similar."

"But not exact. Something unknown was cast on Malfoy, something Potter picked up from his friends."

"Perhaps." Dumbledore shrugged. "Do you think they would allow him to be expelled?"

"Do they control Hogwarts now?" Snape demanded.

"In most senses, no. However, do not make the mistake of believing they can be easily thwarted. Some of them would kill me, let alone you or young Malfoy, without batting an eyelid if they thought it necessary."

"But. . . ."

Dumbledore held up his hand. "In our world, the rule of law is very tenuous. Might does not make right, but might usually gets its way. I warned you, Severus, and I believe you warned your House. Young Malfoy spoke out of turn, and it is possible that he will not know where Harry or Miss Granger are . . . a tactical disadvantage, to say the least."

Snape could only nod. After a moment, he said, "Is there nothing which can be done?"

"Assuming neither Harry nor Miss Granger cast anything. . . ."

"Granger! With her cookbook approach to magic? Unless there is some book on the open shelves

which detail this, she could have had nothing to do with it."

"While I believe in general you underestimate her imagination, I admit I believe you are likely correct in this instance. You must not allow your biases to lead you to the conclusion that Lily Evans was the only Muggle-born with true magical talent. Be that as it may, assuming this is something Mister Malfoy did to himself, no matter how inadvertent, the answer is no, there is nothing more we can do."

"And if Potter did do something?" Snape demanded.

"Would Mister Malfoy apologize?"

"Very likely not," Snape admitted.

"Then let us hope that whatever happened wears off."

*

It didn't take long for Fred and George to spread the story of Draco's apparent cursing of himself to their friends once classes restarted in January. Numerous people kept their eyes on Harry, Hermione, and Draco, but after a few days, even Snape had to admit that, if anything Draco's inability to see the pair (or Harry or Hermione individually as it turned out) actually made for a more harmonious atmosphere. Snape was surprised that Potter did not act take advantage of Draco, as his father would have taken advantage of him.

That made Snape think.

The one person who didn't take things quietly was Pansy Parkinson. A week after her return, she flounced past the two Gryffindors and hissed, "Draco is so lucky. I wish I didn't have to see inferior people," before moving off, her squat nose held high.

Only Hermione caught the hiss of Harry's Parseltongue under his breath, even if she was not sure what it was. Only on their way to the library after dinner could Hermione ask what he had done to her.

"Why, I gave her what she asked for. Of course, the only really inferior person I could think of was her."

"You mean. . . ?"

Harry nodded. "She can't see herself in any mirror attached to the castle."

The two smiled and held hands on the way to study.

Snape kept a close eye on the pair of them, hoping to have a reason to punish them that even the Brotherhood couldn't object to. However, the pair only held hands moving about the corridors, which was well within the rules. Snape was not to know it, but beyond that, the pair merely lightly kissed 'good morning' in the common room, and lingered a bit over a kiss before leaving the common room at night.

Ron, Seamus, and a few of the other boys would have liked to have teased them about it, but one look from Harry quelled not only Fred and George, but even a nasty-tongued Sixth year. Most of

the older girls thought Harry and Hermione very adorable, and kept a close eye on Hermione when Harry was practicing or training.

Ginny Weasley was seen to keep a close eye on Hermione as well, her face expressionless, but only Luna seemed to be worried about it. Ginny said nothing, but scribbled in her diary.

As for Pansy Parkinson, Tracey and Daphne reported the next morning that her screams had been heard through the Slytherin area. Not only couldn't she see her self in any mirror attached to Hogwarts, no one else could either.

*

January seemed like a quiet month to most of the students, once Pansy had stopped checking her reflection in a little makeup mirror. Harry was the only student to know what the staff knew, that the Druids and the Brotherhood members, patrolling alternate nights, had each chased something or someone several times, but it had gotten away. Both groups had observed unnatural groupings of spiders, but there was no set pattern or point they seemed to be fleeing from.

By the end of the month, Cobra and Jason, now joined by Scorpion, patrolled the castle every night, along with the alternating patrols. Two pairs of vampire elders in bat form perched outside both Harry and Hermione's windows every night from midnight until just before dawn, one ready to turn into smoke and enter through the cracks in the windows should trouble arise, the other to raise the alarm.

Harry and Hermione knew little of these precautions. However, near the end of the month, Luna confided to Harry that she was now certain that Ginny's aura was changing, growing darker overtones and a very different underlying appearance.

Harry realized that he should have mentioned this before. So on that last Saturday afternoon of the month, he brought Luna to his meeting with the Brotherhood. The two brothers did not scold Harry, but their looks said it all -- he may have missed something important.

The next afternoon, the 31st, Osiris and Cobra met with Harry and Luna. Osiris demonstrated the use of a pensieve, and he examined Luna's memories of Ginny's aura. Harry was disappointed to learn that he couldn't see auras, at least not yet, even with Osiris'coaching.

Osiris was too pensive to give Harry any sympathy. Luna was thanked, questioned about Ginny's habits, encouraged to keep an eye on Ginny in case she exhibited any further changes, and then gently sent on her way.

As soon as the door shut behind Luna, Harry's shoulders slumped. "I messed up, didn't I?"

"Yes, but probably not seriously," Osiris said bluntly. "We could not keep a close eye on her, and Luna's gift is not yet developed enough to have caught on much earlier than she did, no matter how much we encouraged her." He turned to Cobra. "Did you catch the most salient fact?"

"I believe so."

Osiris turned to Harry. "And did you?"

Harry thought for a moment, and then he realized what it was --Ginny was often seen scribbling away in her room. "She might have Riddle's Horcrux diary!"

"Exactly." He and Cobra exchanged looks. "This could prove interesting."

"At least I'm out of it," Harry said with feeling.

"Aren't you forgetting something?" Cobra asked.

"Probably," Harry admitted. He thought again. "The Prophecy?"

"Precisely. No doubt others can destroy the Horcrux, but not with the comparative ease you theoretically could, at least with our help."

Harry sighed.

*

The next Saturday, Harry was surprised to be only meeting Cobra in the room set aside for such meetings. Even more surprisingly, Cobra disappeared from the room, taking Harry with him.

"You look surprised, Harry."

Harry blinked, looked around, and blinked again, knowing he was in the Brotherhood's camp. "This may sound stupid, but Hermione says that *Hogwarts: A History* claims that you can't apparate in or out of Hogwarts, and that didn't feel like a Portkey."

"All true," Osiris agreed. "What we do when we wish to access Hogwarts might be called 'popping'; it's what house elves do when they travel. Now, the magic is related to apparating, but it is a bit different. Very few magi have the power to imitate elven magic. It is also only good for us for about eleven of your miles or so."

"Oh." Harry looked at the room full of Brothers, plus the senior druids. "It's bad, isn't it?"

"It is," Osiris agreed. "Miss Weasley has Voldemort's diary Horcrux. Worse, she has partially bonded with it."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning it is leeching the life and magic from her. At this rate, in a week or two at most, the soul fragment will be able to restore itself in material form, and Miss Weasley will be dead. He will then seek out the main soul segment, which we still believe is in Albania, and join with it, bringing Voldemort fully back with some additional Dark magic and a blood sacrifice. No doubt, he would then create at least one more Horcrux at that point."

Harry started to open his mouth, but Osiris raised his hand. Harry therefore kept quiet. "If we were to destroy the diary tonight, we could prevent most of that."

"Most?" Harry asked.

"Because of the bond, the entire soul fragment inside Horcrux would likely be drawn into Miss Weasley if the Horcrux shell is destroyed at the moment. Now wait," Osiris cautioned Harry, who was about to ask another question. "You were not really made into a Horcrux. Your scar was the actual Horcrux, although it had a type of bond to you. In this case, Miss Weasley would be the

entire Horcrux. There would be no way to separate her. She would have to die."

Harry's eyes went wide.

"Over time, probably several years to a decade or so, Voldemort would come to first dominate and then totally control the Horcrux that had been Miss Weasley. She would be lost."

Harry controlled himself, for the moment.

"The entrance to the Chamber of Secrets is in a girl's lavatory, for some odd reason. Cobra?"

"There is a steep stone slide, which I took rather than risking any more magic. The door to the Chamber was ajar, but it is activated by snake-magic. The ritual transformation area to materialize himself is almost ready. It needs a very clear pattern of symbols, which he has had Ginny draw partially in simple pencil and partially in her own blood. A bit more blood, say a pint instead of the several cups he had bled from her these past few weeks, and all will be ready."

"Your Valentine's holiday is a week from tomorrow," Jason said, picking up the story. "That idiot Lockhart has arranged three days of foolishness. Normally, most students would be distracted by this, and the staff distracted by the students. The older students will be in Hogsmeade next Saturday, and there will be a feast next Sunday. Most likely, he will make his move one of those two nights."

"Miss Weasley will be safe to rescue only in the hour to two hours it should take Tom Riddle, as we should no doubt call this fragment of him, to materialize. We can do many things, but it is likely safest if you were to be the one to destroy the Horcrux. At the very least, it would be prudent for you to be there, if you are willing."

Harry started to nod, but stopped. Instead, he bowed and said in his best early Egyptian, "As my lord Ahk Shir-rusch commands."

"There is no need for that, Harry, at least not over this," Osiris said gently. "Do you still wear the ankh I gave you last summer?"

"Of course, sir," Harry answered, fishing it out by the chain.

"Very good." He held the ankh for a moment and then dropped it. "We and our allies here will be keeping a discreet eye on Miss Weasley. We will know each time she goes to the Chamber. Two of our Druid allies are also Parselmouths. They and Brother Cobra will be able to infiltrate the Chamber. Should the ceremony start, your ankh will vibrate. When you can, touch the ankh with your wand, and you will be transported to the lavatory, where Scorpion, Jason, and I will be waiting. Do not bother changing, we will take care of it there."

"I understand, sir."

Osiris looked very serious. "Harry. . . ." Harry looked worried. "There is something you need to understand."

"Sir?"

"This is a ceremony Riddle cobbled together from several different sources, rather brilliantly, I must say. We do not believe Riddle could have done this before he was in his forties. So, that means

either our time-line for his making the Horcruxes is off, or he added information to this one. Considering the form, that is certainly possible."

Harry merely nodded.

"Our estimation is that the process should take longer than an hour. We could be wrong, especially if Miss Weasley is even more under his control than we believe."

"Which means?"

"Which means we may not be able to save her, Harry. It will not be your fault if we don't."

"If I had told you about Luna. . . ."

"At the point where Miss Lovegood was likely to have noticed that degree of aura change, they were already linked, Harry. We would be where we are, except with more notice. Understand?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good. Be prepared, Harry."

"I will be, sir."

*

The next week was a very hard one for Harry. Ron was hurt, because Harry seemed more withdrawn from him than usual. Hermione and Luna could tell Harry was both worried and agitated, but took the hint and did not press him. Hermione was especially worried, as Harry was on the one hand totally uncommunicative, and on the other, seemed to need her near by.

Luna woke Hermione up early Thursday morning, a little after 5:30, and led her down the stairs. "I don't know why I woke up, but I did," Luna whispered. "Either a nargle brushed by me, or I dreamt one did. In either case, I went to the common room, just wanting to walk around a bit before trying to get another hour's sleep, and there he was."

"He? Harry?"

Luna pressed her finger to Hermione's lips and they entered the common room. Harry was laying on the largest sofa, near the fireplace. His face was scrunched up, and he was obviously having a bad dream.

Hermione felt Luna's lips against her ear. "Take care of him, Hermione," she whispered, and then she went back up the stairs.

Hermione went and sat on the edge of the sofa. She hesitated, but then ran her fingers through Harry's hair, something she had thought about for almost a year. She was so gentle, he did not wake up.

Instead, Harry quieted, and then fell into a deeper sleep.

Hermione continued stroking his hair, giving Harry some peace. Obviously, something was building up, which he was not allowed to talk about.

Hermione hoped the crisis would soon pass, whatever it was, and that it would cause as little damage as possible as it did so.

Chapter XII

Saturday, February 13

Harry was restless all day Saturday, and had trouble falling asleep. Because of his sleepy state, it took Harry over a minute to realize that he was being summoned by the ankh. Once he realized what was happening, Harry fumbled for his wand and, since he had his bed curtains closed and a silencing charm up, touched it to the ankh.

Harry therefore materialized on the floor of the girls' loo in his underwear. Under the mutterings of Osiris and Jason as they materialized magical body armor and then robes, Harry thought for a moment he heard giggling, but he chose to ignore it.

In just over five minutes from the time Osiris had first sent out the signal, Harry was ready. "What?" Harry asked, seeing the three wizards looking at him.

"You're the Parselmouth, Harry," Jason chided gently. "Say 'open', if you will, towards that dusty sink."

"Open," Harry obediently said in Parseltongue. Scorpion held out brooms, somewhat shorter than racing brooms. In a few seconds, the four were floating down the shaft.

At the bottom, they set them aside. Osiris made himself and his two followers invisible, and then Harry hurried down the tunnel in the direction Osiris had indicated.

To Harry's surprise, the massive door to the Chamber of Secrets was open. He paused, and felt two of the men go past him, while the third tapped Harry on the shoulder.

Harry went cautiously into the Chamber.

At the far end, in front of a huge, primitive-looking stone face, which might have been that of a man or an ape or a monkey, a figure was standing, turning around. At his feet was a slither form.

"Well, well, well, I must say I am surprised," the older teen said.

"Why?" Harry asked.

"I had not anticipated you showing up, Harry Potter."

"Put down Ginny's wand," Harry said.

Riddle snorted. "There is nothing a second year can do to me, Potter. If you knew who I was. . . ."

"I know who you were, and what you became. As for not being able to stop you, that's what that fakir Voldemort thought, when he attacked a toddler," Harry retorted.

"Prove it, little boy," Riddle sneered.

Harry had already silently sent a bright yellow spell at Riddle. Riddle didn't even have time to see it coming, let alone raise a shield, as it was simply an intense light spell, traveling at the speed of light. Riddle was blinded, and would be for several seconds.

Harry dove out of the way, in case the screaming Riddle sent any curses where he had been. Harry noticed the limp Ginny was being moved out of the way as well by unseen hands.

Within seconds, Riddle was disarmed, bound, and gagged. "How is she?" Harry asked one of the Druids, who was examining Ginny.

"I don't know," he admitted.

"Asclepias as well as two of your healers are prepared," Osiris said. "Jason? take the girl to them."

"Of course," Jason said. He gently cradled Ginny in his arms and disappeared.

"Sir?" Harry asked.

"I have broken the links between Riddle and Miss Weasley. If he has not taken too much from her, she will survive. The link was very strong. He drained her faster than I had thought likely, but had not yet killed her. He should be stable for at least an hour, and then will return to the Horcrux, if it is not destroyed."

"Should I . . . ?"

"Not yet. Cobra! Take your two friends and deal with the basilisk as you see fit."

"Yes, sir!" Cobra and the two Parselmouth Druids left the Chamber.

Osiris turned back to Harry. "If you destroy the Horcrux now, we can gain no information."

Harry glanced at the outraged and struggling Riddle. "I don't think he's likely to talk."

Scorpion quietly said, "What did I tell you one of my specialities was?"

Harry thought, and then said, "Pain magic?"

Scorpion nodded. "I will get him to talk, although we may not get everything." He looked at Harry. "I think it best if you were to wait on the other side of the door, Harry."

"But . . ."

"It will not be a sight you will wish to remember," Scorpion stated coldly. "Go."

"And command the door to close," Osiris added.

Harry glanced at Scorpion, who had quickly conjured a fire, and was pulling various sharp and nasty-looking objects from his cloak. Osiris had conjured a plank, a tub of water, and some towels. Harry nodded and did as he was told.

*

The door to the Chamber opened some forty minutes later, and Harry was unsurprised to see Cobra on the other side. "You found it?" Harry asked.

"Found it, and was forced to kill it," Cobra said regretfully. As Harry stepped into the Chamber, he

saw two groups of Druids Portkey in. "They're going to process it."

Harry nodded his basic understanding, and risked a glance over to where Riddle had been. Except for a few bloody smudges, there was no sign of him. Osiris and two Druids were still examining the diary.

Osiris motioned Harry over. "Good news and bad news. Voldemort did not interact much with this Horcrux, but he did add some memories. The last seemed to have been added in August, 1981. This confirmed that at that time, he had five Horcruxes. The other good news is that we found the location of one of the missing ones, the locket. It seems to be in a tidal pool in a cave Riddle had visited as a child. There seem to be numerous precautions, so we will have to be careful gathering it for you to destroy."

Harry merely nodded. He was sleepy.

"The bad news is, we don't know where the diadem is. Voldemort was not specific, but it seems to be somewhere here in the school. Riddle had already chosen a hiding place when he had made this Horcrux. Because it was more his own memory instead of one Voldemort added, Riddle was able to keep the secret more easily, and there does not seem to be any way to force the diary to answer."

"And it would be dangerous to allow it to feed on someone else's life forces and magic, even under controlled circumstances," one of the Druids put in.

"True. If he had not already have formed that bond with the girl, we would not have allowed this to have gone forward."

"Is there any news about Ginny?" Harry asked.

"Not yet. Why don't you try and get some sleep? Everything will be clearer in the morning."

Harry was torn, as he'd like to wait for news about Ginny, but he was asleep on his feet. "The diary?"

"We will study it a bit more, and then ask you to destroy it," Osiris said.

Harry nodded, and Osiris transformed Harry back to the state of undress he had started off in, and then levitated him so that he was laying down. Then Harry was Portkeyed back to his bed, where he dropped about half an inch onto the soft mattress.

Despite the excitement and the worry, Harry was so exhausted he fell asleep in less than a minute.

*

"Harry!" Harry felt something poke his shoulder, which he ignored. "Harry!!"

"Oh, Ronald! Move out of the way." Harry's nostrils were gently pressed together and two finger tips gently pressed his lips closed.

Harry snorted and opened his eyes. "What?" he asked looking up into Hermione's worried eyes, very aware of his lips moving against the fingers Hermione still held to his mouth.

"Come on," Ron whined.

"What?"

"Professor McGonagall left a note, saying we could not leave Gryffindor, and . . . and Ginny is missing."

"Right," Harry said. "I'll get dressed and be down in a few minutes, Ron."

"Right," Ron replied, wandering out, a very confused boy.

The previous year, Harry would have been very concerned about Hermione seeing him in his under-vest and boxers, but he simply got out of bed, scooped up his clothes, and said, "I'll change in the bathroom."

The very worried Hermione stopped him. "I think you know something. Is it bad?"

Harry shrugged. "I think everything except Ginny is good. I don't know how she is. Don't let on."

"I won't."

*

When Harry and Hermione came down to the common room, the place was crowded and noisy. When Luna saw them, however, she came over to them with a look of combined concerned and panic. She looked into Harry's eyes, and then threw herself into Hermione's arms.

Harry hugged his two friends and looked around. Percy was in a stiff chair, his elbows on his knees, his face in his hands. Fred and George were on a sofa, with Alicia, Angelina, and Katie all hovering nearby.

A buffet had apparently just been set up. Ron must have been one of the first to go through it, but he was mostly looking at nothing as he distractedly ate an entire plate of mixed sausages.

"He'll make himself sick," Hermione muttered.

"Anything that distracts him," Harry said. "I'm actually hungry, and you two should at least have some juice or something."

Since Luna, who was shivering, was still hanging on to Hermione, Harry went over to the buffet. He somehow managed to carry a tray in his left hand with three large mugs of hot cocoa on it, and a plate with a wedge of quiche and numerous scones in the other.

The three ate standing against a far wall.

After about forty-five minutes, Professor McGonagall came into the room. A glance quieted the room. "I have been given the gist of a series of events, which I shall now relate," she said formally, "just as each Head of House should be doing at this time. To start, we must go back in times almost exactly fifty years."

She glanced around. "You see, that was the last time the Chamber is believed to have been opened." She paused in thought. "It was two years after I myself had left Hogwarts. There were several incidents, with Muggle-born children, or those from prominent families of mixed-blood, being

injured, and of course similar messages left in blood. Then, a young Ravenclaw was killed. You girls all know Myrtle, the ghost in the girls' lav."

Harry realized that he might have heard some giggling the night before after all.

"A fifth year Slytherin prefect named Tom Riddle brought evidence that a Third year Gryffindor, Rubeus Hagrid, had been raising some sort of dangerous creature, which escaped. Hagrid was expelled, but there was never any direct evidence that he or whatever beast he was raising were in any way concerned with the matter, and in fact, he has now been fully exonerated."

That brought a murmur.

"It turns out that Tom Marvolo Riddle was actually responsible. While his father was a Muggle, his mother was one of the last known descendants of Salazar Slytherin." McGonagall looked at the students, took a deep breath, and said, "The letters of 'Tom Marvolo Riddle' can be used to spell the phrase 'I am Lord Voldemort'."

The gasp was loud.

McGonagall took a few moments to recover, and then went on. "At some point, You-Know-Who. . ."

"Riddle," Harry growled, just loud enough for all to hear.

McGonagall's lips thinned for a moment, but then she nodded. "You are correct. Riddle made a very Dark object, although it resembled a Muggle day diary. This somehow came into the possession of Ginny Weasley. The diary, in turn, was possessing Miss Weasley." The gasps were louder this time, and Luna was not the only Gryffindor who found comfort through physical contact.

Glancing around, Harry saw Fred and George were slack-jawed. Ron had sat down, without checking to see if there was a chair behind him (there hadn't been). Ron was also very pale. Percy, on the other hand, was grinding his teeth, and his cheeks were bright red with fury.

"This object has slowly been taking full possession of Miss Weasley. It was Riddle, using Miss Weasley's unknowing body, which unleashed the monster. Last night, the Druid patrol followed the possessed Miss Weasley into the Chamber of Secrets. A group slew the monster, which was a basilisk."

Those few students who knew what a basilisk was were shocked.

"The connections between Miss Weasley and the diary have been broken. However, she does remain in a coma. We will let you know her condition as it changes. Now, if Miss Weasley's bothers would join me, please?"

As the dazed Ron went past Harry, Harry laid a hand on his friend's shoulder. Ron merely nodded, and followed his brothers.

*

"It's my fault, isn't it?" Luna asked quietly. She, Hermione, and Harry were seated in a dark corner of the very quiet common room.

"No, it's not," Hermione assured the younger girl. Luna did not look convinced.

"Once Riddle got his hooks into Ginny, there was no way to break the connection without hurting Ginny," Harry said. "I know, I've felt guilty that I didn't pass on your warnings soon enough. As soon as he controlled Ginny enough to send that basilisk out the first time, it would have ended like this to some degree. Well," he acknowledged, "those others wouldn't have been petrified."

"She was my only friend before I came here," Luna sniffled.

Hermione hugged her. "She's still your friend, and so am I, and Harry and Neville, too."

"She could recover," Harry pointed out. "The diary drained her life force and her magical reserves, but those can build back up."

"They can," Luna agreed, "but they don't always."

Professor McGonagall and the four Weasley brothers came back just before noon. "The good news is that Miss Weasley will recover. However, it will be a long process. She is being withdrawn from school, and will return to us next year. I wish to emphasize that this was in no way Miss Weasley's fault. She was used, and abused, by this object. The buffet will be refilled momentarily. Please, stay within the House until five o'clock. Dinner will be served as usual from five-thirty, but only until six-thirty rather than until the usual seven." McGonagall glared at them. "Do not stray. I will take a head count at seven, so you had best be here."

Harry took a step towards Ron, but George, who was guiding Ron's footsteps, shook his head. Fred, however, came over. "We realized something," Fred growled.

Harry's heart rate went up, as he worried the Weasleys were going to blame him.

"We can't be totally sure of course," Fred went on, "but there was one really good time someone could have slipped Ginny that . . .that thing."

"When?" Harry asked softly.

"When we were in Diagon Alley last August, at the bookstore, Malfoy came over and gave Ron some lip about you, and generally stuck his nose in the air. George and I were about to enlarge his nose and split his lip when his father and Dad both came up, glaring. Old Man Malfoy took Ginny's used cauldron from her and pawed through the books."

Fred's face went red. "Ron had been pretty hard on his books last year. I mean, they were old. . . ."

"I understand," Harry said. "Malfoy sneered at Ginny's used books."

"And the diary seems to have been in the books, or at least we think so."

"That sounds about right," Harry agreed.

"You'll pass that on to the right people?"

"I will."

*

That night at dinner, Malfoy walked up behind Ron on his way to his own place and softly chanted, "Five little Weasels, scrounging in the mud. One wrote in the wrong book, so now there were four little Weasels, scrounging in the mud." It took Neville and Dean to hold Ron to his chair. Seeing Fred and George start to stand, Malfoy hurried away. Harry and Hermione had been on the wrong side of the table.

"One of these days, we'll be out of school," Ron muttered. "And then I will kill him."

*

Lucius Malfoy looked out the grand window at the late winter estate. Whatever his Master's plan had been, it had failed. No doubt, he would be blamed, should the Master ever return.

Part of him wished the Master had never been vanquished. Part of him worried that the Master would somehow return in his lifetime.

Suddenly, Lucius was aware that there were two figures standing behind him. Casually, he gripped his cane, with its hidden wand.

Lucius spun to his right, using his momentum to pull the wand from the cane with his right hand.

Lucius' jaw ran into a fist traveling in the opposite direction, as he had been unaware of the third man, let alone the fist. The fist that had cracked his jaw, loosened two teeth, and slightly cracked three others. He was quickly disarmed.

Lucius glared at the three men, all in plain light brown robes. "I don't know who you are, or how you got in. . . ." He paused, as it should have been impossible for anyone not of the family to have gotten past the blood wards without permission.

The Brotherhood had merely drained Draco of just over a pint of blood, Obliviated him, and used that and some advanced magic to bypass the wards, not that Lucius would ever know that.

Lucius recovered. "You realize, whoever you are, you'll all be in Azkaban for this."

"Not really," Cobra said. "You will remember this visit, but you will not be able to share in the information. Even if you did, if you tried to testify under any truth potion, all we would have to do is ask you if you were ever an active Death Eater."

Lucius scowled and was about to protest when Jason spoke up, "You don't own a large section of the Ministry these days, Malfoy. Yes, there are a whole number of people there who would love to ask you some questions, given a chance."

"What do you want," Lucius snarled.

"Just a few things," Cobra said. "You are going to free a house elf, send your son a letter we already wrote, resign from the Hogwarts Board of Governors and the Wizengamot. . . ."

"NEVER!"

Scorpion waved his wand twice, and Malfoy's robe flew up and his loin cloth was removed. He next placed his wand under Malfoy's testicles and snarled, "CRUCIO!" After five seconds, Scorpion

said, "Now that I've reminded you how your Master tortured you, shall I show you how a real expert does it?"

*

The next morning, Draco Malfoy was rereading his father's letter for the third time. Still, the letter did not change. His father had resigned from both the school's Board of Governors and the Wizengamot, and had freed one of their house elves. In addition, he and his mother were headed for Paraguay.

Draco was not certain where Paraguay was, or how he was to get there when school ended in four months.

Like many others in the school, he wished the year would hurry up and end.

Chapter XIII

The denizens of Hogwarts went through the rest of the late winter and early spring on egg shells, not quite trusting that something bad was not going to happen. For the second years, however, the main problem as Easter loomed turned out to be deciding what electives to add the following year.

Hermione wanted to take all five of the new classes, even if three was the maximum. Harry managed to argue her out of taking Muggle Studies, while Luna convinced her she would not get much out of divination. In return, Harry did have to agree to taking Care of Magical Creatures, as well as Arithmancy and 'Runes'. He already was operating at the post-O.W.L. level in Runes, but could not reveal that.

The second years got together several times to discuss their choices, mostly to help Neville, who was totally undecided, and the Muggleborn Dean, who had never even heard of two of the subjects and had little idea about what any of them were really about. Parvati and Lavender were convinced they had 'spiritual natures' and would be naturals in Divination, and that Magical Creatures only meant animals like unicorns, crups, puffskeins, and kneazles.

Perhaps unfairly, Hermione was subtly encouraging that belief.

The two girls and Seamus refused to take three classes (Seamus was also taking Care and Divination). Neville wavered, but finally only took two electives, Care and, after Hermione, Dean, and Harry agreed to help him, Muggle Studies. Dean was taking the same classes as Hermione and Harry, who were currently first and third in their class that year.

For some reason, Percy really was encouraging Ron to do Divination, and Ron would have settled for Divination and Care. When Dean, Harry, and Hermione agreed to help Neville, however, Ron reluctantly agreed to add Muggle Studies as well, knowing it would also please his father. He was secretly planning on dropping one class after his third year.

Behind the scenes, things were going smoothly, but not very successfully. The castle had been searched repeatedly, but no clue was found as to the diadem's location. The cave had been investigated, and numerous inferi had been destroyed. However, the locket had already been exchanged for a fake. The Druids, the Brotherhood, and Dumbledore had no idea who R.A.B. might have been, or if he might have destroyed the locket.

Harry had gone off for Easter with the Brotherhood to the Hidden Temple, and had assisted the Brotherhood in destroying the diary Horcrux. He had used the opportunity to work out his next summer with Osiris, Tutmoses, Jason, and the others. He would spend the end of June and all of July training with the Brotherhood, with no time travel. He would spend his birthday and a few other days in London with Sirius and Remus, who had promised him a birthday party, where he could invite his friends. He would split August between training with the Druids and Brotherhood, and spending time with Sirius and Remus, or at the Grangers. Part of the time, he might be at Hogwarts, helping in the search for the Ravenclaw diadem.

After the Easter break, Harry noticed the pace of things picking up. He had to laugh when the Hufflepuff Seeker humiliated Malfoy in the first spring game. Flint had tried, to Malfoy's shock, to throw Malfoy off of the team at that point. With his father in South America and no longer on the Board of Governors, Draco was lucky to be retained as Reserve Seeker. As the new Seeker was a Seventh year, Malfoy could try and win his position back the next year.

Harry flew well in both of his games, trouncing the Ravenclaw Seeker and just narrowly beating the Hufflepuff. Gryffindor won both games, 390-120 over Ravenclaw and a hardfought 300-120 over Hufflepuff. As the only undefeated team, Gryffindor won the Quidditch Cup.

After his humiliation on the Quidditch pitch, Draco Malfoy spent the rest of the school year sulking. Not even Crabbe's de-petrification helped Malfoy's mood. The fact that he still could not see Harry or Hermione did not lighten Malfoy's spirits in any way. Students from all Houses were constantly greeting Harry or Hermione in Malfoy's vicinity, especially when neither was near by. Fred and George invented a pair of clever little devices which covered the mouth. By speaking through one or the other, you could 'speak' in either Harry or Hermione's voice. So, by the time Crabbe was revived in early June, Malfoy was acting like a cat trying to thread its way through a carpet covered with invisible tacks.

Crabbe was just happy he was exempt from the final examinations.

When it was time to leave, Hermione was almost as happy that Harry had placed third in their class that year as she was to have placed first two years in a row. Overall, that moved Harry up to sixth in the class.

Harry was just happy that he was going to have an interesting summer, with no Dursleys. He and Hermione hugged tightly, and then Harry hugged Luna more briefly and exchanged hearty slaps on the shoulder with Ron, the twins, and Neville. Then, after giving Hermione another hug, Jason transported him away for the summer.

Hermione and Luna exchanged a sisterly embrace and went their separate ways, each feeling secure knowing that her sister would be safe that summer. Brother Oz had assured them that members of the Druids or the Brotherhood would never be far away. In addition, he and Brother Cobra had spent some time charming a slightly larger copy of the little silver pot charm Harry had given them for Christmas. This was to be worn on a very fine necklace, and worn at all times. If either was injured, Harry would know instantly, and the Brotherhood would move to investigate.

*

Harry spent the end of June on Jason's island, with Jason, Scorpion, and Cobra training him in more advanced fighting techniques. The three made certain that Harry was in peak physical condition. Cobra also introduced Harry to Arithmancy, so he would have a decent head start in the autumn.

Harry then spent three days with Cobra in the redoubt in Antarctic, working on his Parsel-magic. This was followed by five days in the Atlas mountains, with Brother Zara and some of the brothers from the Tibetan temples, working on Harry's meditation and Occlumency, plus more Arithmancy. None of the brothers active in Harry's training wanted to turn him into a purely magical warrior. They hoped to help him become a balanced individual who just happened to be a well-trained warrior as well.

Harry was next scheduled to spend six days at the Great Hidden Temple, where some of the brothers would help teach Harry how to more easily identify a Horcrux, and, if he had a real feel for the magic, perhaps even identify objects which might have been in long contact with one, or living beings under a Horcrux's influence.

No one wanted to risk another Ginny Weasley.

It was on the evening of Harry's fourth day at the Hidden Temple that he saw five brothers

approaching him as he watched the sun set. He did not recognize them, despite now knowing nearly a third of the brothers.

Something felt wrong, and Harry clasped the ankh Osiris had enchanted for him. He didn't know if it would send out anything like a distress signal, but he hoped it would. He also backed up against the western defensive wall of the temple complex, so they couldn't surround him. They already had any escape routes cut off.

As they got close, Harry saw that three of the men looked like the ancient Egyptian brothers he knew, one looked more Greek, while the fifth could be from anywhere from northern Egypt through the rest of the eastern Mediterranean.

"You do not have to be afraid, little fish," one of the Egyptians said with contempt. "We do not like that you are here, but you are safe. Here, that is."

The Greek was invading Harry's space, and he didn't like it. There was really no place to go, so he didn't back off. He just glared, however.

"Not a particularly attractive fish," the Greek said in a bored tone.

Harry ignored the Greek and looked the Egyptian eye to eye. "I've never met any of you."

"I am Merenre."

"Ah," Harry said. This was the leader of the group which disapproved of interactions with the greater magical world. "And is one of you Khafra?" This was the other recent High Priest from the faction.

"I am Lord Khafra," the haughtiest of the group said solemnly.

"Uh-uh," Harry said. The man reminded Harry of some of the haughty wizards he had seen in Diagon Alley.

"We just wanted to see the delicious young man who so fascinates Tutmoses," the Greek said with a sneer.

"Let me guess, you're Agathon," Harry said with disgust.

"That's not a very friendly tone," Agathon complained.

"I don't think any of you want to be friends with me," Harry pointed out.

"True," Merenre agreed. He turned to the nondescript brother. "Ahri?"

"His heart is racing. He is frightened, and Agathon makes him nervous." Harry scowled. "I don't believe he thinks much more of us than we do him." That made the others frown.

"What's going on here?"

The group saw Jason striding towards them.

"Keep to your place!" Khafra commanded.

"We are all brothers," Jason pointed out. "None of you have any appointments or offices right now."

"But seniority counts for something," Khafra said with a sneer.

"Is that so?" The new voice took them all by surprise, coming from the direction of the sunset. They had not known he was in the area. "Then who is senior here?"

It was Cobra. "Agathon, if you move your hand any closer to Harry's buttocks, I shall remove it. From your arm."

Agathon moved a few inches away from Harry, and Harry moved a bit further away as well.

"Your time in the land of ice has diminished your knowledge of protocol as well as your manners," Khafra snapped.

"I am not the one trying to touch a fourteen year old boy under the full protection of Our Lord, not to mention myself, Jason, Zara, and Scorpion."

Ahri and the Egyptian who had said nothing look startled at the information that Harry was under Osiris' full protection -- meaning Harry was a possible candidate for their Brotherhood, under the sponsorship of the others. The latter Brother turned to Harry, bowed, and walked away. Ahri thought for a moment and did the same.

"We had agreed on what to do about Riddle," Merenre snapped, ignoring their leaving. "We would watch, and only if Voldemort seriously threatened the line between the magical and the mundane would we consider interfering. The fact that this urchin was left on our door step should be irrelevant."

"Tutmoses had no right to change directions," Khafra agreed.

"Tutmoses did not do it on his own," Jason argued.

"They all know this, Jason," Cobra said coldly.

"If they still pay attention to truth," came a third voice.

Agathon sneered, and then looked at Harry. "You are thought by some to be the Chosen One of Light," he pointed out. "Yet here you are, under the protection of the Darkest of our members."

Scorpion flushed slightly.

"Some of the magic he practices might be considered Dark," Harry agreed. "That's still better than being just plain dirty."

Agathon tried to lunge at Harry, who easily threw the fleshy man against the complex wall, with Harry ending up in a defensive position.

"Agathon!" Merenre snapped. "Whatever else the boy is, he is not one of your mundane toys." He looked back at Harry. "I disagree with the new course the Brotherhood is taking. We are exposed, and that carries risk. Be worthy of the risks, Harry Potter."

Merenre bowed to the group in general and left. Khafra did not; he just left. Agathon glared at each of them as he left.

"Khafra is an arrogant ass," Scorpion said. "Merenre still has a bit of sense and honor left. Agathon is scum. I doubt Khafra will cause trouble on his own. Merenre will work through our rules. We should keep an eye out for Agathon."

"Agathon has long been a disgrace," Osiris said, making everyone jump from the shock of his sudden presence. "If he interferes, I will deal with him."

The three brothers and Harry all bowed.

*

That night, just after midnight, Osiris found Harry atop the observation platform which formed the highest point of the temple. "What troubles you, Harry?" he asked simply.

"I'm sorry I'm causing trouble in the Brotherhood," Harry started, but Osiris merely smiled and held his hands up.

"No, Harry. The brothers were well-split on the idea of interfering with the general magical world long before even Dumbledore was born. I suspect Tutmoses and his faction were very carefully interfering, by supplying intelligence if nothing else, in the struggle against Grindelwald. I know they were gathering information against Voldemort."

"But if I . . ."

"There is no way to tell what would have happened if Dobby had not brought you to our attention. Well, unless you died, of course, which is very possible. Even if your uncle had not so seriously injured you; even if your aunt had continued to miss with her frying pan; even if your cousin had never again tried to damage you, who can say with certainty what would have happened? All I can say is, if Voldemort had succeeded in doing more than temporarily controlling magical Britain, there would first have been an international alliance against him, and if the barriers between the magical and what you would call the Muggle worlds had started to break down. . . ."

Osiris paused and then shrugged. "There are powers in this world, Harry. The Brotherhood is one such power. The Druids are another. There are a few more, made of wizards. There are other powers as well." He smiled. "Have you ever met a sphinx?"

Harry shook his head.

"They are solitary creatures, for the most part. They warned us long ago about the powers of the mundane world, which we all, in our arrogance, ignored." He shuddered in a theatrical and put-on way. "Trust me, Harry, we do not want the sphinxes to come together. We do not want the manticores coming out of their caves. Worse, there are powers asleep, hoping to wait out the Muggles -- snow dragons, the remaining gorgons, kraken, and worse. There are also powers that went into hiding long before my time."

Harry's eyebrows went up at that.

"They went into hiding as agriculture spread, and civilizations developed. That was thousands of years before my time. If I am to believe the tales, there were even creatures which went into hiding

as humanity spread and became magical." He shrugged again. "Voldemort believes he is the most important thing in the universe. He is but a slight moment in the history of magic on this little obscure planet. Even I am but a slight moment. I would say that you should remember that, Harry, but I suspect you know it instinctively. It is the egomaniacal Tom Riddles, the overly-proud Khafras who forget, just as it is the Merenres and Dumbledores who often allow their knowledge to freeze their actions."

"And the Agathons?"

"He was one of our errors," Osiris acknowledged. "He was an Athenian. As a teen, he was sent to study with Aristotle. Do you know the name Epicurus?" Harry shook his head. "He was a Greek philosopher, only a few years younger than Agathon. He developed an interesting materialist philosophy, which some people have deliberately simplified into a pursuit of pleasure." He smiled grimly. "I believe Agathon was the first to pervert the message. He pursues pleasure with a determinism and single-mindedness that is remarkable. Like Riddle, he views the soul as something purely material, and is determined never to test that theory."

"He's Dark?"

"Voldemort is Dark," Osiris stated. "He is a totally self-centered sadist. He cannot imagine that anyone or anything exists which does not exist in relation to his ego. Agathon is well-aware that there are powers greater than his, something that Voldemort does not consciously acknowledge. Agathon should not trouble you."

"Should not or will not?" Harry asked.

"I have made it clear to the entire Brotherhood that they are to steer well-clear of Europe for the time being unless I give them permission. Agathon and Jason are the only two who live nearby, and Agathon knows that he should stay away from the mainland. If anyone catches him there, they will disembody him." Osiris smiled grimly. "I don't think any, even his allies, would really care to help Agathon reembody himself in the short-term."

Seeing Harry looked a little puzzled, Osiris reminded him, "Like all of us, Agathon cannot really be killed, at least without first finding and destroying his Horcruxes. If he were disembodyed in Britain, say, we would bring his body back here to the Temple, and his spirit would have to make its way here on its own. Then the acolytes here would perform the reanimation ceremony. Should Agathon be more than nosing about, they might even destroy his body. We all have the basis for reanimation here, but his spirit would still have to make its way here."

"I see," Harry said, feeling a bit out of his depths.

"You were going to leave tomorrow evening," Osiris mused. "I think you should leave after dawn instead."

"Will I be going back to Scorpion's?" Harry asked.

"Yes. He and Jason will continue your training, while Cobra works on your Parsel-magic and Arthimancy. You can also fly in your free time. A week there, a week on Jason's island, and you should be ready to visit London."

Harry smiled briefly, happy with the plan, but then he frowned.

Osiris read the thought. "One thing you will be taught is a spell to divorce a spirit from its body or a Horcrux, provided it has already riven itself. You are the only person not in the highest reaches of the Brotherhood ever to be taught this spell. Cobra will lock it deep into your mind, so that none can ever discover it, nor will you ever be able to teach it to another. The language it is in is long dead, and merely saying the words would avail no one. You will need to understand it to use it."

Osiris placed his hand on Harry's shoulder. "You will be able to destroy a Horcrux, or turn Voldemort back into a spirit, should he occupy a body. If all his Horcruxes are destroyed, then it will kill him. The spell can also be used on any of the Brotherhood." Harry looked a bit troubled.

"I trust you to use it only for good. Harry, if you feel yourself endangered, you have my permission to use it on any of the Brotherhood who try to harm you."

Harry looked like he knew how much responsibility this was.

"The spell will also work on others. Vampires are in many ways dead bodies animated by magic and most of their soul. However, a small shred of their soul has been sent on. The servants you would call mummies are an earlier attempt to produce the same result. Much larger sections of their soul were sent into the beyond. Too much, and they lose parts of their personality and will. Zombies, or inferi if you prefer, are created with very different magic but with similar results. The spell may also be used against them. You must learn the spell so well that you can use it without vocalizing it, or at least not beyond a breathless mutter. Do you understand?"

Harry merely nodded as he thought hard.

"What is it?" Osiris asked.

Harry steeled himself, and then bowed. "I am honored by your trust, my lord."

"Then learn, and become victorious, my son." Osiris watched Harry as he left the platform, and then said, "Come forth, my sons."

From two directions, two Brothers came out of the shadows, each slightly surprised they had not been aware of the other. One was Cobra, the other was the man known simply as the First Acolyte, the first member initiated by Osiris.

"You summoned me, my lord?" the high priest of the Temple asked.

"I summoned you both," Osiris said. "You still doubt our new course?"

"I do, my lord," the First Acolyte acknowledged. "Still, I am impressed by the young man, and while I still am inclined towards Khafra's position, I must admit I am becoming disillusioned with some of his adherents." He shrugged. "That does not negate their arguments."

"True," Osiris agreed. "Let us see what his adherents might be up to. Cobra?"

"We have finished our research," Cobra said. "We always wondered how Riddle learned how to make a Horcrux. From some clues Scorpion wrung from the diary, we now know. We also have evidence of how he came up with the unique rejoining ceremony."

Osiris nodded. Learning there such things as Horcruxes was one thing, learning how to make one was quite another. The Brotherhood tried very hard to make that information difficult to

find."Proceed."

"Riddle was still in the orphanage the summer before his fifth year, but he ran into someone who was scouting the conditions for Merenre." The Acolyte and Osiris nodded, of course knowing that Merenre had been the High Priest at the time. Merenre and his group had kept an eye on the world even as they tried to widen the separation. "Would it help if I say that Tom Riddle was a very handsome young wizard?"

"Agathon?" the Acolyte demanded, his lip curling in disgust.

"We know for certain that Riddle created all the Horcruxes we examined with the Brotherhood's ritual. The magical signatures are exact matches. Twelve different Brothers have now done independent studies, and all agree. We know that Riddle and Agathon had an affair. Not absolute proof, but more than suggestive."

"True," the First Acolyte agreed.

"Brother Tolfu finished going through the archives two days ago. He matched parts of Riddle's attempted ceremony to ours, but also to a Hindu ceremony . . . and to a set of theoretical improvements suggested by Merenre and his study group just over four hundred years ago -- which included Agathon."

The First Acolyte shook his head. "We must take steps to keep more than an eye on them. Some one associated with their group has more than seriously overstepped the boundaries."

Osiris looked his most loyal follower. "When I created the Brotherhood, I gave up some of my freedom of action. Do you agree I should take steps?"

"Yes, my lord. I take it you have Tutmoses' agreement already?"

"I do." Osiris placed his palms together. The First Acolyte and Cobra prostrated themselves. When separated his hands, an eye was outlined in fire. "The Eye of Osiris has returned. It shall see and judge."

*

Hermione Granger, only two months shy of fourteen, did NOT frolic in the surf. She did however allow herself to enjoy the feel of walking on the Mediterranean beach, the sand between her toes, the waves washing over her feet and part-way up her calves. She was well-aware of the surreptitious glances she was getting as she beach-walked wearing only a thong bikini bottom.

Part of her dearly wished Harry was here with her, and part of her was terrified at the prospect. There would of course be no unclad walking about at Hogwarts, but she hoped she and Harry might walk to Hogsmeade together. Harry had actually asked her, for he wrote to her every morning, and she responded every night before going to sleep.

Neither Ron nor Ginny had written either of them, although Harry had written them and the twins once each and she had written to Ron twice and Ginny one time. Only the twins had responded, letting Harry know that the family was off to Egypt to visit Bill, having come into some money.

Neville had written to them both twice so far, and Luna sent letters every day, alternating between Harry and Hermione. She and her father was off on a 'zoological journey', looking for one of his

largely unproven creatures. This summer, they were in Iceland, hoping to find a species of magical penguin called the Northern Opal, which Mister Lovegood claimed showed itself often enough to make Muggles believe penguins were common in the Arctic, while being magical enough not to be captured.

Hermione hoped that this next year would be more interesting, but less exciting, than the one previous.

Chapter XIV

Draco Malfoy stomped into the parlor of the hovel his parents had forced him to come to for the summer. Of course, the fact that said 'hovel' had forty rooms and was staffed by three house elves meant nothing to Draco. "Mother! I insist you terminate that so-called flying instructor and engage a better one!"

Narcissa looked at her son with a cold eye. "You insist, do you?"

That brought Draco up short, knowing he had gone over the line. He was not certain how to retrieve his position, however.

"Although he did not say so explicitly, reading between the lines of Severus' report, I thought you might have turned into a spoiled, whinging child, and it seems he was right." Draco started to flush in anger. "Your father and I watched your practice just now. Señor Mendez is a very good, although not great, flying instructor. We asked him to join us in order to help you regain the position you claim you unfairly lost. We explained to you that he was of distinguished family and a well-known broom racer. You were rude and uncooperative. Your father is apologizing to him now for your behavior."

Narcissa's glare hardened. "Your father does NOT enjoy being put into a position where he needs to apologize. I suggest you stay out of his sight for the next several days."

Narcissa leaned back on her Victorian-era fainting couch, but did not relax. "We now realize that we trained you in arrogance as well as pride, without any balance. So, let me tell you a little secret, my son. Our blood, our position, our fortune; these give us an advantage. It is up to us to seize those advantages and turn them into more advantages, for ourselves and for the family. If you fail to do so, there are others who will leap ahead. Potter and his Mudblood dependent are two good examples. After three years of tutoring, what does it say about you that this Granger girl is first in your class, three Ravenclaws are next, followed by a Hufflepuff and finally you? That means you dropped four positions in one year, from second to sixth, while Potter was able to leap from twelfth to, I believe, seventh. There was no collusion, no conspiracy. It was your failure to at least keep your place. They worked hard, you coasted and complained."

Narcissa shut her eyes. "In fact, please stay away from both your father and myself. Your meals will be served in the nursery, for you belong in a nursery. Fly your broomstick, do your homework. I doubt you will do either. We'll see if your siblings can be more worthy of the family."

"Siblings?"

"That means 'sisters or brothers'," Narcissa said with contempt. "We have decided that since we are in exile, and you are such a disappointment, we should occupy our time having another child and raising it with more care. Perhaps even two. Now, begone." Narcissa tried to relax. After Lucius' encounter the previous February, it had taken two months for the swelling to go down enough to show that he still had some fertility left, although he still had not had a full erection. They had always discussed the possibility of another child, a spare to the heir. They had decided they needed one, but wound up having to resort to Muggle treatments, to concentrate Lucius' now very low sperm count and to insure Narcissa's pregnancy.

It had been invasive and a bit humiliating, not even counting the fact that the Muggles could do something that magic could not. The best indications now were that Narcissa was carrying triplets,

and she had to be careful.

Meanwhile, the very confused and hurt Draco had left the room.

*

Harry arrived back at the Brotherhood's tent near Hogwarts the morning of July 30. The original plan had been for Harry to spend three days with Sirius and Remus at the Black family house. However, Sirius had decided that the place needed far too much work, work he was not interested in doing himself, and which was beyond the capabilities of the elderly house elf which was found living there, at least within any reasonable time frame. The elf was therefore set to work in early June, in the hopes that the house might be usable by Christmas.

Remus and Sirius had spent the time since the end of the school term exploring Hogwarts, looking for any secret rooms or passages where Riddle might have hidden Ravenclaw's diadem. Snape was not present, as he and Sirius had gotten into a shouting match the very night the students had left. This had ended with hexes being used by both, with Snape coming up slightly ahead on total number of hexes hitting his opponent, but Sirius having caught Snape with a complex hex which had turned his hair into huge oily pink Afro. Snape had therefore left the field, and the work, to Sirius.

Remus had stayed out of the fight in part because he had felt Sirius slightly more at fault in this case, and because Dumbledore had refused the offers from both the Druids and the Brotherhood to supply a Defense teacher. Everyone was glad that Lockhart had resigned. He had counted on selling a large number of books and taking things easy, but teaching had been much harder than he had thought it would be, and he had not counted on monsters. Instead, Remus would take up the position on a trial basis (the terms had been partially imposed by Snape, on the grounds that Remus might miss a large number of classes, should he have a bad transformation).

Sirius had taken the afternoon of July 30 off, and he and Jason accompanied Harry to Diagon Alley, where he and Hermione were in theory going shopping for their school supplies. 'In theory', because Jason and Sirius refused to let the pair go to the bookstore. They therefore only had to get their potion supplies and new school uniforms (the former were paid for by Jason, while Sirius bought Harry a larger set of school clothes than he really needed), after they had been treated to sundaes.

The quartet visited Gringotts, and then window-shopped for a while. Harry refused to enter Eelops, but Hermione did get him into the Magical Menagerie. Harry refused to buy a familiar, although he did chip in and help Hermione buy a very large and (to Harry's eyes) ugly kneazle-crossbreed named Crookshanks.

Harry came back to the camp happy with his time with Hermione, but wishing they had had some actual time alone. Jason and Sirius both realized this, and assured Harry (with a fair amount of teasing from Sirius), that Harry would have time alone with Hermione before the school year restarted.

That night, Harry got his first present, and to his shock, it was the house elf, Dobby. To the surprise of Sirius and many of the brothers, Harry insisted on freeing Dobby and then hiring him. Brothers Cobra, Scorpion, and Zara were the least surprised, and most proud of him. Remus congratulated Harry for acting much as his mother would have in similar circumstances.

Dobby was overjoyed at the train of events, to the point where Sirius thought the elf might start humping Harry's leg.

The next morning, the Brothers and Sirius were throwing Harry a party. For safety and convenience, Dumbledore was allowing them to have the party on the lawn leading up to the main entrance of Hogwarts Castle. All of the rising Gryffindor third years had been invited, and all were coming except for Ron, as the Weasleys were still in Egypt. The rest of the Gryffindor Quidditch team and about a dozen other Gryffindors would be coming as well. About a third of Harry's classmates from the other three Houses had also been invited, and nearly all of them would be coming.

As July 31 was on a Saturday, many of the students' parents were also coming, including three sets of Muggles: the Grangers; the Thomas family; and the Finch-Fletchleys. The staff who were at the school and many of the Brothers and Druids would be invited as well. Remus had promised that the adults would, in general, keep their distance from the students. Harry had also insisted on inviting Sir Nicholas. The ghost was very touched, and spent most of his time entertaining (ie shocking) the Muggles.

Harry, remembering Dudley, had insisted 'no presents'. The four younger Weasley children had none the less sent him a small stone scarab, which had a slight enchantment for good luck. Luna had sent him a notice that he was to get a year's subscription to The Quibbler. Hermione had, of course, done her research. She did not give her friend Harry a gift. She did, however, give the Head of her Protecting House an appropriate gift, in this case a pair of crystal goblets.

The majority of the students were still too young to want to dance, especially most of the boys. Sirius had designed a number of different fun games, which broke the ice and got all the students playing together until luncheon was served at 12:30, followed by a huge chocolate sheet cake and four types of ice cream, which everyone enjoyed devouring (although the Grangers looked rather guilty as they did so).

By 3:00, everyone was running low on energy, and the guests, other than Sirius, Remus, the Brotherhood, and the Grangers had all left by 3:35. At that point, Jason came back with Harry's knapsack, and Harry and the Grangers were transported back to the Granger suburban house.

After showing Harry the guest room, the Grangers made both teens thoroughly brush and floss. Dinner, which would be served at 7:30, would only be a small garden salad with balsamic vinegar, followed by a chicken Caesar salad, to balance out the red meat and starches of the birthday meal.

Several members of the Brotherhood had had a good time competing against each other in putting wards up and around the Granger property. As Harry had promised to stay on the property, they had no qualms about leaving Harry there for 48 hours.

The Grangers understood that while there had been no magical attacks on Harry during the summers for many years, it was best for him to stay out of sight of the general magical world. Therefore, while the Grangers went off to Matins Harry continued exercising in their fairly private back garden. When the Grangers returned, Harry took a quick shower while Hermione's father prepared brunch.

The Grangers were a hard-working professional couple. They worked four long days a week (7:30-6:00) and were available on their 'off' day for emergencies. They then generally played hard on Saturday and relaxed on Sunday. They would go to Matins and while Hermione's father prepared a nice brunch, her mother would start preparations for dinner, the only other meal they ate on Sundays.

As this Sunday was rather warm for southern Britain, Mister Granger prepared large omelets stuffed with ham, mushrooms, tomatoes, and three cheeses, plus a number of savory snacks. He also made

them all Mimosas, although Harry's and Hermione's were mostly orange juice, and were very light on the Cava he used.

They ate in the kitchen, surrounded by numerous newspapers, and the periodicals which had accumulated during the week. The three Grangers traded stories, while Harry read through the latest Quibbler and enjoyed the domesticity.

After brunch, Harry and Hermione changed and went out into the back garden for some sun. This amused the Grangers, as Hermione had spent nine days on the Mediterranean shore wearing nothing but a thong bottom, and they knew that Harry had spent some time on a Greek island, wearing nothing (information supplied by Jason at Harry's birthday party).

However, Hermione was wearing her fairly conservative two-piece suit, and Harry a pair of cut off shorts. Both were obviously very shy in each other's presence, which was just fine with the Grangers.

The Grangers had allowed their fireplace to be hooked up as a one-stop floo connection for the rest of the summer, connecting only with the Gryffindor fireplace at Hogwarts. Hermione would come through every morning for the day. This would allow her to practice magic on the school grounds, help a bit with the search for the diadem (although she did not know the full reasons why yet), and of course spend time with Harry while still spending time with her parents at night.

The Monday after Harry's birthday, the pair flooed back to Hogwarts, where they learned why they had not been allowed into the bookstore in Diagon Alley. Sirius and Jason took the pair to Hogsmeade, where there were two used bookstores and several other shops.

Sirius was a bit surprised that neither teen was overly interested in Honeydukes. They both liked chocolate, but neither was overly interested in other sweets.

What Hermione was most interested in, besides perhaps Harry, was knowledge. Hermione had been working on the fundamentals of Occlumency, starting with Indian meditation, for just over a year. She had read the basic manuals, and had the advantage of a very organized and controlled mind. With just a little tutoring by some of the Brotherhood, she was deemed an adept at Occlumency. While a Legilimens with sufficient skill, like Dumbledore, or ruthless power, like Voldemort, could break into her mind, none could do so and take her thoughts without a struggle.

Hermione was determined to improve past that point as quickly as possible. Therefore, once Hermione had sworn an impressive secrecy oath, Sirius had allowed Harry to decide what to share.

Harry shared nearly everything, and he knew that Hermione would learn the rest soon enough.

The knowledge of who and what the Brotherhood was impressed and slightly frightened the young teen. She was frightened, because she could see the pull many of the Brothers had on Harry. She was frightened because she did not want to lose her best friend to the quasi-immortality she was fairly certain they would offer Harry at some point. The youngest brother had been made at 24, she learned, and the typical age was between 30 and 33.

Hermione quickly lost the tinge of jealousy she had sometimes had when Harry out-performed her on practical work. She had accepted it in Defense their first year, and had accepted it in Charms their second. She did not like being out-shown part of the time and pushed hard the rest of the time in her speciality of Transfiguration. Now knowing Harry was two months older instead of ten months younger helped, as did a better estimation at how powerful her friend really was.

Hermione was also intrigued to learn exactly what it was they were looking for, and why. She approached the stack of notes the staff, Remus, Sirius, and the Brothers and Druids had made on their search of Hogwarts and organized it, cross-referenced it, and had it all plotted on diagrams and maps of the castle in just three days of working on the project part-time the second week of August. The two rather prissy librarians (one from the Brotherhood and one Druid) had been offended the first day, reluctant admirers the second, and Hermione's committed assistants by the end of the third.

Amused, Osiris and Dumbledore had called a general meeting of the searchers the next day.

"You've done all the obvious physical searches," Hermione told them. "However, you have not used two very important pools of information."

Harry had asked Nick to bring the ghosts along to the meeting. Hermione therefore addressed the Gray Lady. "Has Sir Nicholas told you of our quest, my lady?"

The ghost nodded in agreement.

"So you know if the statue's diadem, the statue in the Ravenclaw common room that is, is an accurate description?"

The ghost hesitated, and then actually answered. "It is," the ghost whispered.

"Do you know where the original is? Did you ever tell Riddle?"

She hesitated, and said, "I did tell young Riddle. It was hidden in a forest . . . in the southern region of a far off place called Pannonia." Seeing blank looks, she added, "I believe it was also once called southern Illyria."

Jason muttered, "By the gods." Everyone looked at him. "Albania."

Hermione pouted. "So that means. . . ."

"I bet Riddle came back to the castle at least once after leaving school, didn't he?" Harry asked Dumbledore.

"Yes, in the mid-1960s, soon after I was appointed. He said he wanted to apply for the Defense position."

"So, he didn't find the diadem at school and replace it wherever it was hidden. He found the spot while he was student, and hid it away," Hermione said, disappointed.

"Is so, he was cleverer than we were," Sirius pointed out.

"We already knew that," Remus said, making Sirius frown and Snape, who was there for the day, smirk just a little. "He apparently let a troll in through the dungeons in Harry's first year. We never found that entrance as students." They had, however, found it the week before.

"Does anyone have any ideas where else we can look?" Dumbledore asked the assembled group.

"No, but I know who else we can ask!" Harry said. "Dobby!"

Pop! "Mister Harry, sir?"

"Could you ask the head elf and the oldest elf to come here?"

"They is usually the same, Mister Harry, sir. Dobby will tell her she is wanted."

Less than two seconds after Dobby popped away, another elf appeared, old and stooped. "Young Master wants Old Sally?" she asked.

Harry quickly explained what they were looking for and why. "Do you know where it is?" he finally asked.

"No, Young Master," Old Sally said regretfully.

"Do you know where it could be?"

"House elves bound to Hogwarts may not tell," she said, her eyes shifty and her voice shaking.

Harry thought he recognized the tone. "No punishing! Could an elf look wherever and bring us the diadem if it's there?"

The old elf considered, and said, "Old Sally may for Young Master, as youse talks to Hogwarts, or for Headmaster."

Harry looked at Albus, who nodded and said, "Would you please, for both of us?"

Old Sally popped away, and the group spent nearly three anxious minutes before she came back, holding the diadem. Harry took it from the elf and thanked her, and Dumbledore did the same. Harry then held it out to the Gray Lady. "Is this it?"

"It is," the ghost replied in a barely audible voice.

Osiris approached, but Harry forestalled him. "It's one of Voldemort's Horcruxes," he said.

"Then let us destroy the Horcrux within it, leaving just one known object."

"So we still need to know who signed their named R.A.B.," Harry complained.

"You mean like Regulus usually did?" Remus asked with a frown.

"Who?" Harry asked.

"Regulus, my younger brother," Sirius said. "He was a Death Eater. He was killed by the Death Eaters for some reasons in late 1979. He died at home. . . ."

Dumbledore instantly sent Sirius, Remus, and several Druids and brothers off to Grimmauld Place to search for the real locket.

*

"It is imperfect, but it will do," Voldemort said. He had been a little surprised before joining to

Quirrell that none of his followers had searched him out. He had then discovered that those he would have considered the most devoted to him, as opposed to devoted to his cause, had been killed or imprisoned.

Finally, however, just over eight months before, one of his loyal young Death Eaters had found him. Young Crouch had found him a series of young Muggles to possess. This had allowed Voldemort to mutate an adder for a familiar, beginning a process which had ended this day.

Yes, of all his followers, Voldemort had to admit young Crouch had done a better job than most. He had even managed to steal the wand Wormtail had hidden on himself when Crouch Senior had foolishly brought it home to examine. It had of course been Voldemort's own.

Now he had an improvised body, made of blood and venom. Although not fully stable, it was more so than his shadowy existence had been. Now, what should his next step be, when his goal was to regain his body?

Voldemort came to a decision. It was time to go back to his ancestor's lands. It was time to go back to Little Hangleton.

Chapter XV

Several groups had been keeping a general eye out on a patch of forest where they thought Voldemort's essence had taken refuge. As soon as the last two Horcruxes had been discovered (the searchers had quickly found the locket) and then destroyed, these groups had put together a plan and stormed the area. Harry was not present for the actual assault, but he had been brought to a magical village outside of Tirana, which had managed to escape the Communist persecutions.

The assault teams had found nothing.

The groups, supplemented by even more Druids and members of the Brotherhood, combed the forest in more detail. They found evidence that suggested that Voldemort had been in the area as recently as one to three weeks previously.

Worse, they found the body of a missing Albanian wizard, who had been tied up and executed by the Killing Curse. Although they could not be certain, all the signs pointed to the possibility that Voldemort had either remade himself, or was at least in some sort of physical form, and had created at least one more Horcrux.

The news was kept secret from the general public, but the Ministries around the world were put on alert. There would be extra security provided for the Quidditch World Cup, to be held in England in 1994, and some of that security would stay stationed in Britain should the proposed Triwizard Tournament be held the following autumn and spring.

While many were more worried or anxious, no one was as disappointed by these events as Harry. He had hoped that it would all be over before the school year started. He had hoped that he would have his life for himself, rather than still being the tool of prophecy, the instrument of fate.

His mentors amongst the Brotherhood saw this, and understood the teen's reasons. Their solution was simple. They gave him as much time as they could with Hermione, and filled the rest of his time as best they could with flying and training. Jason and Sirius were a bit disappointed when they found out Harry and Hermione had not progressed beyond hugging and heavy kissing, but everyone ganged up on Sirius to prevent him from encouraging Harry to go further faster.

As the end of August approached, Harry managed to cheer up just a little. He decided to put all thoughts of Voldemort and any possible Horcruxes out of mind, while of course continuing his training. He would let Osiris and the Brotherhood, the Druids, Dumbledore and his group, and the Ministries all worry about the problems Voldemort presented.

'I'm really fourteen,' Harry told himself several times. 'I'm going to enjoy this year.' He told himself this enough times so that even he believed it.

He also swore that if anything or anyone interfered with his having at least one good year, they would regret it.

*

Draco Malfoy was sent back to Malfoy Manor a few days before the school year started. He was not allowed to leave the Manor, and as his parents had been very detailed in their instructions, the elves wouldn't even punish themselves when they thwarted him.

The last day of August, Draco finally built up enough nerve to go into the secret stash of Dark artifacts his father kept hidden under the floor of one of the rooms. He wasn't sure what he was looking for, and when he finally selected one object to take to Hogwarts, he wasn't sure exactly what it was. All Draco knew was that it was a very wicked-looking dagger that made him shudder to even touch it.

Draco packed it away very carefully.

*

Harry and Hermione were both at the platform early. They had met Luna and her father in Diagon Alley early that morning, and the students and their parents/guardians enjoyed a late breakfast in a nice hotel on the way to the station.

Luna had changed the most over the summer, having grown nearly an inch. She was nearly as tanned as Harry and Hermione from running around the woods of the far north. Luna seemed somewhat dreamy to Harry and Hermione, but then Harry realized that this meant that Luna's 'gift' must have started to mature, along with Luna's body.

Harry really did not want to think about the implications of that. It was enough that, while acting a bit disconnected to the everyday world, Luna also seemed calm, and happy to be with her friends.

Once they were left on the platform, Hermione and Luna staked out a compartment, while Harry looked for Neville, Ron, and Ginny. Neville was soon found, but the Weasleys showed up with only a few minutes to spare. As Harry started to move towards the gaggle of red-heads, he saw Percy scowl at him, and then glare. Fred however blocked Percy from approaching, and George came over instead.

"What's wrong?" Harry asked.

"Ginny's sort of nervous," George said with a shrug. "So, Mum has decreed that all of us have to share a compartment. It won't be too bad, since Percy made Big-head Boy and won't be there too much, but you just know he'd tattle."

Harry nodded. "Are we okay though?" he asked.

"You and your girlfriends are with me and Fred," George teased, "and I'm pretty sure you and Hermione are with Ron. He's still not too keen on Luna. Ginny is still very quiet."

"Will she have to be Sorted again?" Harry asked.

"I hope not." The whistle blew and the two teens gave each other a friendly punch on the shoulder.

*

Severus Snape hurried away from the great hall, still hungry. He was NOT happy with the new Defense teacher. Still, the Headmaster had made it very clear that his choices had been Lupin or one of the Brotherhood. Snape, seeing the choice, had agreed that Lupin was the lesser of evils.

Granted, these 'Brothers' were able to quickly reverse Lupin's transfiguration. Still, the fact that there had been a full moon just the night before made Snape's skin crawl, and had certainly ruined his appetite the day before (since Lupin was in the castle)-- and Snape had still not fully recovered.

*

Draco sat in a compartment with just Pansy and Crabbe. After nearly an hour of silence, Pansy asked, "What are you thinking so hard about?"

Draco looked up and thought a moment. "Make certain we aren't listened to," he told Crabbe. Crabbe nodded and went to stand outside of the door.

When Crabbe had shut the door behind him, Draco said, "Let's just say I came across an interesting object, and I need to figure out a way to give to someone without being caught."

"Potter?"

"That would be my first choice," Draco agreed.

"What sort of object?" Pansy asked.

Draco thought again, and then described the dagger. When he was through, Pansy said in an exasperated tone, "You really don't know what you have, do you?"

"A cursed, and maybe poisoned, dagger?"

"Yes, but it sounds like a Dagger of Hera."

Draco frowned. "What's that?"

"For the charmed poison to work, one woman has to use it against another," Pansy said. 'And then, only if she is envious of the other woman for some reason,' she added to herself. "Give it to me. I'll see that Potter's Mudblood gets it." Pansy suspected Granger was behind her problems with mirrors the previous years, and she could not understand what Potter saw in the girl, since she was fairly flat and had teeth like a chipmunk. Pansy was almost ecstatic as she fantasized about wiping what she thought of as a smirk of the girl's face.

Draco nodded his agreement. He was all for someone else running the risks.

Had he asked, Pansy would have agreed.

*

Much to her embarrassment, Ginny Weasley was indeed Sorted a second time. She spent over five minutes under the Hat, and to her surprise, she actually ended up in Ravenclaw. This time, the Hat had not even considered Gryffindor; Ginny's only options were Slytherin and Ravenclaw. As the Hat pointed out, the very fears that Slytherin now inspired, not to mention the fear of the embarrassment being in Slytherin would cause her in her family, was enough to prevent her being Sorted into Gryffindor. The Hat had nearly laughed out loud, as opposed to only in Ginny's mind, when she had mentioned Hufflepuff as an alternative to Slytherin. It was only the knowledge, gathered from the thoughts of the students at the Slytherin table during the Sorting, that so many would love a chance to harass or even harm a Weasley prevented the Hat from sending Ginny to where she really belonged more than anywhere else.

Remus Lupin had been visible enough the previous year that he was not seen as a totally unknown

quantity. He was also dressed better and looked much healthier than he had at any time during the previous winter and spring. That announcement that he was also awerewolf had startled most of the students so much that Dumbledore had managed to allay most students' fears before any of them could vocalize them.

When Harry made his way to the Gryffindor common room, therefore --hand-in-hand with Hermione, side-by-side with Luna -- he was feeling fairly content. Colin had given up stalking Harry in what little spare time he had the previous winter, and again would merely follow Percy around on their project. He would show no sign of resuming any stalking this term, for which Harry would be grateful. Ginny did not know that Harry had had any connections with defeating Riddle or his monster, and so did feel she owed him any favors. Harry hoped that the jealous looks she had given Hermione and Luna that evening, and any occasional stalking, would be more difficult two classes down and in another House.

Malfoy had not bothered him or his friends on the train ride. Harry rather hoped that the 'blond ponce' (as he and Ron often referred to him) had learned his lesson and would just leave Harry alone. Granted, Malfoy had sneered in his and Hermione direction when he had realized that he could again see them, but hopefully, that would be as far as things would go.

Harry hugged and kissed Luna goodnight on the cheek, and then hugged Hermione a bit more firmly, kissing her goodnight briefly but properly, before heading off to bed.

While Harry was sleeping the sleep of the just and well-fed, another was having a more difficult evening. Since his run-in with the mysterious trio who had assaulted him, Lucius Malfoy had many difficulties sleeping. Therefore, he generally woke up around 2:00 am, stayed up for an hour nursing a brandy, and then returned to bed.

This night, as he poured his brandy, a voice said, "You might offer me one."

Malfoy spun around and saw a man sitting in the shadows. A snap of the man's fingers, and the lights came up. He was a slightly swarthy man of average height and with oily curly hair. He was not in any way overweight, but there was a fleshiness about him, which suggested good living. The man's mouth was smiling, but his eyes looked deadly.

There was also a trace of magic about him which reminded Malfoy of his Master, not to mention the trio who had attacked him. "Who are you?" he demanded. He was unarmed, and so had to bluff.

"Someone who can help you, in a limited way."

"And how is that?" Malfoy demanded.

"Temper, temper," the man scolded, and then he looked at the brandy bottle. Malfoy bit his lip and poured the man a brandy. "Thank you," the man said. "First of all, I apologize for your injuries last winter. I am part of a group, and a faction of them got a bit carried away when they confronted you."

"Is that what you call what they put me through!"

The man sneered at Malfoy. "No, that is probably how you would have described it, if you were talking to a person tortured by your fellow Death Eaters."

Malfoy swallowed his response.

"They belong to a faction within our Sodality which desires greater interaction with the magical world. My faction wants more separation. There is nothing more about us that you need to know, other than knowing that we are powerful, and not to be crossed."

"And?"

"And because of our factional divide, my group finds itself barred from Britain. We would like full reports, from multiple sources. We know you have a network in Britain. We are presuming you also have contacts other than your son and Severus Snape at Hogwarts?"

"Yes, but little that is as direct," Malfoy admitted.

"Are you willing to fully share that information?"

"What do you have to offer in return?" Malfoy asked.

"I cannot protect you from my Brothers," the man admitted. "However, should your Master return, we can protect you to a large degree if you stay here. You would have to inform us your Dark Mark was bothering you. We should be able to break the pain of your being summoned for five to eight days at a time. Interested?"

Lucius Malfoy struggled within himself, but said, "Yes." He was unsure what he would do if the Dark Lord returned, and this might keep more options open at little risk.

"Good. Then we have a deal. I will send a vampire to meet with you tomorrow night at midnight, in your back garden. Do not harm her."

"A vampire? Not you?"

"I think we would both prefer to keep out contact at a minimum," Agathon said, finishing his brandy before slipping through the wards.

Lucius Malfoy tossed his brandy down and poured himself a double. He very much hoped this would not come back to haunt him.

*

Hermione was thrilled by her new classes, and Luna a little jealous that she would have to wait a year. As she was already familiar with the basic rune sets, she set herself to study that subject, at least, with Hermione and Harry.

Hermione was a bit doubtful at first, but Harry was very happy Luna was joining them. He was already operating at a near-N.E.W.T. level, beyond that, actually, in Egyptian and Thracian. Coaching Luna made the subject tolerable for him. Ron, unsurprisingly, was already complaining about the amounts of work by the end of the first week.

All the Gryffindors were happy with their new Defense instructor. All of the classes, third year and above, had to face a boggart the first day. The third years had all gotten a good laugh out when Neville had changed his Snape boggart into a Snapish version of a little girl in a pink dress. The other Gryffindors also managed to deal with their fears as they came up, although Harry wondered if Ron would have done as well with a version of the giant spiders he had heard were in the forest as

he did with the foot-wide one.

Hermione had been a bit challenged, as her boggart was a dead Harry. "Make me snore," Harry had magically whispered in her ear, and Hermione had passed the test. Harry had been a bit miffed that Lupin had refused to let him even try to face it.

"Anything that frightens you is likely too intense or private to show the others," Lupin had explained later that afternoon, after classes had ended. He had then let Harry try, and had to admit he should not have been surprised to see that Harry's boggart was a dead Hermione, which Harry had fought by making it have hiccoughs.

After two weeks of classes, Harry took stock of things as he and Hermione snuggled against each other in a love seat, each reading while enjoying each other's company. Both were happy and content with their position.

Harry was not by nature a reflective person, but as he reached the end of a chapter, he did pause to take stock. Thinking first about how his life had changed, Harry realized that this was perhaps the first time he had even thought of the Dursleys since he had left Hogwarts the previous summer. Harry let a stray thought pass on towards Dudley. He had arranged for Dudley to stay at Smeltings, believing that no one, not even Dudley, should have to live with Marge Dursley year round.

Feeling Hermione snuggle a bit closer, Harry forgot about the Dursleys. Here, cuddled warmly against him, was affection and friendship -- everything he had been missing for ten years. His closeness with Hermione, and his adoption of study habits similar although not as fanatic as hers, had helped move him away from a close friendship with Ron. However, his dating Hermione more than compensated for it, not to mention instead of being close friends with just Ron and Hermione, he had a companion with Hermione, a close friendship with Luna, good friendships with Ron, the twins, and Neville, and was friendlier with a wide range of his fellow students, which had not been true his first year.

Because of his extra training, and the maturity the extra year of study had brought him, Harry was greatly enjoying most of his classes. History with Binns was still dead boring, but the Druids and Brotherhood were feeding him stories which helped him grasp magical history. Potions was also far from fun, but Snape now merely contented himself with his usual insufficient instructions, glares at Harry, and marking Harry as low as he dared. Because he was so advanced, Runes were also a bit boring for him, much to Hermione's dismay, as that was her most challenging class.

Harry was even more challenged by Arithmancy than Hermione was by Runes. The fact that Hermione had a natural grasp of the subject meant that it was difficult for her to give Harry any help. They had already had to agree that Runes and Arithmancy were sore subjects for them, and to try and avoid the topics.

The pair were happy that Hagrid was teaching Care of Magical Creatures. They had especially enjoyed looking at the unicorns he had provided for their (and his) first lesson. Hermione had been appalled when she learned that Hagrid had first wanted to have them interact with hippogriffs, only to be talked out of it by the Druids. Harry had merely shrugged -- anyone who still considered a giant three-headed dog as a 'pup' and thought dragons cuddly had different standards than most.

Harry was brought out of his reverie as Hermione closed her book and gently rubbed her shoulder against his. Even after all this time, Harry was still amazed at how easily he melted with any physical attention, something only Hermione and a few of the Brothers guessed at.

The couple hugged goodnight for a few moments, before briefly kissing. Harry went to bed, glad that things were so calm at Hogwarts.

Harry was not to know that Pansy Parkinson had been stalking Hermione since the first day of classes that term. She had hoped to entice Millicent Bulstrode into at least helping, if not striking out against Granger in her place.

Millicent had ignored all the hints. Pansy, however, had merely resolved to act alone. She was uncertain exactly how the Dagger of Hera worked, but thought she knew enough. She therefore resolved to strike whenever she was sure Granger would be alone for several hours, which would hopefully enable her to establish something of an alibi for herself.

Millicent had promised to help that much and Greg had agreed to go along. Pansy figured they would provide a better alibi than Draco and Vinnie.

Now all she needed was a chance.

Chapter XVI

September flowed in October, and October transformed into November, and Pansy Parkinson was getting impatient. Her target was remarkably difficult to pin down, at least with enough of a time span to strike and provide herself an alibi.

Granger was never really alone in the corridors of Hogwarts. Most often, there was a crowd around her; if not Potter was with her. Even in the library, when Potter was out practicing Quidditch, the Lovegood girl or others would be gathered around the annoying Mudblood. Even on the one Hogsmeade weekend so far, Granger had not ventured to the ladies' loo by herself.

Worse, Potter and Granger had become the center of a multi-house, even multi-year crowd. Not only were Hufflepuffs and even Ravenclaws paying court (in Pansy's eyes), so were a number of Slytherins! Unlike the year before, when the pro-Death Eater faction had held the edge in the Slytherin boys' dorms and the neutrals had just held the edge in the girls', power had shifted in both, to the neutrals in the boys' and what Pansy thought of as the blood-traitors in the girls' (they called themselves 'progressives, however), although the balance of power in both sets of dorms were very tenuous. Davis and Greengrass were dominating the younger students, male and female.

Pansy was uncertain about what to think about the Dark Lord. None in her family had ever been Marked, but her impression was that they had supported the aims if not the level of violence the Dark Lord and his Death Eaters had proclaimed. Now the pure-blood agenda was eroding away before her very eyes, and there was nothing directly she could do about it. She hoped, when she struck down Granger, it would send a stronger chill through the blood-traitors than the previous year's events had done. Vincent somehow ending up petrified had caused nearly as much confusion as real terror.

The Slytherin-Gryffindor game arrived, and Pansy knew she had no chance of approaching Granger in the stands. Pansy sat near one of the exits, ignoring the game. This was easy to do, even if Draco had managed to earn his position back as Seeker. Potter was not humiliating him as badly this year as the year before, but all of the Slytherin team was clearly out-classed. In the end, despite ever more aggressive tactics (ie cheating), the Gryffindors would win, 420-30.

Pansy shadowed Hermione back to the castle, but could do nothing.

Pansy then realized that the next week she might have a chance. Potter would be at the Ravenclaw-Hufflepuff game, along with the Gryffindor Quidditch team and most of his friends. Even Granger's shadow, the Lovegirl girl, would likely be at the match with the ridiculous lion's hat she was wearing today or something similar, as she adored Quidditch. Granger would likely hold up in either her common room or the library.

It could be her chance.

All she needed was patience, and luck.

*

Voldemort made himself stop shivering as he heard his loyal Death Eater return. Soon, he would be fed venom and the fire would be built up. That could wait; now was the time for news. "Well?"

"The plans for the Triwizard continue, my lord," Barty reported. "The family elf gave me complete

copies of all the plans for the Tournament and for the World Cup in August."

"Good. I have need of another. I cannot send you off to Hogwarts next year and stay here, any more than I can go there in this condition. You have the list?"

"Yes, my lord. Karkaroff may be willing to aid us at Hogwarts."

"He was the least trustworthy of those I Marked. Still, yes, I must keep him in mind. Read me the list. I need to know who is free."

*

Hermione tidied away the books she had been reading, even if the library was nearly empty. She paid no attention to the two first year Slytherins, even as one slipped away. Hermione had heard the roar of the crowd even in the library, and knew the match was over. Harry would soon be coming in, and he'd be chilly. She'd stop by the kitchens for some hot chocolate for all the Gryffindors, even if she would hand Harry his mug herself.

Exiting the library, her head filled with dreams, Hermione was unprepared for the attack. She was flung into a wall, and then she felt her lower abdomen burn.

Hermione's eyes focused in on the sneering face of Pansy Parkinson, who snarled. "I curse you, Hermione Granger, for striving to be above your station, for claiming more than the protection of a famous House, and for trying to lead our year."

Hermione merely gasped as the pain in her bowels and belly intensified. Her hands went to the pain, and she realized they were gripping a knife handle. As she started to pass out, Hermione had only one thought.

"Harry!"

She was fortunate to be wearing the charms Harry had given her which the Brotherhood had charmed.

*

Harry had strolled over to speak with Osiris, who had attended the match with Jason and Cobra and had been sitting with Dumbledore and Minister Bones during the actual match. Suddenly, he sank to his knees in pain.

The three ancients rushed to Harry's side, with Remus Lupin coming up from one side while they were followed by Dumbledore and Bones.

"Hermione's hurt. Bad," Harry said, looking up into Osiris' eyes with anguish. "Help me!"

"The warning charms?" Osiris asked.

Harry nodded, unable to say more.

Osiris touched Harry, while the concerned Cobra and Jason grabbed hold of their leader. The quartet disappeared before Dumbledore could come up to them. To the increasing surprise of the students, Dumbledore started to sprint towards the castle, followed by many others, especially

Remus and Snape, as well as Minister Bones.

*

The quartet appeared on an alcove, near the writhing body on the floor. Jason grabbed Harry and threw him into Cobra's waiting arms and knelt briefly by Hermione. His expression was grim as he looked up. "She's been stabbed by a Dagger of Hera. My Lord, you need to get me, Harry, and Hermione to the infirmary quickly. Cobra, you need to find Asclepias, tell him about the Dagger, and then do whatever he says."

"Right," Cobra said simply, handing Harry off to Osiris and then disappearing. Jason gathered Hermione in his arms, and Osiris took them and Harry to the infirmary.

Placing Hermione on a bed, Jason commanded Madam Pomfrey not to touch the nearly-convulsing Hermione, then took Harry aside. "Harry, this is very serious," he said. "I am going to tell you to do several very odd things. If you want to have any chance of saving Hermione, you must do as I say."

"All right," Harry said, steeling himself.

Jason conjured a small beaker, and said, "You must go into that toilet, and masturbate into that beaker."

Harry was speechless.

"Just do it. I know you're not in the mood, but the quicker you do it, the more likely Hermione is to survive. Use your Occlumency to block out everything else. I know this will sound heartless, but you must do it."

"I'll . . . well . . . right," Harry said, confused but following orders.

"I take it that blade is cursed?" Madam Pomfrey demanded.

Jason nodded. "Any treatment you tried would not only be ineffective, you then couldn't use it after the blade is removed."

"And that will be when?"

"Hopefully soon."

At that point, Asclepias and Scorpion appeared. Asclepias went over to Hermione and waved his wand over her. "Good. Whoever did this hated her, but did not feel the right kind of jealousy for this to be as quick-acting as it could be." He glanced at Jason. "Harry?"

"He's working on it," Jason answered.

Asclepias merely nodded. At that point, a very winded Albus Dumbledore came into the infirmary, followed by Snape, with Luna Lovegood quietly coming in and finding herself a quiet corner. Cobra and two Druids also popped into the infirmary.

Asclepias barked out a command in Gaulish, and the two Druids went over and collared Snape. "We need to start what you would call anumber three saline potion base. You will help."

"And if I don't?"

"Then either you will leave or we will kill you."

Snape merely nodded and said, "The infirmary's potion lab is through that door."

Asclepias leaned over to Jason and whispered, "The Lovegood girl is here. Would she be a help to Harry?"

"I rather doubt it," Jason answered.

Remus, who had stopped to floo Sirius, and Madam Bones now entered, with Sirius right behind. "That's it!" Madam Pomfrey snapped. A wave of her wand closed the doors. "You lot! Over against that wall. Stay out of our way unless we ask for you."

The group stayed that way for nearly five minutes, the only sound Hermione's now-whimpers of agony, as she weakened. At that point, a rather red-faced Harry came out of the toilet.

"Success?" Jason asked.

Harry merely nodded. Asclepias grabbed the beaker and peered at it. "Good sample," he said. He started adding some ingredients from his medicine pouch while he chanted in Mycenaean.

"Come over here, Harry," Jason commanded. He set up a cushion on the floor. "Kneel here." Harry did so.

Asclepias handed Jason the beaker, who had Harry hold it in his hands. "Harry Potter, do you claim this woman, Hermione, as yours?"

Puzzled, but trusting Jason, Harry said, "I do."

A wave of Jason's wand put up some privacy screens, and then another left Hermione nude while a third cleaned off the clotted blood.

Harry flushed and averted his eyes.

"You have to look, Harry," Jason said firmly. "You need to pour a third of the solution around the wound and say in the Greek I use, 'I claim what is mine from the goddess'."

Harry swallowed nervously, and as Jason removed Hermione's hands from the hilt, Harry did as he was told.

Less than three seconds after Harry was finished, the cursed Dagger lifted itself out of Hermione's lower belly. Asclepias flicked his wand, and the wound closed, although it was red and angry-looking. "Place your right hand on the incision," Jason commanded as he took the knife away. "Hold Hermione's right hand with your left. Until I tell you otherwise, do NOT move your hands. Use your meditation exercises to concentrate on your feelings for Hermione."

As Harry did that, Asclepias managed to get Hermione to drink half of the rest of the potion. Jason adjusted the sheet up to Harry's hand and laid a towel over Hermione's breasts, and then removed the screens he had created.

Hermione sighed and relaxed from the effects of the potion.

"Hermione!" Jason commanded. "Tell us who did this!"

"Pansy Parkinson," Hermione murmured, and then drifted off. Asclepias took the remainder of the potion to the Druids, with instructions.

"Cobra! Scorpion! Fetch this Parkinson girl here. Unharméd," Osiris commanded.

"Now wait a moment. . . ." Dumbledore started to protest, but the two had already disappeared.

"No matter what the Granger girl thinks she saw. . . ." Snape started to say from the doorway to the potions lab attached to the infirmary.

"No," Jason stated. "Hermione was not aware of what she said. The magic inside her, the magic hurting her, revealed the name of the attacker. It would not have mattered if she had not seen the attack or had not known her name."

"What do you need Miss Parkinson here for, then?" Dumbledore demanded.

"We need her blood," Jason answered.

"What!" Dumbledore, Snape, and Minister Bones all shouted.

"Without a quart of the attacker's blood infused into the potion our Druid friends are brewing, Hermione will die in less than thirty-six hours," Jason stated, which made Harry make a noise of anger. "Or do you want Hermione to die and Miss Parkinson executed for murder?"

"I doubt you could even get her convicted of simple assault on your evidence," Snape sneered.

"Considering how corrupt and bigoted magical Britain is, you are likely correct. However, Harry now falls under our laws," Osiris stated. "As Miss Granger is his, we would execute justice."

Before Dumbledore or Snape could say anything more, Minister Bones said, "It's only a quart of blood." She turned to Madam Pomfrey. "Would that hurt the Parkinson girl?"

"Could she be given standard blood replenishers?" Poppy asked.

"Of course," Asclepias answered. "Well, after the blood is drawn off."

"Then no, it wouldn't damage her. I get the replenishing potions."

"This girl will soon need them as well," Asclepias said. Pomfrey nodded and the group relaxed slightly.

Asclepias took the movements as cover to quietly ask Jason, "Why is Harry holding the girl like that?" He did not know any reason for it.

Jason murmured back, "So Harry won't kill the Parkinson girl when he finds out how bad Hermione is cursed."

Asclepias nodded his understanding. Harry's skills and power were building, but they could not risk

that being widely known. Even if they could easily save him from the Ministry, they would ask awkward questions better left unasked.

At that moment, Cobra and Scorpion returned with the protesting Pansy. "I haven't done anything! I have witnesses! I have an alibi!"

"Silly witch," Scorpion said. "We haven't told you why we were fetching you yet, so how would you know when you needed an alibi?"

Dumbledore winced, and thought yet again that perhaps Hogwarts actually did need to have a course in critical thinking.

"Oh, this isn't necessary," Asclepias said impatiently. Three waves of his wand and Pansy was immobilized, stripped, and spread-eagled six feet in the air. "We need the blood from her femoral artery, as close to her labia as possible."

"Right," Pomfrey said, and in seconds was drawing off the blood into a two-quart glass beaker. It only took a few moments to get the quart needed. Asclepias took the blood to the lab while Madam Pomfrey closed the wound, unfroze but lightly stunned Pansy, and administered the blood replenishing potion.

"The potion will be ready in a few moments," Asclepias said as he returned. "Hermione will need to be dosed five more times, once an hour."

"So she will survive now? Can we all go?" Snape demanded.

"You may go, but no, she will not survive."

"WHAT!" Harry had joined in Remus', Sirius', and Madam Bones' protest.

"Did you think Hera was a goddess easily placated?" Jason answered with contempt. "These weapons were created over thirty-five hundred years ago, and for over eight hundred years there was not even a partial treatment. This basic treatment took over fifteen hundred years to develop. The Daggers were the perfect weapon one woman could use on another. The curse destroyed the woman, decaying her flesh from the womb outwards. It would take a week to actually kill. The flesh would be rotted, but death would be caused when the blood turned to dust."

Jason placed a hand on Harry's shaking shoulder, and realized that it wasn't fear or shock but fury. "Hermione will never have children. If she is not given a second treatment, she will die in five to six years."

"The curse is driven by the emotions of hatred, envy, and jealousy," Asclepias said. "Parkinson seemed driven only by the first two. In addition, Harry has added a bit of his life magic to her healing, and he is very powerful. I would say she has five and half years to seven."

"But. . . ." Harry whimpered, his fury rushing away, leaving his concern.

"There is that other treatment," Jason said.

"And that is?" Dumbledore demanded.

"One ingredient would be Parkinson's life blood," Asclepias said.

In the stunned silence, Harry asked, "How much is that?"

"All of it," Jason answered. "If Parkinson is drained of blood, her life will give Hermione, well what would you say? Twenty more years is typical."

"Again, it would partially driven by Harry's life force as well as Parkinson's," Asclepias mused. "Parkinson's is of course somewhat inferior, but she is magical. I'd say twenty-five would be a good estimate."

"Out of the question!" Snape protested.

"Why?" Osiris asked.

The question quieted the room.

"I asked a question," Osiris said quietly. "Parkinson tried to end a life, and has dramatically lowered Miss Granger's life expectancy by at least seventy years, perhaps a hundred."

"Expectancy?" Snape spat. "Hanging around Potter, she'd have been lucky to have reached seventeen!" Before Sirius could hex his old enemy, Jason had simply backhanded Snape into a wall, where he collapsed.

No one seemed concerned, except for Dumbledore, who had other worries. "More to the point, Miss Parkinson is only thirteen,"Dumbledore pointed out. "No truly civilized society would execute a child!"

"What does that have to do with magical Britain?" Harry spat. "Why is Parkinson's life worth more than Hermione's?"

"The worth of a life cannot be measured, Harry," Dumbledore said,"especially when neither has truly begun."

"So she gets away with murdering Hermione?" Harry demanded.

"No, certainly not," Minister Bones stated. "However, I must say it is almost impossible she would be executed, or in our system, sentenced to the dementors, at such a young age." She looked at Asclepias. "How long does Miss Granger have until it's too late to administer such a drastic, and at best medium-term, solution?"

"Six months at the outside," Asclepias said. "I would really say it should be done by the New Year."

"And it should be pointed out that the Daggers of Hera are among the most heavily proscribed magical objects there are," Jason pointed out. "Their use does carry an international death penalty, and I don't know of any exception for children."

The shaken Minister ignored that for the moment. "As Miss Granger is Mister Potter's magical dependent. . . ."

"Actually, she is now his," Jason said.

"His what?" Sirius demanded before anyone else could. Remus put a warning hand on Sirius'

shoulder.

"That is up to Harry. His slave, his concubine, perhaps even his wife. She is magically bound to him. He must have intimate physical contact with her at least once a week." Seeing Harry turn very red, Jason added, "It need not be that sort of intimate contact, Harry. That would be best for contact of brief duration, but it does need to be at least skin-to-skin contact. We can discuss the details later."

"But what to do about Miss Parkinson?" Osiris asked.

"Harry, as her protector, and even more so as her magical betrothed, let us say, can demand blood payment from the Parkinsons," Remus said coldly, surprising everyone. "What blood price should be paid for the leading student at Hogwarts these last fifty years, even if she's Muggle-born? What price to satisfy the Head of House Potter, the acclaimed Boy-Who-Lived, when pressing full charges will likely lead to the girl's execution, even if she is just thirteen? The Parkinsons must pay, if Pansy doesn't pay with her life."

"A complete freeze on all the Parkinson family assets until they are accounted for," Sirius agreed. "Then Harry can claim a third to as much as half, or Pansy's life blood. Let the Parkinsons decide which they value more -- their fortune or their daughter. If they try and flee the country, they lose it all, plus Pansy's life if they are caught."

"For two men who have always claimed to loath pureblood custom, you two seem to have an excellent grasp of its detail," Dumbledore complained.

"Know your enemy," Sirius growled. "Pure-blood prejudice rules wizarding Britain. One faction wants to kill the Muggle-born and subjugate the Muggles. Another wants to keep us totally separate from the Muggles and demand we keep the Muggle-born -- and the werewolves and goblins and centaurs and whoever else there is -- in 'their place'. And most of the rest think of all these non-pure-bloods are just talented and exotic talking apes -- not quite nice, but useful."

"Argue somewhere else," Harry pleaded. "Asclepias, could you fill me in on everything I need to tell Hermione?"

"I should tell her, Harry," Asclepias stated.

Harry shook his head. "If I am responsible for her as my partner, I should." He looked at Asclepias and Jason. "You two are welcome to explain everything to her parents, though."

"Harry?" Osiris got Harry's attention. "Name Sirius Black as your agent in seeking justice from the Parkinsons. I will go with him, and then join these two at Mrs. Potter's family."

"Yes, sir."

Chapter XVII

"Harry?"

Harry had been half asleep, laying on his back in a small private room off the infirmary, Hermione cuddled against him, asleep.

He was fully awake now. "Yes?"

"Am I dreaming?"

"No, you're not dreaming."

"Am I . . . am I dead?"

"No," Harry said, hugging Hermione to him, "you're not dead."

"Then why are we in bed together, naked?" She reconsidered. "Or rather, why am I naked while you seem to have your pants on?"

"That's a long story," Harry said, and he proceeded to tell her.

Twenty minutes later, Hermione was sobbing on Harry's chest. When Hermione's tears slowed, Harry helped her clean up and prepared to do one of the hardest things a man can do -- listen.

"I don't know which is worse," Hermione said, her voice quivering, "knowing I'll likely be dead in six years or knowing I'll never have children." She crawled back into Harry's arms and said, "Did I ever mention my sister?"

"No," Harry said, surprised.

"It was the summer before I turned eleven," Hermione said. "Rose was born when I was three. We were at a beach in southern France, and I was making this huge, amazing sand castle. I know now that I must have been using accidental magic to keep it together. My Dad was taking all these photos, and Mum was so happy. She was between seven and eight months pregnant. Anyway, Rosie was jealous that I was getting more attention than her. Ever since she had been born, I was withdrawing more and more into books, because she was cuter than me, and a lot more out-going, but this time, I had Mum and Dad's attention, not her."

Harry hugged her more tightly.

"So, Rose was trying to show off by swimming further and further out, and no one noticed she'd gone too far until she was in real trouble. Well, to cut the story short, she drowned. Mum gave premature birth to my brother, Hugo. He died three weeks later."

Hermione sniffled again but shrugged. "I'd always hoped I'd have at least two children. Now, I'll never have them, even if somehow . . . well, no matter what, I won't live to forty-five, will I?"

"No, but maybe," Harry said.

Hermione frowned.

"You should know what I asked Osiris, in private," Harry said.

"You would want me to make a Horcrux?" Hermione asked. She was not certain that such a spell was as gray as Harry portrayed it. It seemed to her that killing someone, even someone who deserved to die and was going to die, to further one's own life was at least a little Dark.

"I asked," Harry admitted. "Osiris said that, for some reason no one has ever figured out, no woman has ever successfully made one. He said it made no obvious sense why the ritual seemed gender specific, but that it seemed to be in practice."

"Then why bring it up now?" Hermione demanded.

"I didn't; you did," Harry retorted. "Some of the Brothers, having failed to secure their loves'longevity via a Horcrux, came up with a solution mid-way between their existence and the semi-sentient existence of their mummified servants."

Hermione frowned for a moment, and then whispered, "The vampires?"

"The vampires."

"Harry, it's illegal to be made a vampire in Britain, and illegal to make a magical vampire throughout Europe," Hermione responded, pointing out the first problem that occurred to her.

"Well, technically, it's illegal for a vampire to do those things here," Harry retorted. "There are other places on earth where it would be legal, and there is also the ritual that created the first vampires."

"That was lost a long. . . . Oh!"

"Exactly. Not lost, just not shared by the Brotherhood. Hermione, I don't want to lose you!"

"Would you become a vampire as well?" Hermione asked.

"Osiris polled the Brotherhood, or at least a section of it, last summer. I could be made a Brother any time after I turn twenty-four, although they weren't going to tell me until I left Hogwarts. That's part of their guidelines. Or, if you prefer, you could make me a vampire as well."

"Well, under the circumstances, there's not a whole lot of choices, are there?" Hermione said bleakly. "We both know that the British Ministry will never allow a pure-blood to die to give a Mudblood an extra twenty to twenty-five years of life."

"Probably not," Harry agreed. "However, the Parkinsons might. Her parents are well-off, but both sets of grandparents are very wealthy, and both have other grandchildren. Her maternal great-grandfather is also still alive, and is supposedly the most infamous miser in western Europe. They might just be greedy enough to sacrifice Pansy for a large portion of their fortune."

"How horrible!" Hermione said. "I mean, I loath Pansy for what she's done to me, but I don't know how comfortable I would be in having her killed to extend my life."

"Well, then she shouldn't have attacked you with a Dark object that's so illegal it carries such a heavy penalty," Harry retorted.

Hermione was not satisfied, but moved on for the moment. "And what about us?"

"I had to claim you," Harry said. "The charm, in a sense, made me choose between you and Pansy's opinion of you. The potion only stopped the effects of the Curse because I claimed you, disavowing Pansy's interpretation. Hera was a goddess of married couples, after all, so the worst effects of the Curse are gone."

"How . . . how. . . ."

If it gets that far, well, your heart simply stops. Fortunately, it turns out Pansy really did not understand the use of the Daggers. She was envious of your status and what you've done, but there really needed to be an element of jealousy. If she was jealous of us, then you would have been hurt even more than you were."

Hermione took stock, and realized that except for some minor pain around her new scar, she really seemed physically fine. "And so what does all this mean to us?"

"Pansy means nothing. As for us, well, I wasn't about to take you as a slave, and even though I'm really fourteen, we weren't allowed to get married as I am not sixteen."

"And?"

"Technically, you're my concubine, meaning you're married to me, but in theory I could take a wife once I'm a bit older. I can't marry you, and change your status to my first wife, until I'm twenty-one."

"When I'll likely either be dead or, well, undead."

"True." Harry sighed and said, "This isn't the right time to say this, but I don't know when it would be. You can't be Lady Potter unless we're magically married. You can stay Miss Granger or be Mrs. Potter, whichever you prefer."

Hermione's mouth quirked. "How about Mrs. Granger-Potter?"

"If you want."

Hermione closed her eyes, determined not to cry again. "My parents are going to have fits when I tell them all of this."

"Jason and Osiris are talking to them." Harry almost smirked. "I'm sure they'll make certain that all the blame goes where it belongs -- Parkinson, Malfoy, and British magical culture."

"Malfoy? Where does he come in to this?" Hermione demanded.

"Osiris plucked the fact out of Parkinson's mind that she got the Dagger from Malfoy. He didn't really know what it was, so she took it from him. She tried to get some others to use it on you, but when she couldn't she used it herself We'll decide -- you, me, Osiris, and the other Brothers, what to do with that information later."

"Typical of Malfoy."

Harry hugged Hermione tightly. "You need your rest, Hermione."

Tired from the healing magic and her emotions, Hermione hugged Harry to her chest, and fell back asleep.

*

To say that the Grangers were appalled, dismayed, and irate over what had happened to their daughter would be a vast understatement. They knew little of Horcruxes or even vampires, other than the misinformation many Muggles had for those creatures of the night. That their daughter would never grow to full adulthood, would either lead a very short life or a very unnatural existence, was very difficult to absorb.

The fact that Harry had offered to split the blood money, if offered, any way they and Hermione wanted was of course of little comfort to the parents were already grieving for their future loss. In the end, Harry and the Grangers would decide to assign any money to Hermione to do with as she willed.

*

The next morning, Snape had just come into the great hall when he realized what was about to happen. Potter had come into the hall, and a smirking Draco Malfoy was making a bee-line towards the Boy. Worse, Potter had a fierce grin on his face that Snape recognized all too well, even if he had never seen it on this Potter -- James Potter had often worn it just before some major prank had been pulled.

Snape hurried towards their direction. Although still out of ear-shot, Snape was surprised to hear every word. He realized with a bit of shock that this had to be Potter's doing.

"Ah, Malfoy! Just the person I wanted to see."

Draco stopped in his tracks, confused. "Huh?"

"You must know all about what happened yesterday afternoon by now. So, tell me something, since you claim to understand custom and the pureblood families so well. You know, under the law, I can claim at least a third of the extended Parkinson family fortune, although we're trying for half. I'm told that's at least sixty-three million Galleons. Would you agree, or is the other estimate I heard, somewhere between a hundred and a hundred and five million closer?"

"What?" To say Draco was confused was an understatement.

"Well, let's say seventy-five million. A third of that would be twenty-five million galleons." Harry scowled at Draco. "Can you imagine, I mean really understand, twenty-five million Galleons, Malfoy?" Harry knew he was having a difficult time doing so.

"Of course I can," Draco lied scornfully. "The Malfoys are one of the few families richer than the Parkinsons."

"In Europe, at least," Harry agreed. "Now, I wonder how Pansy got a hold of a Dagger of Hera? Her family is pure-blood, but only five hundred years old and not noted for being overly-Dark. I had a thought," Harry lied, for this had been partially Jason and Sirius' idea. "If the Parkinsons decide to pay instead of letting Pansy die, I think we'll kick back ten percent of their blood money in return

for Pansy providing legal proof of where she got the Dagger."

Harry leaned into Draco's confused face, and asked, "Tell me, Draco, do you think the Parkinsons would turn over anyone NOT in their family for two and half million Galleons?"

Draco's normally pale face went so white that Snape was surprised that the boy didn't pass out. That meant that Draco had been involved in Pansy getting the Dagger of Hera. He might be concerned about someone else, but he would not have had that powerful a reaction otherwise.

Draco fled the hall, and Potter bowed slightly to Professor Snape before going to eat a quick breakfast.

Snape went to the head table, puzzled at why Potter would clue in Draco. Or him.

Then, he realized the answer. The Parkinsons would indeed turn over Draco's name for two and a half million Galleons. Snape admitted to himself that he was tempted to see if HE could turn in Draco's name for two and a half million. Draco would then, at a minimum, be expelled, and more likely have his wand snapped and be forbidden future instruction. Pansy would be lucky to get off that easily.

Pansy could still get married and have pure-blood children. Draco would not be able to take his place in wizarding culture without having at least a magical education through his fifth year, plus access to a wand.

Lucius would have to pay at least the two and a half million Galleons or whatever else the blood fine might be for the Parkinsons, and Snape shuddered to think what Lucius would do to Draco, unless Lucius had ordered this in the first place.

Snape did not think that was very likely.

Then Snape realized that, depending on the exact course of events that got the Dagger from Draco to Pansy, the Parkinsons could have good blackmail material. Lucius would no doubt end up having to pay much, perhaps all, of the Parkinsons' fines. Yes, the Malfoys were alleged to be richer than the Parkinsons, but not by that much.

Even if the Parkinsons only got two and a half million in hush money, Potter might consider that money well-used, as it hurt the Malfoys. They would not have that much actually cash available.

As for cluing him in, Snape realized that this was in part a warning to Snape not to get in the way. Snape's dislike for Harry went up a bit, but his respect for Harry increased even more.

Snape sat down to a hearty breakfast. He decided there was no use crying over spilt Malfoys.

*

Two weekends later, a Malfoy cousin showed up and spoke privately with Draco. The Parkinsons had ended up paying a blood penalty of just under thirty million Galleons. Draco would be marrying Pansy the morning of the following August 31 -- so there would not be much of a honeymoon. Rather than bringing a dowry, the Malfoys would be paying a bride price of ten million Galleons, which was thought to be a modern record.

The cousin was very clear. This was the last time the family would be helping him out of major

trouble. If he made one more serious error, he'd be lucky if he ended up in an isolated shack with some surly tutors for the rest of his education.

*

Meanwhile, the rest of the school was trying to adjust to the new routines. Harry and Hermione (Mrs. Granger-Potter in class) were sharing a small suite of rooms attached to the Gryffindor common room. So far, Luna was the only student allowed into the suite, although Neville would be allowed in by Christmas, and several other students were given access in the spring.

Several students had tried to insult Hermione in those first few weeks. Strange hexes seemed to affect them, without anyone seeming to cast them -- some had their tongues enlarged; some had their fingers and toes fused together; Snape's greasy hair had turned a long, luxuriant, and vibrant red, with two long pig-tails; Marietta Edgecombe and Cho Chang had their eyelashes grow to nine inches long, at which point they had knotted together. Equally oddly, whenever one of these incidents happened, the same hex affected Draco (his eyelashes had bound him to Crabbe, to most people's amusement).

Despite everyone on the staff's best efforts, only Dumbledore was able to cancel these hexes. Most thought that was because of Dumbledore's power and expertise, but Dumbledore knew better. It was too easy for him to change the affected back. The hexes were designed so that he alone would have to take the time to correct them, as he was partially responsible for the chain of events which had led to this situation to begin with.

Dumbledore therefore took his penance without complaint.

Just as that chain of events had started at Hogwarts, Pansy Parkinson found that her leaving Hogwarts had left her and her family facing a number of unpalatable choices. Her family was split over everything concerning her, united only in regarding her as a liability, a spoiled commodity, well-dumped onto the Malfoy family.

Her mother's family had no further interest in her. Some of her father's family, besides being glad to have traded her to the Malfoys, also agreed to use her as a hostage to fortune.

In mid-December, therefore, she was turned over to her father's cousin Walden Macnair. He took her to a run-down mansion near the little Muggle village of Little Hangleton. From then until mid-August, she would be serving as nurse-made to a monster and his snake, and as play toy for the Death Eater in residence and any others. The day after her wedding the following September, she would be returning to the Riddle House, as Barty Crouch Junior was hoping to be elsewhere.

Macnair left Pansy with her new lord, grateful that he was unlikely to be called upon again until the following August.

For Pansy, the next eight months would be a purgatory which would sink deeper into hell after the mockery of a wedding. Not even the short appearance of one of her Housemates for two days over what she correctly imagined was the Yule holiday gave her anything but more work to do.

In South America, Lucius Malfoy dutifully passed on nearly all the information to his vampire contact, other than Pansy's change of location, and his knowledge that Macnair was indeed in contact with his erstwhile master. Like the Parkinsons, and Macnair to a degree, Malfoy was trying to keep all his options open.

*

As the holidays approached, Hermione would be going to meet her parents. None of them anticipated exactly how difficult a meeting that would be. Hermione would leave her parents house the morning after Christmas, and while both she and her parents would have been sad to know that the night before would be the last night she would ever spend under their roof, none of them would have been surprised.

Meanwhile, Harry had been arguing with Osiris, Tutmoses, and the First Acolyte.

"Harry," Osiris finally said with a sigh, "your spouse is a very brilliant young woman, but she has very little experience. I assure you, the finest minds of the Brotherhood have looked into this problem. We know the making of Horcruxes inside and out, as you might say. We have no clue as to why making a Horcrux seems to be gender-specific."

"And having the rituals in her mind could be dangerous," Tutmoses added.

"You know perfectly well that Osiris could lock it away in her mind in such a way as to make it perfectly safe," Harry retorted. "If she only works on it in our bedroom, without taking notes other than is a strongly-passworded magical file, it would be perfectly safe."

"Fairly safe," Tutmoses pointed out.

"Fine. Safe enough." Harry turned to Osiris. "What are the common factors of the great minds of the Brotherhood who have studied this?"

"We know magic better than your spouse will for decades, or even hundreds of years, Mister Potter," the First Acolyte stated. "We know the ritual intimately."

"And what else?"

"I assure you, we have kept looking at the developments of magical theory, all around the world," Tutmoses said. "Even the Brothers most against our being involved with the general magical world are interested in their ideas."

"I'm not surprised, but that's not it," Harry said.

The three men looked at each other and shrugged. Harry shook his head and looked over at Cobra, who was also present.

"I don't know what you're driving at, either," Cobra admitted.

Harry sighed. "What seems to be the problem? That the ritual shouldn't be gender specific, but appears to be so, right?"

"Correct," the First Acolyte agreed.

"Yet the only brilliant minds looking at the problem have been males," Harry pointed out. "A female mind, even one that's undertrained, might be able to spot something that none of you would, simply because she has a different outlook towards both language and gender in general than you might. If the problem is more fundamental than that, she probably won't find the problem."

The four men grimaced. The First Acolyte sighed, and said, "I shall arrange someone to teach your spouse the languages this spring."

"She can work on the problem this summer," Osiris added. "But why is this so important to you? She can. . . ."

"Become a vampire," Harry agreed. "How cuddly is a vampire?" he demanded.

"Usually not very," Tutmoses agreed.

Harry left things at that.

*

When Harry gently escorted Hermione into a carriage to carry them back to the castle after the winter holiday, he did not feel the hostile, calculating eyes glaring at them. Lord Voldemort's agent within the student population took the next carriage to the castle.

Chapter XVIII

For Hermione, the end of the autumn term had been very much a blur. Harry had cosseted and protected her nearly every minute they had not been in their little suite, while Luna had been by her side in the Gryffindor common room, and Tracey, Daphne, Susan, Hannah, Mandy, or Padma had been with her outside of Gryffindor.

Just getting used to her new status had also occupied her. Harry had adjusted to their new sleeping arrangements (and sleep was all they had done until their first night back after the New Year) much more quickly than she had. Learning that just sleeping in the same bed with her drove away his frequent bad dreams made Hermione feel warm in ways she had never anticipated.

Still, Hermione took some time to get used to the squirming form sleeping next to her. Even more difficult for Hermione to get used to was how Harry treated her in private.

In public, Harry was tender and considerate towards her. In the common room or when someone else was with them, Harry was shyly affectionate. Still, Harry was always to some degree on alert whenever they were not alone. Harry Potter wore a series of masks to face the world, more so than anyone else Hermione knew. Even with Luna, their best friend, or with his mentors Jason and Cobra, Harry still seemed to be at least wearing a half mask.

Only Hermione knew the frightened Harry, the boy still recovering from years of abuse, dealing with being The-Boy-Who-Lived, or as some in Gryffindor and Hufflepuff were starting to whisper, The Chosen One.

The Chosen One was, Hermione had decided by the end of January, the most uxorious, yet overtly masculine, male she had ever heard of. Harry's greatest joy, in private, was to pamper her. He delighted in washing and bathing her, he varnished and polished her nails, and even learned how to give her manicures and pedicures. He even brushed her hair several times each week. Once she initiated their sex life, he was willing to play any role so long as it was affectionate.

Hermione realized that he had to be the hero to the world, but alone with her, his greatest joy was to make her happy, which to him mostly meant physically pleasing her, although he had tried to buy her gifts in Hogsmeade the few times they went that spring. By making her happy, he could earn the affection from her that he was still not convinced he deserved, even if she was happy to give him that affection unconditionally.

The weekend Hermione figured all that out, Harry was a very happy young man.

At the same time, Hermione's language and private magic lessons with the members of the Brotherhood took up whatever free time she might have had. Despite the death sentence hanging over her, Hermione was happy -- emotionally, physically, and intellectually stimulated. Whenever the thoughts of the clock slowly ticking away her life surfaced, Harry was always able to distract her long enough for her to keep going, and any despair or existential angst was kept at bay.

The rest of Hogwarts seemed to simmer down quickly after the winter break. Any disputes seemed limited to a few individuals, and none seemed to involve, or evolve into, inter-House rivalries.

Thinking about that as March worked its way towards April, Severus Snape felt some twinges of shame. He realized that a fair part of the cross-House rivalry and even violence had been started, one-sided, by his own House, and that he had been (largely)unconsciously egging his students on by

protecting them while bullying the other Houses. The previous year had shown where that violence could lead, and without Snape egging both sides on to a degree, no one seemed interested in restarting their past behaviors at anywhere near their previous levels. The common response of both Gryffindors and Slytherins to the other was still a sneer, but even Snape admitted that most of these were more a learned reflex rather than any real sign of hatred.

Snape had to swallow his anger, but still had to admit that it was Potter and his consort who were leading the way. They had refused to bully Malfoy the previous spring, and Potter had even scolded the Weasleys when they had gone too far.

Snape had literally bitten his tongue enough to slightly draw blood when Filius had remarked to Lupin one night how glad he was that Harry was closer to behaving like his father had during his last year instead of his first five.

As he had swished the healing potion around his mouth after dinner, however, Snape had to admit the possibility at least that Flitwick was a more balanced observer than himself when it came to Potters. James Potter had been a cruel, arrogant dandy during his first five years. Lupin had claimed the term before that Snape and his cohort of future Death Eaters had given out more bullying than they had absorbed, and Snape finally had to admit that was true -- except they had rarely been able to strike at the Marauders with any success.

Snape now wondered, for the first time, what would have happened if the Potters had survived their encounter with the Dark Lord? Would he and Lily have remained estranged? Or would the fact that he had tried to save her at least have at least partially mended their old friendship? Or would his motives for trying to save her -- just her, not her husband or son -- have driven them even further apart?

With that question, and the shame it brought, Snape finally let go his jealousy and hatred of James Potter. Not his dislike, never his dislike, but Snape could live with that without poisoning himself.

*

A few days after Easter, Barty Crouch knelt before his master, trembling.

"You have developed doubts about me," Voldemort said coldly.

"No, my lord, not about you," Crouch groveled. "Never about you!"

"Then about what? Your impersonation next year?"

"No, my lord."

"Go on."

"I do wonder how I am to accomplish my mission with these Druids and others at Hogwarts."

That had been nagging at Voldemort, as much as he loathed to admit it. "And what do you suggest?" he asked nicely.

That terrified Crouch, as such politeness was nearly always a prelude to violence. "I understand why Potter must be killed by your hand, my lord," Crouch admitted. "I would just like you to be restored before I go to Hogwarts. That way, if I should fail, you would still be fully able to implement your

other plans. I do not trust the girl to be an adequate tool, let alone the others."

Voldemort had no other plans ready for action, but he was hardly going to admit that. He had this plan, and two semi-reliable agents in Hogwarts, both of whom would be leaving at the of the school year. "There is some value in what you say." Voldemort thought hard for a few moments. Negating Potter's blood protection would be very useful. However, he knew that at least part of the blood protection had been broken when the Boy's Muggle relatives had attacked him.

Under these circumstances, Voldemort decided negating whatever blood protections remained were not as urgent as they would have been if they had been fully intact. "Very well. Get Macnair to help you. Capture Moody. We will drain his mind and you will begin your impersonation sooner than I had planned. You will still need to get into Hogwarts and get Potter into this tournament, and see that he survives the first two tasks and wins the third."

"Yes, my master," Crouch said.

"Well? Begone!"

Crouch scurried from the room, glad that his only punishment was not being able to bugger the girl in passing as he usually did.

*

Two weeks later, Alastor Moody watched in horror as Voldemort was brought back into physical form. There was nothing he could do to prevent it, tied up as he was. What little satisfaction he had was that he had not been taken easily. Walden Macnair was dead, and young Crouch (his mind roared with anger at the knowledge that young Crouch had somehow not only escaped Azkaban, but that his escape was undetected) would carry scars on his face and chest far worse than Moody's own. He was now also missing his left hand, having cut it off in the rebirthing ceremony.

The body that emerged from the cauldron was humanoid, but not human. The creature picked up a wand, which only now Moody had noticed was on a tombstone, with a sigh of satisfaction. With ahiss, Crouch's wrist was healed. "I cannot restore your hand. It would be lost any time you transformed, and we can't have you bleeding out unexpectedly."

"Yes, my lord," Crouch whimpered.

"You've done well," Voldemort told his servant. He approached Moody. "Anger, defiance, and fear," he mused. "Most would have their fear uppermost in their mind. I shall not punish you for killing one servant and nearly depriving me of my most useful one. In fact, I believe you shall spend at least the next fifteen months or so in a very pleasant daze. I could kill you, but then you would not be nearly as useful. I have in mind an interesting potion, since I now have the time to brew it, but until then, Imperio!"

*

Lucius Malfoy reported the pains caused by his Dark Mark to his contacts, just as Severus Snape had to Dumbledore and Cobra. Dumbledore carried on for over a week on how Harry's scar might have been useful.

What distracted Dumbledore, as well as the Ministry, the Druids, and the Brotherhood, was the discovery of the decomposing body of Walden Macnair in late April. The fact that he had been

suspected of being a Death Eater was uncovered in his files, which, it turned out, had been sealed in 1982.

The Ministry then went through a 'thorough' self-investigation that lasted nearly three weeks. The only other suspected Death Eaters who had not been at some time publically accused before 1982 were now dead.

Harry and Hermione, still unhappy at other major lapses, voiced their suspicions at this convenient turn of affairs. Harry's advisors voiced the pair's suspicions as their own, and some outside auditors were brought in, resulting in the quick realization that no such review of all Ministry records could possibly be done less than three months. That, plus the fact that the Ministry had fairly detailed files on every Muggle related to a magic user and even more detailed files on Squibs and the fact that the only files the Ministry had most pure-and-full-bloods were detailed genealogical records, spawned a huge public debate.

By the time the furor died down and the records scoured, it would be the middle of August. Nearly all those still living who had been accused of being Death Eaters or of having ties with Death Eaters were either out of the country (along with their portable wealth) or (like Ludo Bagman) could prove they had been falsely accused. The parting shot of those who had run off would be used by Madam Bones to justify finishing her cleaning out of the old guard from their positions in the Ministry.

But those events would play out over time.

*

"Arise, Ginevra Weasley," the hooded figure intoned as few nights before the start of the N.E.W.T. and O.W.L.s. "You are now part of the Ravenclaw Sisterhood. While you are a student, your first allegiance is to the Sisterhood, and to the principles of Ravenclaw. Recite with us."

Ginny and the other nine witches in the ritual chamber chanted in unison:

"We are Ravenclaw. Knowledge is Power.
We are Rowena's Women, independent, not pawns.
We work together against the world.
We swear to preserve our customs.
We swear to preserve our traditions.
We swear to preserve ancient knowledge.
We are Ravenclaw. Knowledge is Power."

The group broke apart, Penelope Clearwater guiding the happy Ginny out of the room. The seventh year prefect nodded to Cho Chang and some of the others, until she was left with the fifth year prefect, a second year, and a very nervous third year -- Marietta Edgecombe. "We are the leaders of the Sisterhood," the seventh year said solemnly. "We are pure of blood, and are the natural guardians of Ravenclaw's traditions."

She glared at Marietta. "Are you with us or against us?"

"Why wouldn't I be with you?" Marietta squeaked.

"We need you to work with the Weasley girl," Marietta was told. "She has the blood, but her family has strayed from tradition. Clearwater is bright, but she is Muggle-born. I want you to befriend

Weasley. Write to me at least every three weeks or so next year. I'll be glad to give you advice."

Marietta bowed and then fled.

"What a wet blanket," the fifth year said scornfully. She turned to her leader. "I assume we're to do the same?"

"Yes," the seventh year agreed. "Weasley will be our listening post in Potter's camp." That what they would learn would make its way to the Dark Lord was understood, but not mentioned.

*

The incident which set Harry and Hermione off in early June was a key part of Voldemort's plot, although that would not be apparent for some time.

Marcus Flint had been brought before the Dark Lord over the previous winter's holidays. His mission was to assassinate Remus Lupin, although he did not know why. He was not to strike until the end of May at the earliest, although again he was not told the reasons.

After meeting the Dark Lord for the first time, Flint was not about to ask for details.

Flint had been given a silver alloy knife. He was of course not to try and attack Lupin from the front. A straight-up knife attack on Lupin would have been near-suicide even by the fully-restored Dark Lord.

Instead, Flint decided he would attack Lupin when Lupin was pressed by the crowd at the last Quidditch game of the season -- Gryffindor playing Ravenclaw.

The season had been a disaster for Slytherin, losing all three games. Flint blamed this largely on Malfoy, who had been beaten in all three games. In reality, only Potter had shown Malfoy up, and not nearly to the degree of the year before. Cho Chang had only won when the Snitch Malfoy was about to catch flew right into her face. The Snitch had appeared right in Diggory's line of sight. The fact was, Flint was a poor captain, and Snape had been too distracted to make up for Flint's poor leadership skills. Without Snape's coaching on how to avoid getting caught, the Slytherins had lost nine goals in penalty shots against both Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw, and an even dozen against Gryffindor.

Now Flint was prepared to end the Quidditch season on a dramatic note. He had just finished his second try at the N.E.W.T.s the day before, and was so nervous about his actions he actually had done worse this time than he had the first time around.

After eight years at Hogwarts, Flint knew the pre-game activities very well. The two teams stood, more or less at the same time, and made their way out to change. This was the signal for the students and staff who were attended to start making their way to the pitch. Visitors who were attending would have already started dribbling in.

Lupin was one of the staff members overseeing the guests. Lupin had attended only two games before during this year, even though he had been seeing to the outside fans in each game. Still, he would want to watch Potter play.

Flint therefore stayed at the top of the Slytherin seats, near an exit. He paid little attention to the game. A small part of him could not tune it out, however. He was not pleased, but not surprised,

that the game was short and dominated by the Gryffindors.

Flint exited as soon as he saw Lupin stop applauding. He knew that while Lupin was on duty before the match, Sinistra was afterwards. Flint was therefore not surprised to see Lupin clasp the shoulder of the man he had sitting next to -- Flint correctly guessed it was Sirius Black -- and then make his way to the closest exit which would take him towards the castle. Black was obviously staying to talk with McGonagall, and therefore Flint could dismiss both from his calculations.

Flint went down the stairs and made his way towards the most probable route for Lupin to take. Fortunately, Lupin's path would be the same if he was heading straight back to the castle or to the Gryffindor changing rooms.

Flint arrived in time to see Lupin, in the middle of a mixed crowd of students, speaking with Potter's pet Mudblood. A few moments later, Lupin and the crowd of about fifteen students moved off, merging with other knots of students.

For Flint, that was both good and bad news. Good because it would be much easier to approach Lupin surrounded by others. Flint had no real idea how acute the werewolf's senses might be. He guessed, as it was near the new moon, they would be little sharper than a real person's, but he was not certain enough to want to bet his life.

The smaller than expected crowd was bad news, because Flint would certainly be identified as the assailant. Flint was prepared to accept that, but would have really preferred not to. Still, he was not about to fail in his mission.

Flint moved out from the stadium wall just before Lupin pulled even with him. He had accurately judged the currents and eddies of the fifty or so students in the general area. He slowly moved closer and closer to the werewolf, pulling the silver alloy knife out when he was less than five feet away.

Remus Lupin did not realize that danger was approaching him, first from the side and then from behind. The first indication that something was amiss was the incredible pain he felt around his right kidney, as Flint thrust the knife home. It was so thin and so sharp that it felt more like an elbow to his kidney than anything else.

"Oi!" Before Flint could let go of the knife, leaving it embedded in the werewolf, he felt a hand grab his wrist and pull.

Flint whirled around, angry because he had been caught, and then angrier when he realized that his attacker had pulled the knife out of Lupin when his wrist was pulled away. Flint slashed at his attacker, hardly taking in that it was Ron Weasley. Instead, Flint next thrust the knife under Ron's ribs and then twisted it as he pulled it out.

Flint then turned back to Lupin, who was in fact turning to face Flint, a very shocked look on his face as the real pain started to make itself felt.

Flint repeated the stroke he had used against Ron Weasley, but this time he let go of the hilt, leaving the knife buried in Lupin's chest.

Flint pulled out what he had been told was a port key. It was a small, heavy, green object -- Flint thought it looked a bit like a small metal pineapple. There was a metal lever-like device on the top, held firm by a small piece of metal attached to a ring. The Master had called it a 'pin'.

"Jesus Christ!" Dean Thomas screamed when he saw the hand grenade. "Everyone! Run for your fucking lives!" He grabbed the bleeding Ron and started dragging him away as fast as he could.

As directed, Flint pulled the pin and released the handle. Flint pulled the grenade close to his chest and waited for the portkey to whisk him away. When it didn't, he brought it close to his face to see if there was something he could identify as being wrong.

One second later, the grenade exploded.

*

Two hours later, a very concerned Hermione was waiting for Harry in the suite. She looked up, and then stood as Harry, still in his Quidditch robes and partially covered with dried blood, staggered in.

The two looked at each other for a moment, and then Harry said, his voice filled with anguish, "He's dead!"

Harry looked at Hermione, and her heart broke seeing the look of stunned confusion on his face. Harry took a step towards her, and then fell to his knees. Hermione moved towards him and pressed his cheek against her stomach. Harry clutched Hermione around the waist and started cry.

Then Hermione blinked in confusion. "Harry? Exactly who died?"

Chapter XIX

Two hours after Marcus Flint stabbed Remus Lupin and then blew himself up with a hand grenade he had been told was a portkey, a very concerned Hermione was waiting for Harry in the suite. She looked up, and then stood as Harry, still in his Quidditch robes and partially covered with dried blood, staggered in.

The two looked at each other for a moment, and then Harry said, his voice filled with anguish, "He's dead!"

Harry looked at Hermione, and her heart broke seeing the look of stunned confusion on his face. Harry took a step towards her, and then fell to his knees. Hermione moved towards him and pressed his cheek against her stomach. Harry clutched Hermione around the waist and started to cry.

Then Hermione blinked in confusion. She had never seen Harry like this. "Harry? Who died?" Her voice caught for a moment. "Ron?"

The face pressed against her signaled a 'no.' Harry looked up, and although his shoulders had been heaving and he had sounded like he had been in tears, his red eyes were dry. "Remus," he rasped. "Just . . . just before he died, he looked over my shoulder, and said . . . and said, 'I'm sorry, James. I failed you'."

Harry swallowed nervously, and said, "Then he looked at me and said, 'I'm sorry, Harry', and then he was gone."

"I'm so sorry, Harry."

Harry roped in his emotions for a moment, and swore, "I'm tired of reacting, Hermione. There's nothing I can do right now, but if I ever get a chance, I will get justice."

"We will," Hermione corrected.

Harry looked Hermione in the eye and said, "I understand now why the Brothers made mummies and then vampires. I don't want to live without you." Harry clutched Hermione around the waist, and started to cry in earnest.

*

Marcus Flint had absorbed most of the shrapnel, and was therefore the only one killed by the explosion. Eighteen students, besides Ron, had been injured by the blast, and of course Ron's knife wound was serious. All would survive, though.

Dean Thomas was docked one point for his use of bad language, and rewarded fifty points for his quick thinking. This pushed Gryffindor into the House Cup over Slytherin by twenty-one points, which made Dean even more popular in his own House.

Considering the glares many of the Slytherins were now often getting from the rest of the students, they did not begrudge the Cup, and many made a point of congratulating Dean despite the grumbling of Draco and a few others.

While the Hogwarts term was winding down, a very different meeting was occurring in the north

African desert. Merenre had been startled to be summoned to the Temple from the cave complex he occupied just a few miles west of the Temple. He wondered if it was just a coincidence that this was the first time in several weeks none of his followers were staying with him at his tiny oasis.

When he saw that he was meeting not just with his friend and ally the First Acolyte, but with his Lord, Tutmoses, Cobra, and Zara, Merenre decided that it had not been a coincidence. Still, he was a very senior Brother, and had served three terms as High Priest over the millennia. "What is this about?" he asked Tutmoses.

"We have uncovered information about some of your followers," Tutmoses stated. "We would know if their activities, as opposed to their underlying beliefs, were sanctioned by you."

"It is not their beliefs you question?" Merenre demanded.

"Their basic beliefs, no," Tutmoses said. "Three of us have opposed them for centuries. One of us here still believes in them. Still, actions are not beliefs."

"Let us sit, and have some beer made the true way," Osiris said.

The group sat, and Merenre relaxed just a bit. This was a ritual ancient even when Osiris had been young. It was a gesture of friendship, meaning that whatever the problem was, they were honestly concerned about him, or at least Osiris was, and Merenre was warmed by that thought. "What has happened?" he asked.

It was still Tutmoses who answered. "As you know as well as we, basic knowledge of our ceremonies, of what are now called Horcruxes, has never been totally suppressed. Therefore, we never thought to question how Tom Riddle discovered the idea of Horcruxes. We long thought, or perhaps were even led to believe, that he created a ceremony which led to something similar to our soul boxes, but which were not exactly the same."

"This isn't true?" Merenre asked, startled.

"No," Zara answered. "We have now finished studying the echoes of his Horcruxes thoroughly, and the shells even more so. In all cases, they were created by our methods." He paused and then added, "Precisely our methods."

"How . . . how is that possible?"

"Who did you and Khafra both use as your observer in Europe, in that recent century and a half the two of you were high priests?" Tutmoses asked simply.

The answer was easy. Still, Merenre thought a moment, and then demanded, "Do you just suspect Agathon betrayed us, or you have proof?"

"We now have proof that Riddle and Agathon conducted an affair, off-and-on from the summer of 1941 through the autumn of 1947," Cobra almost snarled. "We also know that Riddle created at least two Horcruxes during that time period. Yet Riddle was not reported to have made any Horcruxes until the 1960s, and when it was reported that was NOT reported by Agathon. After over two thousand years, he should recognize one of us, even with one soul box, let alone two!"

Merenre realized that it was only the respect he was held in that had made this a friendly meeting. They were all being open with him. He could not dodge the truth. "Agathon has always been very

foolish in his actions, but now it seems, for the first time, I must consider him also either a complete fool or a traitor, if not both," Merenre acknowledged.

Zara continued. "There is more. Do you remember the group you led, searching for new ways of rejoining soul fragments to a totally recreated body?"

"Of course," Merenre said with contempt.

"And of course you remember the idea your group came up with, for dealing with any of us who might be long separated from our bodies?"

"Naturally."

"Your suggested ceremony was the one the diary-Riddle was setting up," Cobra said dangerously. "Agathon was not part of the group, nor has he ever consulted the records so far as we can see. Where did he learn of it? And if he did not directly betray us a second time, who informed Riddle?"

"Are you saying I did one or the other?" Merenre demanded dangerously.

"I am suggesting it," Cobra acknowledged. "It is possible, if not the most likely scenario."

"You've been associating with Jason too much. His Greek logic is rubbing off on you, rather than your native common sense being at the forefront," Merenre sneered.

"I do not believe you gave the information to Riddle. However, you understand this ceremony best. Did you ever share this ceremony with Agathon?" the First Acolyte asked.

"No, I did not, nor do I know of anyone who has." He looked at the First Acolyte. "You are suggesting we have two traitors?"

"In your group," Cobra pointed out.

Merenre winced at that.

"Agathon must be a traitor of some kind. We do not know if he is the only one," Zara pointed out in turn.

"Do you know who Lucius Malfoy is?" Cobra asked.

Merenre frowned. "No."

"He is the wizard who planted the diary soul box on Harry's young friend," Cobra informed the confused man. "He had been very high in Voldemort's service. He has exiled himself to South America. Agathon met with him, and set up a vampire contact -- one loyal to Agathon, rather than to any of the Vampire Clans. All the information from Hogwarts that Malfoy gets, and he receives a fair amount, is passed on to Agathon. Agathon meets often with Khafra and Salemin, but no others that we can discover. Khafra often meets with you, along with others, and Salemin just spent five days with you." These were the two most militant of Merenre's group.

"My Lord!" Merenre fell to his knees. "Please believe me! I have nothing to do with any conspiracy!" When the fiery eye appeared over Osiris' head, Merenre prostrated himself, trembling. Osiris, Lord of Death, was sitting in judgement. Merenre was thankful he had told no lies.

"I believe you," Osiris said quietly, "for which I am grateful. You have been a loyal brother, and have served the Brotherhood often and well. I do not believe your way is the way we must tread at the moment, but we must be watchful, for our path may become too slippery with little notice."

"I . . . with your permission, I would like to announce that I am withdrawing to my cave for the next fifty years, for solitary meditation," Merenre begged.

"I would prefer you withdraw for . . . seven years," Osiris said simply. "And, if it would not disturb your meditation, I would ask Brother Tuamon to visit you with information, and to receive any advice, every tenth day. He shall also bring supplies, unless you plan to fast often."

"I shall reserve every tenth afternoon for his visit," Merenre answered, getting up on his knees. "May I know why?"

"As I said, I believe you wrong on our course for the past hundred and fifty years, but you had good reasons for following such a course. We cannot integrate into magical culture. We may even have to tighten our withdrawal more than you did." Here Tutmoses made a face. "We must still learn more about these times, both magical and mundane. Only then shall we have the information needed for a better decision. Your opinions and thoughts are needed for balance."

"I thank you, Lord," Merenre said, rising. He turned to Tutmoses. "You do remember that some of your most ardent followers were also in my study group. Could any of them have supplied information to Voldemort, to cause a situation where we would have to intervene?"

"I would hope not," the startled Tutmoses said. "If so, I was not part of it, and I will treat such a traitor just as I would if he is from your group, or any other."

Merenre bowed and took his leave.

"I am glad he was not involved," Cobra said with a sigh of relief.

"As am I," the First Acolyte agreed. "We must discover if there is another traitor. You are leaving Agathon free as bait?"

Tutmoses nodded.

"Is there anything else?" the First Acolyte asked his Lord.

"Not at this time, old friend."

The First Acolyte bowed out.

"Maybe I've been around Scorpion and Jason too much, but is there any chance the First Acolyte is involved?" Tutmoses asked. Cobra looked startled at the very idea.

"I have verified he is not," Osiris answered.

"Good," Cobra growled, glaring at Tutmoses.

"Nonsense," Osiris stated to Cobra. "Anyone could have a motive for helping Riddle, even me." He smiled at their shocked faces. "I swear, it wasn't I. What else was there that you wanted to talk

about, Cobra?"

"Dumbledore has refused to hire one of us or one of the Druids for the Defense teacher next year. He has hired a friend of his, a retired and crippled auror named Moody. With your permission, I and the Druids will send the ghost Binns on, and we'll see if that will encourage Dumbledore to hire one of us as a history instructor."

"I can just see you or Jason as a history teacher," Osiris teased.

"I would volunteer," Zara stated. They looked at him in surprise. The Median was probably the only member of the Brotherhood who was universally liked, as well as respected, by all the Brothers. "Remove Binns, and I will speak with Dumbledore. It is time I saw the far north."

"Let it be so," Osiris agreed. "You will spend time with Harry this summer?"

"I will. I think it best if he and his new consort spend some time alone on Jason's island first, however."

"I will speak with Harry and Hermione about it," Cobra agreed. "They leave school in the morning."

*

The five Weasleys sat in one compartment of the train, silent. Finally, Fred said, "Hell of a year."

"Two years," Ginny whispered.

"Five years," Percy growled, glaring at Fred and then George.

The twins glared back, and then the three oldest Weasleys laughed.

"Glad you lot are bloody happy," Ron whined.

"Take your pain potion," Percy commanded. Ron made a face, but did as he was told. Meanwhile, Percy frowned. "I'm going to be worried about you lot next year."

"No, you won't," Fred said.

"You won't have time," George added, before Percy exploded. "That job you're taking at the Ministry. . . ."

"I haven't taken it yet!" Percy protested.

"All you ever wanted to do was work in the Ministry!" Ginny protested.

"I know," Percy said. "But those people around Hogwarts and Hogsmeade -- the Druids and ones dressed like Druids. . . ."

"They aren't all Druids?" Ron demanded.

"Not unless they've been heavily recruiting in the Middle East," Percy retorted.

"Dad has said most of the Ministry is working so much better now that Fudge is gone," George

pointed out.

Fred jumped in, "We wouldn't want to work there. . . ."

"But you might be able to make a real difference there now," George concluded.

Percy nodded, but frowned at Ron and Ginny. "I'll still be worried."

The other four said nothing, but silently agreed.

*

Draco Malfoy, typically, had given his mother's pregnancy little thought. He had no idea how long such things took for witches, and as his family had said nothing to him, he had ignored it.

It therefore came as a shock when he was Portkeyed off the Platform and taken, not to Paraguay or to Malfoy Manor, but to a small cottage in what seemed to be the middle of nowhere.

When he turned to the cousin who had brought him there to protest, he was shocked when he was slapped, hard, before a sound could escape his lips.

"You are in disgrace," the cousin stated. "Your foolishness has cost us a huge fortune. Since you did not inquire, I hereby inform you that your mother gave birth to triplets last March -- two sons and a daughter. All three appeared in the Great Book." That meant they were magical.

"Your father has not decided which will be the Heir, but you no longer are." That shocked Draco more than the slap had. It was because of that shock that the cousin was able to fasten a collar around Draco's neck.

"If you take the collar off, it will kill you. If you leave this area, you will also die. The boundaries are clearly marked. You are of course allowed magic. A house elf will appear every morning to bring you food and to take away the dirty dishes from the day before. Leave any clothes you want cleaned near the dishes, and they will be returned the next morning. Injure the elf, or cause her to injure yourself, and, well, you had better be good at finding your own food in the woods here, and cooking it."

"I thought I'd see Pansy!"

"Parkinson is serving Our Lord. You'll see her on your wedding day."

"But. . . ."

"Silence! You may also use your broom, but do not go higher than tree level. In many ways, your life is in your hands, Draco. I would suggest you study hard. You dropped a few more rankings in your class." The cousin smiled. "Remember. You will have to work for your stipend from the Malfoy Trust once you leave Hogwarts, just like the rest of us." The cousin Portkeyed away, leaving Draco standing in front of the cottage, his mouth hanging open.

*

Hermione walked out of the small stone house, and her eyes went wide despite the bright sunlight. "Wow!"

"It is attractive, isn't it?" Jason said proudly.

"Dare I ask how long it's been yours?" Hermione asked.

Jason paused in thought. "That's difficult to say. There was a small group of fishermen who lived here when I was a regular wizard. They, and those on the nearby islands, were under my protection. Then, of course, I left to join the Brothers at the Temple. When I returned here, some three hundred years later, these islands were deserted."

"The so-called Greek Dark Ages, between the fall of the Mycenaeans and the start of pre-Classical Greece, correct?"

"Well, that's how you moderns might regard it," Jason said. "Living through such times . . . I hope you are both spared."

"I'm sorry," Hermione said, downcast.

Jason forced a smile through the bad memories. "None of that! The island is nearly one of your miles long, and you can see this little bit of rock gives you a nice overlook of the entire island. Harry can tell you that it is shaped a bit like an oblong shield. It is just over a third of one your miles wide here. The house is fairly modern." He smiled. "Well, it has plumbing. The water is magically freshened, otherwise it would be brackish. The food stored here is magically preserved, and Harry here is good with a fishing net."

Harry nearly blushed.

"No one not allowed on the island can come here. The Muggles see this as a dangerous shallow rocky shoal, and anyone magical whom I have not keyed into the wards would see the same." He pulled out a small hand bell. "If anyone except myself comes, this bell will find you and ring. Otherwise, I won't be here for exactly seven days."

Hermione smiled nervously.

"No need to be nervous," Jason said, smiling at Hermione and then turning his head to wink at Harry. "There are no magical restrictions here. If you need anything, Harry knows how to call his elf. Don't lose yourself in homework or research. You'll be working with some of the greatest magical minds in history, and we'll solve your problem one way or another."

"Thank you, Jason," Hermione said. "Cobra took most of my books, and told me I am to get as much sun and exercise as I can."

"Good," Jason answered. He looked at Harry, and the two clasped forearms. "Be well, my son." And with that, Jason took his leave.

"I'll never get used to that," Harry said after Jason left.

"What?"

"I really do think some of them think of me as, well. . . ."

Hermione smiled, "You're surprised they think of you paternally? Or avuncularly?"

That threw Harry. "Av-what?"

"Like they're your uncles," Hermione explained.

"Exactly. Well," Harry considered, "sort of a mix of the two." He smiled. "Let me show you the island."

Chapter XX

Harry and Hermione spent a very happy week under the Mediterranean sun. Whatever shyness they still had with each other disappeared as they frolicked in the surf, and, once Hermione discovered some gillyweed, under the surf as well.

The last night of their stay, as they lay on a large blanket, staring at the stars after having made love, Harry asked, "What are you thinking? You look. . . ." He searched for the right word.

"Introspective?"

"Yeah, that sums it up," Harry agreed.

"I haven't thought much about it this week, but I was thinking about what would happen if we find a way to make Horcruxes for me . . . as well as what will happen if we don't."

Harry said nothing, knowing that Hermione could hardly help but think of the possible death sentence she was under.

After a few moments of silence, Hermione asked, "If you're fairly sure you going to take them up on their offer at some point, would you like an island like this?"

"It might be nice, but I don't know if magic could change all the records of an island this size or not," Harry pointed out. "Especially in any well-traveled area. I mean, charts and computer records might make it more difficult than it was in Jason's day."

"There is magic which would make it impossible for outsiders to find, but you're right," Hermione agreed. "And other areas with this nice a climate, in the Caribbean, for example, are just as well-traveled, not to mention they have tropical storms. That would likely be true in the Pacific as well." She paused, and said, "I suppose you, and some of the Brothers, could put up strong enough weather wards for wind. I'm not sure about any storm surges."

Harry finally picked up on the strong hints. "I'll ask."

After a few more minutes, Hermione said, "I guess there are four major possibilities."

"Four?"

"Well, besides making Horcruxes, becoming a vampire, or, well, dying from the curse, I could, well either of us could get killed before then," Hermione pointed out.

"True," Harry was forced to agree.

"Tutmoses had me talk to a vampire in April," Hermione said quietly.

"I know," Harry said. "I didn't want to say anything."

"Contrary to some stories, most vampires prefer tropical climates, although a number migrate to the higher latitudes during winter, to take advantage of the long nights."

"I know," Harry said, holding Hermione tightly. She didn't resist, but cried out her fear, until she

fell asleep in Harry's arms.

*

"I don't like it," Jason growled.

"Neither do I, but it seems to be a reasonable request," Tutmoses pointed out.

"I never thought Agathon would be very interested in Quidditch," Scorpion retorted.

"Oh, he's not interested in the Quidditch in the slightest, but, assuming he has no other motive, he is interested in the crowd," Zara said simply. "Most of the tens of thousands are there for an outing, to see bits of the greater magical world and to have fun. These events are the greatest congregations of magical people there are, remember, and well worth seeing even if you have no interest in the sport. Another, much smaller segment, are the Quidditch fanatics. There will be a larger group there to sell to the crowds, and another group of more-or-less professional gamblers. Still, there will be many who will be there to see and be seen. They are Agathon's natural prey, the pretty faces and taut bodies, and he will want to revel in them."

"That's not what he told me, but it is generally what he meant," Tutmoses said drily. "If he had pretended any interest in the game, I would have said no out of hand."

"Is it just him?" Scorpion asked.

"Just him."

The Brothers looked at each other, and each made nearly the same grimace, which amused them. Finally Jason said, "If he touches Harry, or his friends, I'll hurt him."

"And then I will remove his arms, legs, and tongue," Scorpion stated. "We'll see how he likes a thousand years like that."

"I'll tell him, if he comes within fifty feet of Harry, or hurts him or his in any way, he becomes your plaything for a hundred years," Tutmoses told Scorpion. "He looked at Jason. "Then I'll give what ever is left to you."

The other Brothers nodded, satisfied.

*

Hermione was totally composed the next morning, and over the next seven weeks she applied herself with great diligence to learn the magical theory which would enable her to deal with the Horcrux magic the following year. During the school year, she would meet with various members of the Brotherhood every Sunday to brain-storm.

She was also pleased to learn that Brother Zara and one of the friendlier Druids would be splitting the history position. Both Dumbledore and the Board of Governors had objected, but when the pair had offered to serve with no pay on five year contracts, the Board had overruled the Headmaster and hired them.

Harry spent those same seven weeks fine-tuning his physical and magical combat skills. The couple would then spend two weeks in London, staying with Sirius, which would also allow Hermione to

visit with her parents and both teens to do their shopping.

The Quidditch World Cup was being held in Britain at the end of August. Harry was of course very interested in the event, although the event itself left Hermione rather indifferent -- she did have some interest in meeting mages from around the world. While they could have gone just for the match, they would be at the site for two weeks, so they could meet the magical world, or at least a fair representation of it.

Harry was determined to have his friends nearby. While he and Hermione had received invitations to numerous private boxes, Harry had convinced Jason to buy him a nice box. Harry was disappointed to learn that the Weasleys would be in the Ministers' Box, but this allowed him to invite more students outside of Gryffindor.

While Jason could only arrange three tent sites, that hardly mattered. One tent held the Brothers and Druids who were attending, in part to keep an eye on Harry, who would be exposed in such a setting. To Harry's surprise, they would all be wearing fairly rather standard wizarding robes, as they tried to blend in. To neither Harry nor Hermione's surprise, nearly all of them were either outright Quidditch fans, or were drawn to any sort of competition.

Even though it was identical on the outside, the middle tent was much smaller on the inside. Harry and Hermione had the master suite, and there were five smaller bed-and-bath units. Jason and Sirius each occupied one, as did Luna and her father. The fifth guest was a cousin of Sirius, a Metamorphmagus who claimed her only name was Tonks. She was a probationary auror, and would have been present at the scene in any case. A little string pulling had gotten her the assignment to patrol this patch of the camp ground, plus keeping a more official eye on Harry.

While the Brothers and Druids could supply more than enough magical muscle in case of trouble, Tonks could add the added sanctions of arrest, in case the trouble did not warrant the others fully neutralizing the troublemakers.

The final tent was nearly a mansion inside. Jason had explained that it allowed magical internal expansion -- you could rent pre-fab add-on bed-and-bath units and easily add them on as needed. Dean and Neville shared one (Seamus was staying with his family in their tent in the area reserved for the Irish), as did the Patil twins and Lavender Brown. The other students in rooms were: Susan Bones and Hannah Abbott; Angelina Johnson and Alicia Spinnet; Vicky Frobisher and Katie Bell; Ernie Macmillan and Justin Finch-Fletchley; Tracey Davis and Daphne Greengrass; Anthony Goldstein and Terry Boot -- although the students would arrive over a three day period. The Patils, Mrs. Abbott, and the Davises were also there to act as chaperones.

None of the students kept early hours, other than Harry and Hermione. They were up early every morning to train. The rest of the day, they and the other students watched the camp grounds go from just over a third full to finally over-flowing. The group met mages from all over the world, and for lunch they ate widely at the various concessions which were set up outside the view of the few local Muggles.

It was Luna who first noticed that most of the North Americans they met seemed to be able to pick out the Druids who were always in Harry's vicinity. It was only then that she noted a common appearance in part of the Druids' auras, a trait she and Hermione concluded came from their common magical training. While the vast number of the Druids' people led lives separate from those of the average magical North American, it turned out that the Druids always had at least two positions at every American school of magic which was not affiliated with their faith, and a majority of the positions at the schools which were affiliated to them.

Once the trio had reached that point, Harry quickly learned to sense the Druids' common magic. Hermione was a bit distressed that she was unable to. In a discussion some of the students at the Salem Witches' Institute, however, Hermione learned that there was a simple charm which could make her more sensitive to certain elements magical signatures. She learned the charm, but did not apply it -- there seemed to be a limit of six which a person could carry, and she thought she might need that ability in the future.

Under the outside arches of the temporary stadium, numerous entrepreneurs had set up shops, which would be there until the evening before the game. There were numerous food shops, some providing food brought in via Muggle Britain, others bringing in various types of preserved foods via special Portkeys. After all, a crowd the size of this one needed a great deal of food. (There was also a group of Ministry elves, called the 'Honey Crew,' which went around collecting garbage and emptying sewage, but nearly everyone managed to avoid noticing them.)

There were numerous souvenir stands, of course, but there were also numerous curio stalls, clothing stands, potion sellers, etc. Sirius, in fact, had been rather embarrassed when Tonks had caught him buying pornographic penseive vials from one stall. Of greater interest to Hermione, the Ravenclaws, and a few others were the various book sellers and traders. Harry was more interested in some of the curio shops.

Every afternoon and evening, there were live concerts in the stadium itself (popular or folk music from around the world in the afternoons, chamber music in the evenings). At the same time, there were quite a number of impromptu musical performances around the campgrounds every night, which basically only died off around midnight, by strict order of the Ministry (which provoked a great deal of grumbling, and vows that this would be the last time the Cup would be held in an overcrowded place like Britain).

For all the younger mages, British and other, this was a very different look at the magical world. While there were wizarding villages, and even a few towns, around the world, there were really no wizarding cities -- the largest town, the capital of magical North America -- only had a permanent population of perhaps 20,000, swelling to 30,000 during the times when the busiest legislative sessions coincided with a Quidditch or Quodpot championship game.

Those on the outskirts of the growing crowd had to maintain appearances for the Muggle caretaker and his family, and any other Muggles who might stray past before the final, most powerful (and temporary) wards went up. But the further anyone went into the crowd, the less anyone was paying attention to 'passing' for Muggle.

"It's almost as if you can breath the magic," Luna said contentedly on the seventh night. She and Harry were sitting outside their tent with Tonks and Jason, which Hermione was busy sorting through the sixty-three volumes she had acquired that day, and the two dozen Harry had purchased for himself and the three dozen he had bought for her.

When Harry nodded, which made Tonks give them both a puzzled look, Jason spoke up. "In a sense, you two are both magical sponges. It's not totally uncommon, maybe one out of a hundred to a hundred and twenty of us have the ability. Your senses become a tad sharper, your mind a trifle more alert in the presence of a great deal of magic. Your own magic become just a bit more powerful --all these effects are temporary, of course."

He smiled at Luna. "You're even more affected, because you have empathetic gifts." He suddenly grinned more broadly. "Anyone with any prophetic gifts are banned, to make certain that they don't

start making game predictions ahead of times. So far, three new seers have had their first prophecies -- fortunately not about the game." He looked at Harry. "And nothing we need concern ourselves over."

Harry merely nodded, and Tonks excused herself. She had a late-night party to go to.

"So," Jason asked teasingly, "are you or Hermione going to tell our Druid friends you can now pick them out of a crowd?"

"They don't know?" Harry asked, surprised.

"I don't know," Jason confessed. "Since that charm you learned yesterday seems to have permeated the general magical culture of North America, one would think the Druids would know. But, to tell the truth, we didn't know about it."

"Do we want to know how you found out?" Harry asked slyly.

"Actually, you probably would, but I won't tell you," Jason teased back.

"You do know, don't you, that your group has its own set of magical signatures?" Luna asked.

"Really?" Jason was obviously surprised.

Luna nodded. "I can pick out your group more easily than I can the Druids." She frowned.

"Actually, there was another man I spotted last evening with the same magic, but he stayed well-away from us. Is he one of you, or merely like you, if you know who I mean?"

Jason grimaced. "Agathon is one of us, alas. I must say, he does not approve of our working with Harry, and had been warned to stay well-away from Europe. However, he asked permission to attend. He is not only a magical sponge, but he's also a hedonist, asensualist, and an Epicurean in the modern sense, if you know what I mean."

Luna thought about that for a moment, and then said, "I believe so." She glanced around, and then whispered, "So, he's another immortal? I had wondered."

Jason was startled, but he immediately saw Harry was as well. Jason locked eyes with Luna, but quickly looked away.

"That was rude," Luna mildly scolded.

Jason shook his head, trying to clear the headache looking briefly into Luna's mind had caused.

"How did you. . . ." Harry started.

"As I know most things," Luna said simply. "Intuition for insights, and then applied logic. Once a series of results are obvious, it is merely a matter of testing them and seeing what remains possible."

"Like those snorkicks. . . ."

"The Crumple-Horned Snorkack," Luna corrected gently. "At the moment, I have no proof for their non-existence. Until I do, their existence is at least equally likely." She looked back at Jason. "Are you Jason?"

"He was my maternal grandfather," Jason answered. Seeing Luna's next question, he continued, "Medea did not kill one of her daughters, the only magical one. My mother."

"So, will you do whatever it is that you have to do to become immortal with Hermione?" Luna asked Harry.

"No," Harry said. "For some reason, the ceremony doesn't work for women. Hermione will be studying it to see if she can see why. In any case, if I do it, I need to be around twenty-five. They are willing to let Hermione try it earlier than they normally would if they think it might work."

Luna thought for a moment, and then asked, "Is this to do with Voldemort splitting his soul into that diary that possessed Ginny?"

"Yes," Harry said before Jason could stop him.

"That bit of soul . . . it was split off in some sort of ceremony involving death, if what little I've learned about Tom Riddle is accurate," Luna mused. "Yes," Luna said, looking at them, "I can see that's true. Perhaps you should take into consideration that a woman's magic does not traditionally express itself by conquest, and the taking of life is in some ways the ultimate conquest. We give life, not take it. Perhaps you should consider the implications of creating life, especially as the curse she is under is from Hera -- a goddess of marriage and childbirth."

"But Hermione can't have children," Harry pointed out sadly.

"True, and that would have been easiest thread to follow. Still, there should be other options." Luna stood. "Good night."

"Damn," Jason said, confused.

*

The students had all enjoyed the game, although some, especially the Quidditch players, had enjoyed more than some of the others, like Hermione. She was really only interested in watching Quidditch when Harry was playing.

The game had not been quite as lop-sided as many punters had predicted. Still, nearly everyone had predicted that if the game went too long, Ireland would beat Bulgaria, which is what had happened. Young Quidditch sensation Viktor Krum had caught the snitch only when the game was already out of reach -- and when it was clear that his team would not catch up.

The teens had been warned to stay close to the tents, as the Irish were drinking and celebrating, while the Bulgarians were drowning their sorrows. At first, the screams were indistinguishable from the other loud noises. It was Luna who had abruptly stood up and pointed.

When the others stood, they saw that some of the tents on the perimeter were going up in flames. Harry ducked into his tent and shouted for Jason, while Hermione aroused the guard tent.

The Brothers and Druids sent the students in their tents, despite their protests. Only Harry was held back by Jason. With his back to his tent, Harry was safe from that direction, and Jason and Sirius were flanking him. The Brothers and Druids quickly split up, a third remaining to guard Harry, the other two thirds preparing to fan out with Tonks to see what they could do to help.

"Look!" Sirius exclaimed, pointing up.

"Shite," Tonks muttered.

"What is it?" Harry asked as the Druids and Brothers not guarding the tent sprinted off with Tonks in tow.

"The Dark Mark," Sirius answered. "Voldemort's Mark. He's telling the world he's back.

*

The Death Eaters were gone long before any of the Aurors had made it over to their location, let alone any of the Brothers or Druids. Two dozen tents had been heavily damaged, and over fifty more had suffered some damage. Sixty wizards and witches had been hurt, some badly, although all would recover.

Unmentioned in the reports were the deaths of the Muggle family which operated the camping area.

Everyone at the site was packing by the very early dawn the next morning, even though most of the visitors would have to unpack --it would take a week to arrange enough Portkeys for them to leave. The Brotherhood and Druids could arrange their own transport, of course, and would take care of Portkeying Harry's guests, although Luna's father would be returning that afternoon to cover the evacuation. Luna would be coming with Harry and Hermione.

So, when a stone-faced Cobra and a grim-faced Scorpion appeared alittle after 6:30 that morning, the tents were already packed. "What's happened?" Jason muttered, so as not to attract attention.

Cobra brought Jason, Harry, and Sirius aside. "The news will hit the Wizarding Wireless at seven o'clock, but we need to get you out of here now," Scorpion told Harry.

"What has happened?" Jason again demanded.

"Last night was a diversion," Cobra answered. "At midnight, as the Auror corps was cleaning things up here, looking for suspects, and tracking down suspected Death Eaters, Voldemort freed his followers who were in Azkaban. According to the one survivor, well at least until she died an hour ago, Voldemort led the assault himself -- he is back in humanoid form. From the changes she described, he either had or now has one more Horcrux, just as we feared. The prisoners who refused to join him were killed or Kissed, and the Dementors left with Voldemort as well."

"We have allowed the initiative to drop from our grasp," Jason said in disgust.

"We have," Cobra agreed. "If we can not find a good lead, then he will retain that initiative for now as well."

Chapter XXI

Igor Karkaroff was a very frightened man as he went down to the Headmaster's Dining Room to greet his staff. The news from the World Cup had frightened him, but even worse, he had already been approached by two of the escapees from Azkaban, who would have dearly loved to torture him to death.

They had given him a choice -- cooperate and work his way back into the Death Eaters, or die horribly.

Karkaroff had given in. He was handed an enchanted journal. His was to be a watching brief -- when he arrived at Hogwarts, he would report everything of interest, especially about Severus Snape and of course Harry Potter. If given orders, he would carry them out. Those orders could come from the Dark Lord himself, or from an agent who was also watching Hogwarts.

Karkaroff knew nothing else, except that he should have somehow run much further away.

A few time zones away, Draco Malfoy was made to empty his trunk and repack it in front of his cousin. No one wanted a repeat of the previous year.

The cousin wondered at Draco's demeanor. The teen was too quiet. 'I wonder if the little shite has learned something this summer, or if his bride gave him a difficult time last night?'

In truth, Draco's cowed demeanor was caused by Pansy, but not in any way the cousin could have guessed at.

As soon as they had been alone in the cottage after their brief marriage ceremony, Pansy had dropped to her knees and begged Draco to kill her. She was under numerous oaths, and could reveal very little, but what little she could tell Draco of her life as the Dark Lord's handmaiden and the bum-girl of any Death-Eater passing through, was enough to frighten and enrage him.

Still, Draco 'did his duty', despite Pansy's begging. Neither realized that this would merely open up another way for Pansy to be abused.

Reading between the lines of Pansy's often incoherent speech (made so mostly by the oaths she was under), Draco knew that there was once again a plot against Harry Bloody Potter. He was determined to root it out, and then help it along, gaining credit for himself in the process.

The idea that he might have more to gain by revealing what little he knew to Potter or Dumbledore never entered Draco's mind. Neither did the concept that if he did too much snooping, he might interfere with the plot, which would be a disaster for him, especially if the plot therefore failed.

*

"But you promised!" Lucius half whimpered and half pleaded.

"And we will keep our promise," Agathon said with a shrug.

"Make it stop!"

Agathon noted that the Dark Mark on Lucius' forearm was throbbing with Dark magic. "First of all,

you should have called us in sooner. Second, how would you like to not only clear the Malfoy name but have a chance at real political power?"

Lucius looked at Agathon through the pain with hope.

"I can put you under a set of spells. The Dark Lord would not be able to read that you tried to betray him, and will continue to betray him. They will even prevent the Cruciatus Curse from fully affecting you. You will help bring him down, and will reap the political rewards." Agathon smiled. "Or do you think he can still conquer the world?"

"No," Lucius admitted. He seemed torn.

"We will, of course replace the money your son lost you," Agathon said off-hand.

"And this?" Lucius moaned, referring to the Dark Mark.

"If I eliminate the pain, Voldemort will know you are lost to him. However. . . ." Agathon pulled out a wand, and with a wave lessened the pain by more than half. "That is permanent, by the way, and Voldemort will never know, unless you tell him."

Lucius Malfoy was hungry for power, and more greedy for wealth more than he was afraid of failure. "You'll protect Narcissa and the children?"

"If she and they stay here," Agathon agreed. "Your other son is on the front lines."

With just a slight pang, Lucius said, "Then I agree."

*

Hermione had been excited at Luna's insight. The Brotherhood shared with her their studies on souls and ensoulment, which would, along with her other extra studies, keep her busy for the school year.

Harry was happy that Hermione now had some hope, and also happy that he, Hermione, and Luna were mostly left alone on the train ride, although numerous people stopped in to say hello. Draco, fortunately, was not one of them. Ginny was with her Ravenclaw friends, and had contented herself with making eyes at Harry when she thought no one was watching. The twins were hoping to go into the mail-order joke and gag business, and Ron was acting as their sales rep, walking the train with various prank candies for sale, until he reached Harry, who bought him out. Harry was curious if he could catch Sirius or the Brothers with any of the Wheezes. Still, it was a quiet train ride.

Harry and Hermione were about the only two students not surprised at the appointment of Alastor 'Mad-Eye' Moody as the Defense Professor. Nearly as many students had been surprised at the announcement of the Triwizard Tournament.

Back in the common room, many of the Gryffindors were amazed at Harry's indifference about the Tournament. "Okay," Harry retorted, "how many of you had ever even heard of this thing. I know I hadn't."

About a fifth of the hands went up, including Hermione and Luna's. "The history buffs, and those who are most interested in traditions" Harry pointed out. "So much for eternal glory and all that muck. Just a little footnote in the history books."

"Couldn't the same be said of you and Quidditch?" a seventh year demanded.

"If I played the game just to get my name on the trophy, yes," Harry agreed. "I don't. The Quidditch Cup doesn't mean much to me. Playing and winning does, not the record books."

The murmurings seemed to indicate understanding, although not total agreement, so Harry went on. "Second, yes, a thousand Galleons in a lot of money . . . for a student. What's the total tuition and fees here for a year? Eight hundred and ten Galleons, plus extra for some courses? Add in the cost of two sets of robes and new books, and that's over nine hundred. You're risking your life for a year free at Hogwarts, plus lots of spending money."

"So, if the age line wasn't there, you wouldn't enter?" Fred demanded.

"Hell n . . . ow!"

Language," Hermione corrected.

"Fine," Harry said, rubbing his upper arm where Hermione had elbowed him. "No. I have no interest in participating." He glared at all of them, making a few shiver. "And if anyone tries to enter me as a joke, they'll regret it."

*

"Imperio!"

Harry didn't move for a second, then cocked his head to the left, and smiled.

"Imperio!"

"I've shown the Imperius Curse doesn't affect me," Harry said coldly. "Please don't do it again."

"/Imperio/!!"

Harry scowled, and Moody started to sweat as the tip of his wand slowly moved from Harry's chest to Moody's temple. "I asked nicely," Harry commented.

It was supposed to be impossible to cast an Unforgivable without speaking it emphatically, and infusing your negative emotions into the curse as well. Potter had either done so, or, equally impossible, Potter had reversed the curse.

'Moody' felt his jaw trying to move, and knew, if he spoke, it would be the Killing Curse. The Dark Lord might have inspired deeper fear, but this was an entirely new type of fear.

"Harry," Hermione said quietly. The pressure on 'Moody's' mind eased off. She had shaken off the curse with a bit of effort earlier, but her face was hard. "Harry has been trained to take out anyone who attacks him, especially those who use illegal curses. Surely the Headmaster informed you?"

"Might have," Moody panted. "Didn't really believe it."

"Do you now?" Harry asked.

Moody nodded, and said, "Class dismissed."

"Come on, Nev," Harry said to the still shaken Neville.

Barty Crouch Jr. took a swig of his Polyjuice potion, wishing it was something stronger.

He wondered if Potter would need any help winning the tournament after all.

*

The weeks passed without incident. Hermione was deeply involved in her studies, Harry equally involved with his training. They encouraged each other in their work, and generally enjoyed themselves. They enjoyed coaching Luna and Neville, and made certain they spent some time in the regular common room each night. The Gryffindors were slightly louder than usual, in part because of the boasting of those who would be eligible to try for the Triwizard -- each trying to claim they would be the one chosen for Hogwarts. The common room was also noisier because the Weasley twins, hoping to some day open their own joke and prank shop, were keeping things lively.

The other three common rooms were quieter than usual. The Hufflepuffs were quieter as they debated amongst themselves who should be the one Hufflepuff to enter. Only one would be the best, showing the rest of the school what it meant to be Hufflepuff, what it meant to be a Hogwarts student.

The events at the Cup and the escape from Azkaban had evened out the balance of power in Slytherin. If any of the pro-Voldemort students had had the guts to take the lead, they might have again dominated the House.

None dared. The Druids (and the Brothers, still in Druid habits) still patrolled the grounds and around the common rooms. Parkinson was long gone. Harry Potter had demonstrated that a second of the Unforgivables did not work against him.

The pro-Voldemort students were keeping their eyes open, their mouths shut, and their owls busy.

The Ravenclaw common room was nearly always quiet. Making enough noise to disturb anyone's studies was swiftly dealt with. However, one group within Ravenclaw, the Ravenclaw Coven, spread throughout the castle when they weren't studying, watching everything. Few of them knew, however, where their reports were going.

*

As the great carriage from Beauxbatons moved out of the way, but before the Durmstrang ship arrived, Albus Dumbledore surveyed the crowd of students and staff (the Druids and Brothers were present, but hidden along the far shore and the periphery of the crowd). The Headmaster was impressed at how mixed the students were. 'I've never seen the students so mixed across Houses,' Dumbledore admitted. Looking closely, he could see some exceptions, of course. The most obvious was a knot of some seventeen around Draco Malfoy-- but even that group was actually fourteen Slytherins and three Ravenclaws. There was also a group circling around some of the older Ravenclaw witches, but again, there were a few Slytherins and Hufflepuffs near them -- all male, of course.

Dumbledore slightly smiled under his beard as the mast of the Durmstrang ship broke the surface of the lake and the students nearly all went 'Oooo!', or variations on that sound. He was particularly

pleased to see that Harry and Hermione were acting their age, and were as impressed as anyone.

Dumbledore noted with interest that Harry, unlike the other males in close proximity, seemed unaffected by the quarter-veela from Beauxbatons. As he went through his spiel about the Goblet of Fire later that evening, Dumbledore split his attention between the tables -- other than the Hufflepuffs. They had decided on Cedric Diggory as their candidate, hoping that if only one 'Puff entered, he would have a better chance than candidates from other Houses that were competing amongst each other. An interesting strategy, as well as a typical Hufflepuff response.

A few of the underage sixth year students looked intent on trying to break his announced age line. That should prove interesting, especially as it looked like the Weasley twins were interested. They might come up with a good idea.

Dumbledore was especially happy that Harry in no way looked interested in breaking his announced intentions NOT to participate. Dumbledore's goal here was to produce a Hogwarts champion who would be able to draw the students together, a leader for a year or so, who would then leave school -- and leave a more united Hogwarts for Harry to lead in his final two years if necessary, and perhaps after then as well.

Afterwards, Dumbledore went to sleep early, wondering who might be caught by his age line. The few students he would have worried about tampering with the Goblet were all underage, and therefore, no one should be able to get to it.

*

When the Goblet spat out Cedric's name, Dumbledore was inwardly very pleased. Cedric was just the solid but somewhat charismatic teen he had hoped would be the Hogwarts champion, and there was a slim chance that a Hufflepuff might get all the Houses behind him. Nobody was really surprised that Viktor Krum was the Durmstrang champion, but Dumbledore admitted to himself that he was a bit surprised that the Delacour part-veela was Beauxbatons'.

It was then that the Goblet released an unexpected fourth name. 'No,' Dumbledore said to himself. 'It can't be.'

Still, although shocked by having a fourth name, he was not surprised to see the name. "Harry Potter!"

The murmuring starting.

"Harry Potter!"

Harry stood up. "What? I didn't put my name in the Goblet!"

"None the less, you seem to be entered."

"No! I did not put my name in!"

Barty Crouch came over and waved his wand over the burnt piece of paper, while the crowd's mutterings got louder.

"I swear on my magic, I did not enter my name, or ask anyone to enter me!" Harry declared.

That silenced the crowd. Barty Crouch looked up. "None the less, whomever entered your name meant for you to enter. You are bound to compete."

"Can't something be done?" Harry demanded.

"No," Crouch declared.

"Can't you declare the contest a draw and redraw. . . ?"

"No," Crouch stated. "There must be a winner, or the contestants must either be dead or otherwise unable to compete."

"Sounds good so far," Draco muttered a bit too loudly.

"Two points from Slytherin," Dumbledore snapped. He looked back at Harry and saw he, Hermione, and Luna were whispering. "Mister Potter! Mister Potter!!"

Harry stood straight. "I'll participate under protest," he said. "And if, by some chance I win, who ever comes in second should get the prizes." With that, Harry went to join the other champions, his head held high.

*

"Did one of you do this?" Harry demanded hotly.

The Brothers and Druids all denied entering him. "And we all feel . . . well, rather stupid," Jason admitted.

"We were blinded by the fact that you didn't intend to enter," one of the Druids admitted.

"We should have seen this as an avenue to attack you," Scorpion agreed.

"You handled yourself well, Harry," Zara told him, placing a hand on his shoulder.

"We all had to promise not to help you," Scorpion complained.

"But we made certain to state it that way," Cobra added. "We will not help you win at your tasks."

"Nothing to say that we can't give Hermione some suggestions," another Druid said with a smile.

"Thanks," Harry said sincerely. "It would be difficult to get through this without you."

*

The population of Hogwarts was surprised the next morning when the Gryffindors entered for breakfast en masse.

"What are you pulling, Potter?" Draco Malfoy demanded before anyone else could.

"You can read, can't you, Malfoy?" Harry retorted. He tossed Draco a metal disk, which said, *SUPPORT CEDRIC DIGGORY, THE HOGWARTS CHAMPION*. "I may be competing, but I am not the Hogwarts champion."

"Do I want to know where you got the photo of Diggory?" Draco sneered.

"I have photos of just about everyone at Hogwarts!" Colin Creevy said brightly. Nearly all the Gryffindors, and a third of the rest of the Hogwarts students, rolled their eyes.

"Does that answer your question?" Harry asked.

"Yes," Draco had to admit, putting the pin on, "I have to say it does."

Harry was competing, albeit against his will. This made the Gryffindors happy. Harry was deferring to Cedric, which made the Hufflepuffs willing to tolerate Harry's competing. Most of the Ravenclaws and Slytherins who were choosing to root for one of the two were going for Cedric as well. Still, except for those few who already disliked Harry, there seemed to be no hostility towards him on this score, and even Malfoy was mostly keeping quiet. Harry found that he had more than enough support from his friends that he didn't mind half the school supporting Cedric and perhaps a third supporting him (with the rest being more or less neutral).

The question was, what would be the first task?

*

"Dragons! Did any of you know we'd be facing bloody dragons!"

"Of course we did," Jason answered for the group.

"Remember," Zara reminded Harry, "you are not expected to FIGHT a dragon."

"Perhaps you ought to study," Cobra suggested. "Hermione might help you." With that, the Brothers left the small office they had taken over a few weeks before. They might give Harry some hints, but as they had said, they had had to promise not to directly help.

"Come on," Hermione said, leading Harry over to a set of book shelves. "These have all sorts of books on dragons."

By the next evening, Hermione had worked out all the reasons by females with eggs had been brought. The odds on favorite was that they would be guarding something, most likely egg-shaped, which the champions would have to retrieve. These of course, should be resistant to any summoning spells, "Although you might as well try it," Hermione had concluded. "Is there anything in Cobra's books on Parsel-magic?"

"Not really," Harry grumbled. "I can communicate with dragons with a combination of spells and Parseltongue, but they tend not to talk back. That's especially true of mothers brooding on nests, and especially true of two of the species. . . ."

"The Horntail and the Fireball?"

"No," Harry said with a twisted smile. "The Short-Snout and Fireball. Horntails tend to be offended when talked to, and attack Speakers. And Welsh Greens only like being talked to by wizards who think in Welsh." Harry frowned in puzzlement. "How they know that when the last known Parselmouth who successfully had a conversation with them was Merlin, I don't know. I mean, even if I spoke Welsh, it wouldn't be Merlin's Old Welsh. Maybe the dragon just liked him."

"Well, you can try it," Hermione said doubtfully. "Especially if you go first, before they all get upset."

"If I go first and don't get the Horntail," Harry agreed. "My name was the fourth name out. I don't know if that means I choose adragon last, go last, or both."

"They won't leave their eggs, well, not more than a few yards,"Hermione pointed. "Could you summon your broom and . . . no, that's pretty dangerous."

"Dragons are pretty dangerous," Harry pointed out. "We might have to go with the least dangerous idea, as opposed to something safe."

"True," Hermione had to agree.

Chapter XXII

It was time for the champions to choose their dragon. All four of the teens had been nervous well-before they had been officially told about them. Harry had thought the other schools' heads would have told their champions, and so Harry had clued in Cedric.

Harry relaxed slightly as the others chose. He almost smiled as he drew out the last dragon -- the Welsh Green. There was no such thing as a safe dragon, but the Welsh Green was the least dangerous of the four. It also meant he would go second. He felt just a little sorry for the Beauxbatons champion, Fleur, who would be going last and facing the most dangerous of the four beasts.

Cedric went first, and time started to play tricks on Harry. It seemed as if it was both his turn in an instant, and that it took hours, although Hermione would later tell Harry it was less than twenty-five minutes between the time Cedric would have left the tent and when Harry's name was called.

The crowd was screaming so much that the noise was almost a physical assault. The Welsh Green was upset and roaring. Harry almost smiled as his silent 'accio' failed to budge the golden egg-- he could have screamed it and no one would have heard.

Harry's Parseltongue-dragonspeak spell at least drew the dragon's attention, which in turn drew the crowd's.

The dragon reared back, "**A Speaker?**"

Harry bowed, and slowly approached.

"Do not approach, Little Speaker," the dragon warned.

"I will try not to disturb your eggs," Harry replied, sidling a few steps closer. **"There is an imitation egg in your nest,"** Harry pointed out. **"If I remove it, you and your eggs will be taken back where you and they belong, undamaged."**

The dragon looked at the eggs, and snorted smoke. **"The false egg is not gold, but it is pretty like gold. Gold good."**

"I can make your eggs look pretty like the false egg, without hurting them," Harry offered. **"As a gift, if you would like it, in return for the false egg."**

"Show me!" the dragon demanded.

Harry was glad that turning most objects different colors was easy. He suddenly hoped that dragon eggs were not overly resistant to this type of magic. With a wave of his wand, one of the dragon eggs looked like gold.

"You will do the others?"

"I so vow," Harry promised.

The dragon hesitated, but then bent over and nudged the false egg out of the nest, and Harry quickly turned the other eggs gold. Harry bowed and thanked the dragon both before and after picking the

egg up. Only then did the dragon handlers come and put the dragon to sleep.

All the judges except Karkaroff gave Harry 10s, while Karkaroff gave him a 9. Harry was well-satisfied. Although he had not had to exert himself physically, he was still drained from the stress. He was happy to lie in the tent until Hermione came for him after the other two faced their dragons.

*

"An awful shame about Delacour," Hermione commented to Jason and Zara as Harry half-slept in her lap. The quartet was in Zara's suite of rooms in the castle, discussing the First Task.

Zara and Jason exchanged a brief look. Both knew better than to comment too much about a woman pretending to feel sorry for a woman with veela blood. "In what way?" Zara ventured.

"Well, those claw marks to her face will be horribly disfiguring," Hermione pointed out with a tinge of satisfaction.

"No, she has bred true to her veela ancestry," Jason replied. Seeing Hermione's puzzlement, he explained. "Her magic will not allow her to be disfigured. It will, however, weaken her physical health. She will likely lose a few years of her life expectancy."

Hermione winced at that. "And what about that?" she asked, gesturing towards the golden egg with her chin, mostly to change the subject.

"You know we can't tell you anything outright," Zara pointed out.

"We listened to it screeching in the common room before we came here," Hermione informed them. "Harry told me on the way here that it sounded a bit like the Mermish he heard on . . . well. . . ." She suddenly realized that she might be giving away Jason's secret.

"Zara knows of my island, although not how to find it," Jason told her. "And yes, Harry heard me talking with a merman in his first summer there."

"What do you think of the idea?" Zara asked.

"I haven't had time to research anything," Hermione retorted. "Still, Harry's ideas are often good ones. How would we translate it?"

"Maybe you should listen to it first in its proper environment," Zara suggested.

"True," Hermione agreed, but then frowned. "Where? We only have showers."

"I have a bath," Zara pointed out.

Hermione looked down on the now-snoring Harry. "I'll tell him when he's awake," she said softly.

*

Harry was in the early lead, well ahead of Krum and Cedric (who was just behind Krum), while Fleur was a distant fourth. Most people assumed, therefore, that however Harry was feeling, he should have few worries. When Harry heard the song underwater, however, he went straight to the Headmaster.

"I do not know what perturbs you," the Headmaster complained when Harry stopped ranting.

"Fine," Harry growled, "tell me this. Are you planning on taking a what from me, or a who?"

"I cannot divulge. . . ." Dumbledore swallowed nervously, as he could feel the power radiating from Harry. Fawkes gave a squawk, but rather than singing to calm Harry's nerves, the bird disappeared in a puff of fiery smoke.

"It sounds as if, should you take a who rather than a what, they would be in danger, if they are not recovered in a hour," Harry pointed out. "Hermione had better not so much as get a scratch." He strode from the office.

"Perhaps you should reconsider the hostages," one of the headmistress portraits suggested.

"Nonsense," Dumbledore snorted. "Mrs. Granger-Potter will be perfectly safe."

"Yes, because the Dark Lord does not at least one agent running around the castle," another portrait retorted.

"Do not back Potter into a corner," the headmaster from the late 1200s warned. "Threaten his lady, and there will be hell to pay. And should she die for any reason, you will have lost him. Perhaps not to the Dark, but you will have lost him."

"I wish we had a different task, but we have agreed to these tasks months ago," Dumbledore lamented. "We must carry them through."

"Then explain that to one of the boy's mentors who can then explain it to him, since the rules you agreed to prevent you from doing so directly," another portrait chimed in. "Do it now. Quickly."

Dumbledore sighed and gave in. He decided he would talk to Minerva and Alastor about the second and third tasks as well. Their insights might prove useful.

*

Relations between Harry and the Headmaster softened after the Headmaster's apology, but they were still a bit strained. Few people noticed, however, once the announcement of the Yule Ball was made. Harry, of course, instantly asked Hermione if she wanted to attend, and she had agreed. It would be a few days later when they learned that Harry, in fact, was required to attend.

In any event, this meant Harry and Hermione could sit back and enjoy the fun of watching their friends trying to get dates. Neville struck early, tracking down Ginny Weasley over in Ravenclaw, while it took Dean and Seamus some time to build up the nerve to ask Lavender and Parvati. Ron seemed to think it a good idea to stumble up to a group of girls, apparently in the hope one would ask him to the Ball before he ran away.

So far, none had.

Harry and Hermione were trying to get Luna to go, but she turned down the three boys who had asked her. She had become slightly closer to the Druids protecting Harry than he or Hermione had. After the Druids' solstice service, she would return home for Christmas. If Harry and Hermione went to London after the Ball as they planned, she would join them for New Year's. If they didn't,

she would return to Hogwarts early.

Other than Harry, Cedric was the first champion to get a date. It was taking Fleur a few weeks for the dragon-inflicted scars to heal, and so far as anyone knew, no one had even approached her. It was also not known if Viktor had a date either.

Harry had tried to get Viktor involved in an obstacle course/broom race for fun, which the Gryffindor chasers had thought up. Nine other Hogwarts students had quickly signed up, as had three Beauxbatons students and five Durmstrang students. Viktor had not been one of them. When Harry had appealed directly to Viktor, he had merely shrugged and said gruffly, "Am professional. Cannot play-fly."

Harry and his friends were shocked when he came in a distant third when the races were held the weekend before the Ball. Harry had just nudged out a Beauxbatons student, Cedric, and Alicia, while two Durmstrang students claimed first and second. The other participants hadn't even been close.

"Did you fly as well as you are able?" Zara asked the sulking Harry that Sunday night.

Harry thought about that. "I suppose so. I took some risks. Some paid off and some didn't. I think the Durmstrangers just knew their brooms better than us." He shrugged. "They also had better brooms, but so did some of the students behind me. That made a difference, but I think they would have won anyway, just not as easily."

"You fly what?"

"The Nimbus 2000," Harry said proudly, then he made a face. "The 2001 is slightly more maneuverable, and the Firebolt is faster and more maneuverable." Harry shrugged. "They were both flying Firebolts, but like I said, I think they may have won anyway."

"Did you know they are both alternates for professional teams? They will likely become starters next year, after they leave school, and also become alternates for the Finnish and Polish national teams as well."

"They were ringers?"

"You invited Krum to participate," Zara pointed out. "They only signed up after you asked him. Most likely, Krum didn't fly so they would have a chance to win something here."

"I guess that answers the question if I'm really ready to fly professionally," Harry said.

"And that answer is?"

Harry smiled. "Almost."

Zara smiled at Harry. "You could fly professionally now. Those two are more noted for their flying ability than their handling of the Quaffle. Are you ready for the Ball?"

"I suppose," Harry said. "Why did people ever decide to have dances?"

"People have always danced," Zara pointed out. "Only repressive regimes try to ban dancing, especially spontaneous dancing. I do grant you," Zara added, his eye twinkling, "mixed gender

dancing has been very rare until fairly recently."

"Will you stop that!" Someone, Harry suspected Cobra, had created a charm which allowed the caster's eyes to twinkle. It was really annoying, to Dumbledore even more than to Harry and others.

Zara stood to leave. "And just when I was going to teach you the charm," he said.

"I don't know why everyone thinks you're so nice," Harry grumbled.

Zara laughed and left.

*

In the end, Ron ended up asking Eloise Midgen, which did not seem to please him very much. Hermione was stunned that Christmas morning when Harry presented her after they had opened their presents with what he called a 'non-present' -- a chest slightly larger than their school trunks.

Hermione quickly guessed what was in the chest, but the actual jewelry was still shocking to actually see. She quickly decided that rubies and diamonds matched her best. She was even more shocked to learn that it was a magical multi-compartment trunk.

Then Hermione realized that while the rubies matched her well, but would clash with the periwinkle blue gown. She then went with plain white and blue diamonds to match her dress that night, although she only would wear a few tasteful pieces.

As they lined up that evening, Hermione decided that she and Harry were among the best dressed couples -- several were more expensively dressed, and several of the teens had jewels which rivaled Hermione's. Hermione had worried that her tasteful jewels might still be too gaudy, but now felt more comfortable.

She was also glad that Draco and Pansy were not present. Draco had demanded that his wife be allowed to attend, but no one gave in on her ban from the school. Draco had therefore left for the holidays as well.

Few if any missed him.

Viktor Krum had surprised many by asking Fourth year Hannah Abbott, much made Hermione t'sk slightly in disapproval. Fleur was escorted by the winner of the obstacle race.

Harry never remembered much about the Ball, other than Hermione, and how it felt to hold her during the slower dances. For Hermione, it was one of the more romantic moments of her life, perhaps the most romantic to date, other than parts of their time on the island the previous summer. She was storing up precious memories, in case she had few chances in the future.

*

Barty Crouch knelt before his master, trembling.

"Your direct actions have not displeased me, but I am NOT pleased with your informants at Hogwarts. Evaluate them!"

"The Ravenclaw girl is intelligent, and good at drawing the bits of information she hears in her

common room and among the students in the great hall together. However, she had hoped that the Weasley girl would be more useful in getting information about Potter, and more importantly about the people around Potter. She is a good source on Potter and his Mudblood, both directly and from her three brothers, but not a great one. The brother in Potter's year is no longer a close as he was a few years ago, but is still friendly. The two sixth years seem a bit closer. However, none of them are close enough to know much about the Druids and others."

"Is the Weasley girl a likely recruit?"

"Not at this time," Crouch admitted. "She does not seem as much of a Muggle-lover as some of the others of her family, but she still seems a blood traitor at heart."

"See if she can be led into a more proper frame of mind."

"Yes, my lord."

"And the others?"

"Draco Malfoy is a complete self-centered fool, but he is a snoop. He blackmailed Nott too easily -- Nott is not totally reliable. Malfoy wants some spectacular coup to impress you into leaping into your confidence."

That made the Dark Lord start in surprise. "The whelp dares?"

Crouch pressed his forehead to the floor.

"Young Malfoy may have to be dealt with. Go on."

"The other Slytherin students contacted report to Nott, but not with enthusiasm. Karkaroff's reports are largely unneeded, as he hears little that I do not. Still, his viewpoint allows me to clarify mine."

"Very well." The Dark Lord pondered a moment, and then said, "The whelp has stayed at Hogwarts?"

"No, my lord."

"See that he comes to visit his bride before he returns." A bit of correction needed to be applied to Draco Malfoy's attitude.

*

Both Harry and Hermione enjoyed the rest of the holiday even more than they did the first part, although Hermione had to deal with the emotional stresses of spending time with her parents. She, Luna, and Harry spent their free time researching in the Black family library -- the obvious ways to deal with the second task would be to use a bubblehead charm, transfiguration, or gillyweed. Each had their disadvantages.

Both the charm and any transfiguration could easily be ended by another competitor. The bubblehead charm worked well under water, but did not help with seeing underwater, and the bubble created would prevent securely wearing goggles. In addition, transfiguring just gills would make them very inefficient structures, slowing Harry down unless he totally transformed -- which would leave him handless. Partial transfigurations were unpredictable, each time they were tried

they generally transformed slightly different areas, dangerous when the lungs were involved.

In working underwater, gillyweed was easily the best option. It gave a very efficient gill structure, transformed the eyes to see underwater, and webbed the hands and feet for faster swimming. The problem with gillyweed was the timing. The plant itself varied slightly, and so did the effects. Even if the timing was exact, say an hour, Harry would be unable to breath above the water if he reached shore before then.

At that point, Sirius helped Harry break into a local school which had a pool several early mornings running. Harry mastered several transfigurations for his eyes, hands, and feet, as well as the bubblehead charm. Having used gillyweed in the past helped Harry tremendously.

Harry didn't know what Fleur or Cedric were up to, but Viktor was often seen swimming in the nearly-iced-over lake. Harry, realizing that it was not going to be much if any warmer at the end of February, was glad when Cobra told him that the charms Harry had learned to deal with the Antarctic cold would work under water as well.

No one noticed when a tent was swapped out in the Druid camp. Within Hogwarts, only Harry, his mentors, Hermione, and Luna knew that it had been rapidly created during the late autumn and winter, arriving in Scotland just before the New Year. In the unlikely event anyone unauthorized visited it, it appeared just another tent, used as a dormitory. Its basement, however, was possibly unique. It held a pool, four times the size of a regulation Olympic pool, and it was nearly three times as deep. Harry practiced in it three hours every Saturday and Sunday. Each time Harry used it, it was transformed from a clear pool to an environment more closely resembling conditions he would encounter in the lake.

Meanwhile, Luna had not been idle. She had taken over researching the second task for Harry, leaving Hermione to the study of the curse she had been hit with and the other research on creating a Horcrux for herself. Luna was taking Care of Magical Creatures and Runes (as well as Divination) and claimed to be doing research on the Merpeople and on Mermish. She therefore had access to those parts of the Restricted Section. She found a map of the lake, including the Merpeople's village, and then copied it.

Harry spent some of his little free time with the copy of the map Luna had made. He charmed it not only to be waterproof, but managed to add location charms, especially geared for Hermione, Luna (just in case the Headmaster tried to pull something), and himself. Harry would have liked to have given more features, like Sirius had recently shown him on the Marauders' Map (Remus had had objections while alive), but James had accidentally hit on a way to tie the Map in with the wards and paintings operating within Hogwarts, and those were not present in the lake.

Madam Maxime obviously had some suspicions of what Karkaroff could be hinting to Viktor and what Harry might be up to. As January wore down, the four champions were told that they could only enter the water with a simple bathing costume, their wand, and a knife in a strap-on sheath. Karkaroff's non-specific objections were voted down, but Cedric's appeal for a watch was approved.

With help from Dobby, Hermione, and Luna, Harry made a two piece bathing costume for himself. It would have been conservative in the early 1900s, covering Harry from his ankles to his wrists. If anyone asked about it, Harry would merely reply that it was to hold warming charms better. Given the expected temperature of the lake, that would be understandable, and it was even true.

Out of the water, the costume would be Gryffindor red. After thirty seconds in the water, however, it would fade to white. A tap on the right thigh of the costume would reveal a copy of the map of the

lake, should Harry need it. A tap on new watch he had the Druids get for him would turn the second hand into a pointer for Hermione or Luna.

As the date of the second task approached, Harry felt ready.

Chapter XXIII

The day of the second task was chilly, overcast, and windy. This matched Harry's mood, which was decidedly cranky.

Hermione had been invited to the Headmaster's office the night before, and had not returned, confirming to Harry that she had been taken hostage.

On the signal, the quartet waded into the cold water of the loch. Harry noted that Fleur and Cedric were going for the bubblehead charm, while Viktor was using a complicated partial transformation. Once underwater, however, Harry saw that Fleur and Cedric were swimming off without any transfigurations. Similarly, Viktor's transfiguration partially into a shark stopped in his chest and shoulders. Harry finished transfiguring his hands and feet, took a look at his Hermione locator, and took off.

In less than a minute, Harry was far ahead of the other three. They were going deep, while Harry stuck with swimming nearer the surface. This got him above the weeds and anything lurking in the weeds (Remus had told them there were likely grindelows in the lake when he had been the defense teacher) and allowed him to move faster.

As Harry swam, his mind strayed to the other three. They were thinking like wizards -- going with the first, easiest, obvious thoughts. They used just enough magic to get the job done, and then went in the most obviously direct way to do it. Harry's transformations made him more maneuverable than Viktor, and faster as well as more maneuverable than Fleur and Cedric. All three would be going through the murky and often weed-choked lower lake, a shorter distance than Harry was traveling, but he didn't want to guess at the obstacles.

Out of his peripheral vision, Harry saw the second hand of his watch move -- he had bypassed Hermione, if not the village. He dove deeper, correcting his trajectory as he did so. As he approached, he saw four figures floating, yet securely anchored.

The merpeople looked surprised, and made no noise. Harry wondered if he was there faster than expected, or from an unexpected direction (or both). Not really caring, he cut Hermione loose.

Harry paused, wondering where the other three were. Then, Harry decided that he had been given enough assurances by his mentors and Dumbledore that Hermione would not be in any real danger (although the Headmaster hadn't said so until after he had threatened Dumbledore) that the other three hostages should be safe as well.

Harry nearly took Hermione to the surface, but then realized that she might wake up once she broke water. He took his bearings from the map and his watch, and then swam, hugging Hermione.

Harry saw both Viktor, who looked rather lost, and Cedric, who blinked at Harry in surprise. He thought a moment, and then went on in the direction Harry was coming from.

Once the water was shallow enough, Harry canceled all the charms on him, except the bubblehead charm. He took several deep breaths, and then canceled that as well, and then stood with Hermione in his arms.

Altogether, he had taken Harry thirty-six minutes -- most of it swimming back. As Hermione was taken from him and was being wrapped in blankets, he saw three men he didn't recognize bringing a

sobbing Fleur ashore. Harry turned to Professor Moody, who was standing nearby and asked, "Does someone have to rescue her hostage?"

Moody blinked in surprise. "No, lad. Anyway, you've done your job. No, once the other two get back, those divers will be given any of the hostages not rescued."

"Good to know," Harry said, and concentrated on getting warm, hugging Hermione tightly.

*

With the second task completed, Harry knew he had three months before he would learn what the third task would be. He could therefore, in part, worry about his class work, and more importantly, try to help Hermione.

They, with some help from Luna, had come up with some interesting theories, which Hermione did not have enough experience to fully test. Most of the Brotherhood and those associated with the Brotherhood (such as some of the more scholarly vampires) were working hard to see if they could come up with some answers.

To everyone's surprise, they did.

Zara, Asclepias and the First Acolyte briefed Hermione, along with Harry, Luna, and Harry's mentors, the weekend before the third task. Jason and Cobra were glad there would be at least some hope for Hermione revealed now, as that should help Harry's determination to win.

"Good news, I would hope?" Hermione asked.

"They'd hardly be making such a fuss otherwise," Luna replied.

"We found a way to break the Hera curse, and possibly a way to create a Horcrux for you," Zara answered. "They are connected."

Asclepias took up the explanation. "The reason why no one came up with this line of thought before was that it simply was not possible until recently. We would need to combine Muggle and magical techniques. While your womb was destroyed by the Curse, your ovaries are largely intact. You would have to undergo a Muggle procedure to harvest some of your eggs." Hermione merely nodded her understanding, while Luna looked surprised.

"Harry would have to fertilize them, and then the embryos would be implanted. Now, none of this is possible, magically speaking."

"I know about the Muggle procedure, at least in general terms," Hermione pointed out.

Asclepias merely nodded. "Now, to break the Curse, Pansy Malfoy would have to accept the embryo, bear the child, and return it to you."

"Can we make her swear to care for the fetus and give the child up?" Hermione asked.

"We can, but again, it all has to be freely done, and yes, it has to be the one who stabbed you with the Dagger."

"Tell her the rest," the First Acolyte said.

"Ah. To make the Horcrux, the first part of the procedure is the same, except the one carrying the child does not have to agree freely," Asclepias said carefully. "The child must be born naturally -- in Malfoy's case, we could deliver by caesarian if we have to. Anyway, at the moment where we would normally cut the umbilical cord, you would instead need to kill the mother, doing the ceremony while holding the child."

Hermione looked even more ill and disgusted at the idea than Luna.

"I am sorry, daughter," the First Acolyte said softly. Then he frowned and looked at Harry. "My son?"

"If Pansy or some other female Death Eater does something more, something that fairly earns her the death penalty. . . ?"

"No, Harry," Hermione said firmly. "It would not be right to use anyone as a baby machine."

"No one else voluntarily having the baby would break the curse?" Luna asked. "Without harming the . . . the . . ."

"Birth mother," Hermione supplied, to which Luna nodded.

"Not fully, if it works," Asclepias said. "That is the least certain of the methods to work at all, perhaps a three out of five chance. It might extend Hermione's life for anywhere from two or three years to a decade or so."

"Could the ceremony be done more than once?" Luna asked.

The three Brothers looked at each other thoughtfully. Finally, the First Acolyte said, "We need to look into that more fully."

"At least I have some real hope," Hermione told them gratefully.

*

Draco Malfoy was severely disappointed. He wanted to be something more than just an observer. He was a Malfoy, scion of a great family, and one day, he was certain, he would once again be the heir of the family leadership.

He was still neither intelligent enough, nor cautious enough, to really hide his attitudes. He did not realize that there were other observers at Hogwarts, who would correct and amplify his observations. Barty Crouch was overseeing all the observers, and of course he was much closer than any of them realized.

In addition, many others were watching Hogwarts as well -- the Brothers, the Druids, Aurors from around the world. All had parcels of the truth, bits and pieces of the big picture. The problem was putting those pieces together.

Many of Harry's mentors within the Brotherhood were becoming more anxious as the weeks of Harry's fourth year rolled along. Scorpion had been loudly demanding that Agathon be closely questioned, and perhaps Salemin and even Khafra as well, since Harry's name had popped out of the Goblet of Fire. As the weeks passed, Jason had joined in with the demands. By the winter

solstice, Cobra and Zara had been pressing, as had many of Harry's advocates away from Scotland. Tutmoses had stepped back and given the decision over to Osiris just before the second task.

Osiris was disappointed. He was not certain if Tutmoses had given up on his responsibilities because he was uncertain of going up against Khafra and his faction, or if it was because he knew that Osiris could use more force if needed.

Either way, Osiris was disappointed in Tutmoses' leadership.

Osiris was not immune to the pressures the others felt. Therefore, in early May, he finally summoned Agathon to him, even if this was something Osiris had only done once before in the millennia of the Brotherhood's existence.

The hedonistic brother was nervous, but did not really show it as he entered the great temple. When the magic directed him to his meeting place, however, he hesitated and nearly stumbled.

Agathon knew there was no going back now. He therefore walked into the great audience chamber -- where, thousands of years before, the mage then known as 'the Returned God of the Dead' had rendered judgement.

Agathon paused just inside the entrance. The chamber was long, with a row of heavy pillars on either side of the narrow walk. At the far end, the figure was on his throne, behind him, a nine foot disk of pure gold, polished to reflect the low light available.

Agathon walked, and as he came closer, he saw that Osiris was in full regalia -- he was wearing his blue leather crown, which was later adopted by the rulers of Egypt as something like a war crown. He was adorned in gold and cloth of gold, and was holding the flail and crook of power. On either side of the throne coiled two immense cobras, each now awakening and hissing at him.

Worse, Agathon saw his three horcruxes, which he had thought were well-hidden, their locations known only to him, were at Osiris' feet.

Agathon knelt before his lord. "Master," he said simply, and allowed his forehead to touch the floor.

Osiris made no movement. Agathon started to sweat heavily. His lord was furious. He would remain still until he was ready. His magic was filling the room. A prospective acolyte had used his magic to control and rape a servant girl. Osiris had remained still for three hours, until the prospect had tried to defend himself with lies.

Osiris had remained still as a statue, but his magic dissolved the man into sludge in less than ten seconds.

Agathon knew his life was also at risk, for the first time in nearly 2300 years. He had played what he only now knew was a foolish game. He had thought he had been playing for fun and for Merenre, Khafra, Salemin and perhaps even the First Acolyte -- leaders of the Brothers who hated the mundane world and therefore who cared little what Agathon did there. He had only learned in the 1970s that Merenre united several of these factions -- and that he, Agathon, was by default now actually part of the most radical splinter group, controlled by Khafra and Salemin.

Worse, Agathon had thought he had been playing the game against Tutmoses and his small group of overly-sentimental Brothers. The inclusion of Jason, Scorpion, and above all Cobra in the admirers of the young Potter had been disturbing.

It was now clear that the protection their lord was not merely a formality.

His lord's voice sounded in his head. 'Look at your so-called Horcruxes.'

Agathon whimpered as one Horcrux, a foot-tall statue of the goddess Hebe carved from a huge chunk of amber, sizzled and melted away into nothing.

"Tell me everything you have done for Tom Riddle, including teaching him about our ceremonies, and everything you know of the plots revolving around Riddle and Harry Potter. Do not try and avoid what you know I want to know."

Agathon started to shake as the Eye of Osiris appeared behind him-- he could see it in the golden disk. He knew one lie, even one shading of the truth, would end in his death.

*

At the same time Agathon was confessing, Dumbledore was finishing explaining events to an old friend. "And there you have it, Gellert," he concluded, admittedly confused.

"Do you truly trust Snape?" Grindelwald asked.

"Of course," Dumbledore replied with dignity.

"Now, don't get into a pet," the former Dark Lord teased. "I take it you can trust the rest of your staff?"

"Of course," Dumbledore replied. "I cannot begin to express how comforting it is to have a Defense instructor I can totally rely on."

As Dumbledore mused and muttered about the rest of his staff, Grindelwald thought, 'Has the idiot gone soft in the head recently, or was I even more blind fifty years ago?' Seeing Dumbledore winding down, Grindelwald asked, "And the half-breed? Is she as docile as your pet Hagrid? And what of the other former Death Eater?"

"Madame Maxime is very trustworthy," Dumbledore said, almost heatedly. Then he paused. "I cannot believe Igor could have orchestrated Harry's conscription, but he may be involved."

"And the students?"

"I wish I could answer for them all," Dumbledore admitted. "Still, while they might be providing intelligence, they could have not been involved directly."

"Whatever the correct answer, I am certain you will soon discover it," Grindelwald said, assuring his conqueror.

*

Agathon, stripped of a Horcrux, slunk away after revealing all he knew. He would retire for several years to an island in the Caribbean, where Muggle slaves served their Magical masters from birth until an early death.

Osiris would deal next with the two leaders of the little conspiracy in turn, and then turn his power on their followers. Khafra the Proud broke quickly and easily. He was dismissed, all information wrung out of him. He also lost a Horcrux, and would spend the next two hundred years in the desert, meditating on his errors.

Osiris was a bit surprised that Salemin was the lynchpin, the prime mover in this. Where the others had convinced themselves despite of the evidence that he would go along with their radical plan, there here hints that Salemin -- a quiet, studious Brother who had been a member for close to 1900 years -- knew that things would not have been so simple. He was obvious plotting to do something to his lord.

Salemin, unlike the others, was not cowed by his lord in his glory. He didn't even bother to bow. He merely said, "I presume Khafra and the fool have told you all they knew?"

"They have." Salemin was finally shaken a bit when his three Horcruxes appeared.

"I see we have not been as independent, or as clever, as we had thought," Salemin managed to say.

"I revealed my secrets of continued life," Osiris stated. "I never have given away even a tenth of my magical knowledge."

Osiris stood, and the mere force of his fully revealed magic forced Salemin to knees. "You should know you could not kill me. Disclose what you were planning to do to me."

Salemin struggled to keep his secrets, but as the all-seeing Eye of Osiris appeared, he had to reveal his plan.

"So," Osiris hissed, "you believe I would have been trapped, until such time, if any, as you decided I might be freed. Perhaps. I can see three ways I could have escaped, but I admit they would have taken years to achieve."

Salemin would not have believed that an hour before.

Now, he did.

"Do you really think, even if Merenre or another Brother had joined you, that any three of you would have been resistant to the temptations of power over the world better than I? No, over time, you would have schemed against each other. One would have fallen, and even if he had been replaced, sooner or later, there would have been two fighting for power, and then one. Power, continually exercised, corrupts."

"Are you?" Salemin managed to gasp.

"Perhaps," Osiris answered. "When this is over, I must retreat from the forefront again, to keep the world in balance."

"Are you going to kill me now?" Salemin demanded.

"No," Osiris answered. Still, Salemin winced as two of his Horcruxes dissolved. "I am going to place you in that magical stasis you planned for me, that living death." He smiled nastily.

"We shall see if you can find the three flaws in your plan that I saw . . . and which two I will block.

In a thousand years, we shall see if you are still sane. If you are, then we will talk again."

Only now did Salemin collapse in fear.

*

The next day, and then for two more, Osiris thought while Cobra, Tutmoses, and the First Acolyte, aided by a few others when necessary, dealt with the smaller fishes, who would be punished but who would not lose a Horcrux.

As he thought things out, Osiris came up with six plausible scenarios, the most likely one having Snape at the center. But doubting Dumbledore's faith in Snape highlighted the fact that there was in fact someone at Hogwarts whom everyone trusted, but who had really appeared almost from nowhere.

Mentally giving himself a swift kick, Osiris took himself to Hogwarts.

*

Barty Crouch Junior, polyjuiced as Moody, was stumping through the Hogwarts corridors. His stolen eye detected one of the faux Druids, the one called Jason, suddenly standing up ahead.

Crouch slowed, and the magic eye flipped to a rear view. The faux Druid who called himself Cobra was behind him. Crouch stumbled as the outline of a fiery eye burned into existence near his head.

"We have all been very foolish," a voice to Crouch's side said in exasperation. "It should have been obvious Voldemort would sneak someone in, either under a potion or someone who was a Metamorphmagus. And to think, we all saw you sipping the potion."

Crouch had tried to keep moving, to pull his wand. He could barely breathe, let alone really react.

"Scorpion!"

"My lord?"

"Follow the Eye. Rip every piece of information from this thing and then dispose of it if possible. Keep it in stasis if you need its blood or other parts." Osiris smiled so coldly that even Scorpion shivered. "Then take its place as Moody."

Chapter XXIV

"And there you have it," Osiris concluded.

"But the Cup isn't charmed as a Portkey yet," Hermione pointed out. "You don't know where to send it."

"True, but Voldemort built the location into a charmed disk. Even though Crouch could come and go to Voldemort's lair, it was through another damn disk. We could try and break it, but that could lose us the location."

"So what is it you want me to do?" Harry asked quietly.

"Get to the Cup first and let it take you to the location," Osiris answered. "Land shooting. We'll be at most forty-five seconds behind you."

"And just who is 'we'?" Hermione asked archly.

"Myself, Cobra, Jason, and Scorpion," Osiris answered. "I doubt we will all be needed."

"No," Harry stated.

"No?" Osiris was surprised.

"No. Scorpion will likely be placed near the maze, playing Moody," Harry pointed out. "And I wouldn't put it past several people to make an attempt on Hermione or Luna."

"You may be right," Zara answered. "Scorpion and I have been partially through the connected books Crouch was using to collate information -- a copy of which goes to Voldemort, by the way. Malfoy and Karkaroff among others have been sending information, and Malfoy has been practically begging Crouch for permission to attack Hermione while you are in the maze. There seems to be a group of Ravenclaw girls involved in spying on you, as well. Ginny Weasley is the source of most of their non-obvious information, although it is doubtful she is aware that it is making its way to Voldemort. However, she does seem to be planning on taking Hermione's place, should the curse go fully into effect."

Zara made a face. "In fact, should you fail to seize the Cup first, the Ravenclaw girls who are involved are suggesting they poison Hermione, get you involved with Weasley, and have Voldemort again possess her, while she controls you through love potions."

"See, she could be in danger," Harry said to Osiris. Hermione was still trying to grasp that her friend Ginny would be scheming like that, ignoring that the few Ravenclaws involved were likely egging the girl on.

"I shall stay near Hermione during the Third Task," Zara assured Harry, "as will Luna and several of the Druids. Other Druids will be near the maze, should the need arise. As the task starts in the twilight, the vampires will also be nearby and in force." Harry was satisfied, while Hermione was still thinking.

That evening, as Hermione sat on the bed and Harry brushed her hair, she asked, "What should we do about Ginny?"

"She's just selfish and silly," Harry answered with a shrug. "The other Ravenclaws, the real plotters, will be identified and the Brotherhood and the Druids in ensure that they'll be expelled after the third task." Harry shrugged again. "One would hope that she'll learn a little something from that."

Hermione looked dissatisfied.

"Here's something else to mull over," Harry said.

"What's that?"

"Malfoy's father is still involved in Voldemort's plots to some degree, and so is he. What's more, I got some more information out of Jason."

"He's like a clam to everyone but you," Hermione said, almost smiling. "With you, he's almost as chatty as Hagrid."

"I wouldn't go that far," Harry retorted. "Anyway, they're not sure what she's up to, but Pansy seems to be directly serving Voldemort."

"So she's facing Azkaban, and the Malfoys might be as well?" Hermione suggested, thinking things through.

"Exactly. And they would likely be willing to cut a deal."

"For Pansy to have our baby?"

"Exactly."

Hermione frowned. "Wouldn't it be wrong for us to wrangle them a better deal just to benefit me?"

Harry thought about that for several moments, and then he sighed. "I think that's the problem with being Muggle-raised."

"What do you mean?"

"Do you think many pure bloods would hesitate a moment? For that matter, would any Muggle aristocrat have hesitated two hundred years ago?"

"This isn't two hundred years ago, Harry."

"Isn't it?" Harry asked. "Our new culture here has its own mind set. We don't have to agree with it, but we don't have to feel guilty about operating by the rules."

"Don't we?" Hermione demanded.

"Well, we don't have to," Harry replied, a bit doubtful. "At least we can consider it."

"That's true." Neither were happy with the situation, but both were willing to await events before they made any final decision, keeping their options open.

*

The final task was still over a week away when Hermione and Harry were whisked off to meet with the First Acolyte and some others. "We believe we can help a woman create a soul jar, or Horcrux. However, daughter, we are not certain if it will work, and less certain if it will work for you."

"Why is that?"

"The original method, the one we use, takes the power of death and uses it to detach part of the soul, which is weakened by killing."

"Each person's death diminishes me," another brother said softly.

"Exactly, no matter how cruel or callous the killer might be. Now, the inverse happens at conception. A new soul is created, or if you believe in reincarnation as the Druids do, a soul is attracted. That force of creation has more power than it needs, and part can be diverted. We have not tried it, of course, but we believe that when this takes place within the woman's body who is making the Horcrux, her soul is weakened momentarily at conception and with some modifications to our ceremony, the combination should create a Horcrux."

"Well, as you might say, we are ninety-five percent certain," a third brother said.

"With a ninety-nine percent chance that the conception will be completed," the second brother added. "As it would need to be outside your body, however, there is only a sixty percent chance of it working with you, and a fifty percent chance that the conception will not take place."

"However, it should be perfectly safe for the woman," the First Acolyte concluded.

"We really do not feel we can further your options in the near-term," the second brother concluded. "We will keep studying the problems, but must caution you not to expect more."

"Thank you," Harry said, as Hermione was trying to process all of this. "We'll keep it all in mind."

"After the third task," Hermione pointed out.

*

To the unobservant, Hermione Granger-Potter and Luna Lovegood looked isolated in the crowd. They were at the base of a swell in the ground. No one stood behind them, and those in the seating that was behind them were raised several feet. The people on either side of them had their attention on the maze.

Draco Malfoy snuck into the area behind them, imagining himself a great hunter. In reality, of course, his halting progress was impossible to miss to anyone paying any attention, and several people were.

Draco 'stealthily' pulled the vial from his pocket, nearly dropping it twice. As soon as he began his throwing motion, three vampires pulled him silently into their disillusioned embrace. They had already placed a muting charm on him, so they just had to secure the vial and portkey away with their prisoner.

"Draco's gone," Zara told Hermione softly. "Don't drop your guard, just in case some one competent tries something else."

Hermione nodded. "Will they feed on him?"

"Probably a little, but not enough to harm him."

"Really?"

"Well, not enough to kill him."

Luna suddenly shuddered. "Harry's gone. It has begun."

*

Osiris, Cobra, and Jason were already standing back-to-back and in defensive crouches when Harry had activated the Portkey. Each sent up a prayer, which were rewarded when Harry's signal came through in less than thirty seconds.

The trio appeared in a graveyard, about thirty yards from a fire -- some twenty-odd figures in Death Eater regalia were firing at a large tomb, presumably sheltering Harry. Before they could do anything, they saw Voldemort was in the midst of the group attacking Harry.

"Stop!" Voldemort commanded, and his Death Eaters stopped their attack, as did Harry..

Osiris signaled 'no action' and watched. However, when Osiris saw the attention of a huge, mutated snake being drawn towards them, a slight movement of his staff silently killed it.

Osiris' eyebrows went up as he realized that the snake had been a Horcrux. He had never heard of anyone being stupid enough to embed a Horcrux in a mortal being before.

Meanwhile, Voldemort had moved to the front of the group, and was demanding that Harry come out and duel. Taking advantage of the grouping in front of them, while Harry exchanged abuse with Voldemort, the trio silently, although slowly, picked off the Death Eaters one at a time.

Voldemort, or at least one of the Death Eaters, had to turn around at some point. As it turned out, it was Voldemort who turned just as the eighth Death Eater was muted, pulled a few yards back, and then killed in a silent ballet of death.

"Who dares!" Voldemort demanded. "Avada. . . ." He could not complete the curse as Osiris sent a powerful wall of magic at the group, which made Voldemort and twelve of the thirteen remaining Death Eaters hit the ground. The remaining, slowest Death Eater, was only a set of hips and a pair of legs after the spell hit.

"Tell me, Tom Riddle, did you think Agathon powerful?" Osiris asked.

A hint of terror flashed over Voldemort's face, as he realized who, and what, he faced.

"In many ways, Agathon is below average for our group, and is certainly the least discreet." Osiris stepped closer. "You have talent as well as power; let no one ever deny that. Had you done what you told Agathon you would do -- create your two or three soul jars, by whatever name you prefer, and live a life of gathering knowledge and experience over the millennia, we would not only have left you alone, we might have even invited you to join us. We have done so a few times before."

Voldemort stood and looked Osiris in the eye. The Death Eaters stayed on the ground. "And do you think I would grovel before you or your leaders," he sneered.

The Death Eaters tried to squirm into the turf, and even Voldemort paled even more than normal when the Eye of Judgement burst into its deadly, fiery form behind the trio. "I am Ahk Shir-rusch, Giver of Death, Lord of Nile Waters, Master of the Desert. I walked the Earth as a god millennia before the first stone circles were built in this land. In life, I was probably only slightly more powerful than you, and to be honest, overall very likely not as knowledgeable at your age, although I believe I had more sense."

Osiris smiled grimly. "Do you think I have learned anything more over these last six thousand years? Don't you think my being has become ever more infused with my magic? becoming ever more attuned to power? If you think your puny magic can harm me, feel free to try."

Osiris now glared at his opponent while signaling Jason and Cobra to move away. "But I warn you, even if you have by chance some piece of magic which can harm me, my soul jars are intact . . . and all of yours, including your snake, are gone. Anyone can kill you now, Tom Riddle."

"Anyone," Jason repeated with an expression that showed he was itching for a fight.

"Anyone at all," Cobra agreed coldly.

At that point, a pale, almost pastel green light hit Voldemort from behind. He froze for nearly three seconds, and then dropped like a marionette with cut strings.

"Anyone at all," Harry agreed, now visible, standing next to the tomb he had been sheltering behind.

*

Osiris, Cobra, and Scorpion, pretending to be Druids, were aiding the Ministry in cleaning up the aftermath. Hermione, exhausted from the tension and the worry of having to make some important decisions, was asleep. Harry was alone with Jason.

"You look disappointed," Harry pointed out.

"I am," Jason admitted.

"Why?" Harry asked, puzzled.

"I am, by nature and training, a warrior," Jason pointed out. "I had hoped that there would be some good fights." His face showed his disdain. "Ambushes and a little brawling. Not much action."

"There was more than enough for me," Harry stated with feeling.

"Very likely," Jason agreed. "You are not me."

Harry had to agree with that, of course. He therefore changed the subject a bit. "Is Malfoy still alive?"

Jason smirked. "Which one? Draco was not nearly drained by the vampires. He'll be weak for a few days." He frowned. "His idiot father returned to Britain a few days ago. Since that idiot Agathon

was partially behind this mess, including their involvement, we'll spare them both. Still, in my time, I would have either killed or enslaved the pair of them, or at least striped them of their ability to harm anyone."

"Could you? Strip them of their wealth, I mean?"

"Draco has none. He was the named heir before, and therefore we could attach part of the family wealth. Now that his infant brother is the heir, Draco is worth nothing. Most of Lucius' personal wealth has also already been stripped away. We cannot force him to stop being the head of the family trust."

"So there's nothing we can pressure them with, if Hermione decides to choose one of the options that need them?"

"It turns out that Pansy was used as a nursemaid to some . . . thing, some artificial creature that housed Riddle spirit before he recreated his body. Before and after he was recreated, she was used as a sex slave by the Death Eaters."

Harry's face fell. "Does Hermione know?"

Jason grimaced, and Harry returned the gesture, saying, "Hermione would never condone forcing Pansy, even before this. Now. . . ."

"Actually, we could not overtly force or bribe her, if the goal was to break the curse," Jason pointed out.

"I suppose not." Harry was dissatisfied. "When can I talk to her?"

"When our people and the Ministry have determined exactly what they want to charge her and the other Malfoys with," Jason answered. "I would say about three days." He frowned. "I am not arguing that you shouldn't meet with her. . . ."

"I'll talk with Hermione, of course, but according to custom, I need to do it."

*

Harry met with Pansy four days later, in a cell in the Ministry. Harry observed her from behind a one-way mirror before going in to meet with her. Her eyes looked haunted, and she would twitch and shiver randomly. Harry could not pretend to himself that she had not been ill-used.

Harry took a deep breath and entered the cell. Only Cobra and Jason would be able to observe him.

Pansy sat at attention when she heard the noise of someone coming in. She managed a good version of her old sneer when she saw who it was. "Potter," she spat. "I should have guessed. What does the half-blood hero of blood traitors everywhere want with me?"

"You really are an ignorant cunt, aren't you, Pug-nose?" Harry managed to return with equal venom. "Here I thought you had been raped and used. It turns out you're not even a whore, just astupid slut."

"How dare you!"

"Well, you got repeatedly fucked and fucked up the arse by some two dozen or more men for about a year. Yet you still tow the same line as the men who used you, so you weren't a victim. You were paid an allowance, so you aren't a whore. What else is there to call a girl who allowed her self to be used like but a slut?"

"I didn't allow anything! I was forced!"

"Then who are the ones who betrayed you, Pug? Me, the one who ended your alleged abuse, or those that turned you over like a piece of meat and the ones you used you like a toy?"

"No one can stand up to. . . ." Pansy's shout trailed off as she realized who she was yelling at.

"That's right, you dumb bitch," Harry retorted. "That claim doesn't stand up any more, not that it ever really did. What kind of moron claims to worship purity of blood and yet debases themselves to a half-blood like Voldemort anyway? Now, do you want to get out of a little bit of the major trouble you're in?"

"How much trouble do I get out of and what do I have to do?"

"Not so fast," Harry said coldly. "First, do you want the 'getting out of trouble to apply to just you, or to Draco as well?"

"He is my husband, as weak and worthless as he's been," Pansy answered. For the first time, the sneer fully left her face. "Since you seem to be about to offer me some sort of deal, I presume you feel the same about Granger."

"Yes, and if you have a brain in your head, you'll at least call her Mrs. Potter from now on."

"I understand."

"Good." Harry made a face. "Actually, if you had cast Draco off, I couldn't offer you this."

"And what is 'this'?" Pansy demanded.

"Do you know the minimum as well as the maximum you and Draco face?" Harry asked. "From the Ministry, from me, and from your families?"

Pansy flushed. "Yes," she whispered.

"Now, think very carefully," Harry said coldly. "What is it I need you to do?"

Pansy glared. "I don't know how to break the bloody curse on your Mud . . . on your . . . whatever you call her."

"Would you, if you could?"

Pansy glared. "What's in it for me? I mean for us? Draco and me, and. . . ."

"Don't push it, Pansy," Harry warned her. "You have to agree to help Hermione to end your curse, and rely on me to do what's right when it's over."

"You have GOT to be joking!"

"No," Harry replied. "It's the only way to break the curse, and to prevent it from either coming back on Hermione . . . or avoid hitting you in retribution, if you betray us."

Pansy paled, and held up her hand. She thought a moment, and then asked quietly, "What would I need to do?"

Harry passed over two sheets of parchment, one describing what Pansy would need to do, and the other the oaths which she would be required to swear to enable her actions to break the curse -- and the consequences, not for honest failure, but for bad faith.

Pansy swallowed nervously, and said, "I'll do it."

Chapter XXV

September 1, 2011

Pansy and Draco Malfoy escorted their only child Orion onto Platform 9 3/4. The couple never spoke of the deal which they had been given when Pansy had agreed to bear the Potters the child which broke the Hera Curse. No one outside of a very small group knew that Rose Potter, born early in 1999, had come out of Pansy Malfoy.

Pansy and Draco had then done their best to get her pregnant on their own immediately thereafter, hoping that would erase their internal disgust at having lost so much on so many fronts. They had been under house arrest from 1995 until 2010, on a small estate loaned them by the Potters. They had been offered 'counselling' for what Granger had called their 'post-traumatic stress.' The pair had been horrified by the concepts, and had refused, despite some inducements they had been offered.

They were still banned from international travel. They would never be rich, but between the settlement given them by the Potters and the small pension sent to Draco from the Malfoys, they were assured they would never be poor, either. While neither could acknowledge they had been treated generously by Potter, neither complained of their treatment by him or his either. They were basically semi-outcasts to the Malfoy, Parkinson, and connected families -- what Victorian Muggles would have called 'on remittance,' that is paid to stay out of sight and out of mind.

Any standing they would have would either have to come from their own hard work -- which neither was about to do -- or from acknowledging they were dependents of the Potters.

They were not about to acknowledge that, either.

That left their son. The pair understood why they were never welcome to visit the Potters, and they would not have wanted to even if they had been. They did not understand why their son was welcomed to play with the Potter children and the oft-visiting Weasleys and others. The Malfoys had just enough sense left to know it was to their son's advantage to allow the contact, even if they despised it.

This would be the first time the Malfoys were out in a public place, and on the whole they were quite happy no one seemed to recognize them. Draco's siblings had been schooled in South America, where Narcissa had stayed after the execution of her husband, and they thought of themselves of part of South American society, not European. Since her younger children's lives stood in the way of Draco and control of the Malfoy fortune, she had never visited Britain since their birth, and neither had the triplets.

It did not occur to the Malfoys that there was really no reason for many people to recognize them. The pair and their son were neatly, even overly-neatly, dressed, but hardly at the height of fashion. With little to do, both had put on a fair amount of weight over the years. Pansy had cut her hair short, while Draco's hairline was receding. The children of most of the few people who had known them well at Hogwarts were still too young to attend, and so few of the couple's contemporaries were present.

There were, of course, a few exceptions.

The older Malfoys grimaced, but knew they could hardly avoid meeting the Potters. Granger-Potter was there with Rose, and Rose's full brother (out of Luna Lovegood). Jason Potter was also starting school that year, and was there with his mother and surrogate. As far as the pair was concerned,

there was only one thing good about this meeting.

The trio bowed stiffly to Hermione, and in a slightly more relaxed manner to Luna. Orion bowed more naturally, as he had been allowed to play with Jason, and knew all of the group well.

"Our sympathies on your . . . well, the recent alterations," Draco said in a neutral voice. That had been the greatest news in July. There had been a new Dark movement arising in Central Asia. By all published accounts, Harry Potter had faced them down and destroyed the entire group by himself.

He had not been heard from since, so far as any government knew. Neither woman had put on mourning robes or acknowledged that Potter was gone, but announcements of his 'resignation' of all official and honorary positions had been made. Everyone presumed that Potter was either dead or crippled. Neither Draco nor Pansy much cared which. Still, in theory Potter still might impose his power, and so they were going to be polite to Potter's spouse and their acknowledged lover.

"Thank you," Hermione answered drily. She looked at Orion. "Are you pleased to be off to Hogwarts?"

"Yes, Aunt Hermione," Orion answered cheerfully, which made his parents wince a bit. "Thank you again for the owl. I'm glad I can write to Mum and Dad without having to use the school owls."

"We're glad you like it."

"May we board the train, Mums?" Jason asked his two mothers. Rose had already joined her friends.

"You and Orion are both talented young men," Luna answered. "Nearly every year at Hogwarts, there are three or four students who emerge as the leaders. If you work together, no matter if you are in the same House or different ones, you can be among those leaders." She kissed both boys on their foreheads, and, embarrassed, they took their leave of their parents.

"Do you really think they could be in the same House?" Draco drawled.

Hermione barely restrained herself from wrinkling her nose. She loathed the pair, but tried hard never to show it. It was therefore Luna who answered. "Jason could be in any House. He is brave, loyal, very intelligent, and at times a little sneaky. I would think he would most likely go to Ravenclaw or Gryffindor, but the other two are possible. I think Orion could also go to any House, but Ravenclaw and Slytherin are the most likely."

"You could be right."

After a pause, Pansy asked, "And your children?" Luna had had three of Harry's as well.

"If you mean their future Houses, I fear all are too individualistic for Hufflepuff, although Xerxes is a little young for me to be certain. Beyond that, I couldn't hazard a guess. If you mean where are they now, we left them with Neville and Susan."

And with that, as the train was pulling out, the four waved at their children and gladly left each other's company.

*

"Ravenclaw, and Orion went into Slytherin," Hermione said with a sniff late that evening.

"Are you coming down with a cold?" Luna asked.

"No," Hermione said with a sigh. "I just hope Orion does not emulate his parents."

"As bad as they were as students, neither Draco nor Pansy have impressed me as poor parents," Luna retorted. "Mediocre, no doubt, and a bit too self-centered, I grant you, but the lessons of their teen years seem to have ground down their pride and prejudices to nearly tolerable levels."

"I know, and I hope I haven't ever allowed that to affect my treatment of Orion."

"Of course you haven't."

Hermione's face suddenly showed great pain. "Am I a bad person because I wish something horrible on the pair of them? That I wish Harry could taken revenge on them, somehow?"

"Perhaps a little, perhaps not," Luna answered. "However, while the agreement implies that Harry will never directly harm Pansy, never think that Harry has forgotten the pain those two caused, any more than you or I have."

"What do you know?" Hermione slowly asked.

"I know that Harry needs at least one more Horcrux."

*

At three the next morning, Draco Malfoy woke up with a jolt.

When the pain receded, Draco realized that he was tied into a chair. He was holding his wand, but he could not move it, and his magic seemed halted, as he could not even get sparks.

"Now, isn't this cozy."

"Potter?"

"Did the two of you think I'd ever forgive what you did to Hermione, let alone all the other stunts you tried?"

"Yes, I brought the knife to Hogwarts, but it was Pansy who decided to target Granger, not me!"

Draco couldn't see Potter, who was still behind him, but he did hear the sarcasm in Potter's voice. "Draco, Draco, Draco. You'd sell Pansy out in a moment to save your miserable little life, wouldn't you?"

"Why should I be punished for what she did?" Draco demanded. "Why should I be punished for what Father did, for that matter?"

"You shouldn't, and aren't," Harry agreed. "You're only dying for what you did. As for Pansy, well, Hermione will kill her in five to nine years."

"What!"

"You see, you'll be my second Horcrux, but Hermione can only make one out of someone linked to her, like Pansy is, since she bore Hermione's child."

"You'd orphan our son!"

"Not until he's old enough to handle it," Harry retorted. "If the pair of you were the lousy parents we'd thought you'd be, instead of the mediocre ones you are, we'd have killed you a few years ago." Draco could hear the smile enter Potter's voice. "Now, that's enough monologuing on my part. Goodbye, Draco. It's been a pain in the arse knowing you."

The bindings on Draco disappeared, but Draco found he could not make a voluntary movement. His eyes widened in shock as he saw, rather than felt, his hand lift his wand and point it directly into his mouth.

That was the last thing Draco Malfoy felt in this life.

Pansy had to call in the aurors the next morning, after she had found Draco's body in their sitting room, his head exploded all over the floor and one wall. They had found the suicide note in the pocket of his dressing gown, which had blamed the Malfoy Trust for not granting him his rights as the true heir of the family, despite his having been officially disinherited. That was believable to everyone who knew, or thought they knew, Draco, other than Pansy, who was not certain what to think.

*

Over the next nine years, everyone, except for Pansy, forgot about the mysterious suicide of Draco Malfoy. Even Orion forgot about his father's death, although he sometimes thought about Draco.

Life went on within the magical world, just as it did outside of it. The Europeans tried to maintain a sharp division based on ancestry (as opposed to culture), but that resistance was slowly being eroded away as the rest of the magical world integrated Muggle ideas, although keeping a strict veil of secrecy about magic itself. Muggle technology and ideas were being used to help keep magic hidden in the Americas, Asia, and Australia and New Zealand, and in doing so the practitioners did not stand out as much as they had. On the other hand, old ceremonies and customs were revived or spread, especially those of the Druid sects.

There were several minor attempts to form groups or even covens of dark magic users, which were quickly, and in two cases very bloodily and even publicly, quashed. No government took any credit for these actions. A few, especially in Britain, gave the reclusive Harry Potter credit. In North America and Western Europe, the Druids were often given credit. Another rumor had it that there was an alliance of 'old magic' practitioners, including the Druids, who were responsible.

In truth, it was a combination of all those people, with aid from the Brotherhood, even if few knew the Brotherhood existed.

Rose Potter had been a prefect and head girl. She was apprenticing at the Salem Witches Institute. Orion Malfoy and Jason Potter had been Sorted into Slytherin and Gryffindor respectively, but had stayed close friends. They had not been overly academic, but had maintained good grades. Neither had been made prefect, as they had turned out to be major pranksters, helped out by the Weasleys and Sirius. (Jason's younger half sisters, Xenia and Laurel, however, would be the head girl and fifth year prefect that year, both in Ravenclaw. His younger half-brother, Xerxes, was a second year

Hufflepuff.) They had both played Quidditch, although neither had been quite good enough to become captain. They had fallen in love with a pair of fraternal twins in Ravenclaw during their Sixth year, and had married them in a double wedding the August after they had all turned twenty.

September 1, 2020

Pansy Malfoy was sulkily moving about the small manor house she and Draco had been allocated by the Potters decades before. Orion and his wife were still away, and she was more lonely than she had felt in some time.

Pansy was so lonely, she nearly missed Draco.

Almost.

As she gazed out of one of the old, narrow lead-glass windows into the darkening forest outside, Pansy suddenly realized that she had been Petrified. Her wand was yards away, on the fireplace mantel, and she had no chance of unfreezing herself without touching it.

"For some reason, this place looks unhealthy," a hated voice said. "I just can't point out why."

"It's not just clean, the place has been scrubbed and sanitized," another voice commented, making Pansy's blood run cold. "It's sterile. My Aunt was the same -- a petty, small-minded person, whose soul was dirty, but who could not face it. Therefore, she cleaned the hell out of everything she could, and either pretended everything else was perfect, or she condemned it." The voice halted for a second, and then said, slightly amazed, "I'm really surprised Orion turned out so well."

A tiny bit of fear left Pansy, as it seemed that Orion, at least might be safe. Safe from exactly what she was not certain, but she knew that she was in great peril. For an instant, Pansy realized she had been silently freed, but that Petrification was almost instantly replaced with a great feeling of hazy bliss, which Pansy managed to recognize as the most powerful Imperious she had ever been under, and she had been put under numerous times, especially by Voldemort and his visiting Death Eaters. Pansy was not sure what she was doing in this state, and really did not care at the moment.

When the haze had cleared, Pansy realized she was now sitting in a straight chair, wearing only her most unflattering underpants. She was still frozen from the neck down -- only involuntary movement, like breathing, was possible. However, from the neck up, she was free. "Where are you bastards!" she demanded.

"Behind you, where else?" Hermione answered.

"What do you want? How dare you invade my house. . . ."

"My house," Harry snapped. "Never yours."

"Are you here to kick me out?" Pansy demanded, puzzled.

"Of course not," Hermione answered. "I'm here to execute you."

"What! You can't do that! It's illegal!"

"And since when do you care about that?" Hermione snapped back. "And since you've killed me, you should stop whinging and take your punishment."

"What?" Pansy was clearly puzzled.

"You do deserve to know what, although I'll skip the magical proof, as I doubt you could understand them," Hermione answered, moving within Pansy's line of sight. "First, why kill anyone, even you? Because Harry is immortal, via a Horcrux. Well, three actually. For many reasons, it's much easier for a male to create a Horcrux than a woman, as the male just has to kill, while a woman, a more direct creator of life, has to have a magical bond of certain types. Essentially, since I could not directly bear any children, the only people I could kill would be Harry, Luna, my two children, or you. Well, I would hardly kill any of them, unlike you."

Hermione frowned at Pansy. "And you essentially killed me years ago. Even now, some of the poison, although not the actual curse, is inside me. I would die in about five more years, and the effects are just starting to show again. The only way I can find to fully purge the poison is by magically returning it to you. Since you have not gone through the many treatments I have, it would kill you in about an hour of excruciating pain. However, I will kill you by faking your suicide before you are in too much pain."

"But . . . but. . . ."

"But what?"

"I don't want to die!"

Hermione nodded. "Most people don't at any given time. However, you have made it such that either you or I must die. Be honest, wouldn't you prefer it was me?" Pansy didn't answer. "Of course you would. I prefer that's you, and I am the one in a position to choose. It also allows me to try and create a Horcrux, which is more than a mere side benefit. So, anything intelligible to add at this point?"

Pansy looked into Hermione's eyes, and knew there was no way she could successfully plead for her life. If there was any chance, she would have done anything. Since there wasn't she knew she could at least try to die with pride. "You won't harm Orion, will you?"

"I can't imagine Orion ever doing anything warranting our doing anything but cherishing him," Hermione answered.

Pansy nodded, and then asked, "How. . . ?"

Suddenly, Pansy could move her body, but she realized she was under the Imperious again. This was weaker, and in the back of mind, the part which was not screaming realized that the first Imperious had likely been Harry's.

Pansy stared as her head and arm moved so that she was staring at the tip of her wand, which she only now realized must have been in her hand. Over her internal screams, Pansy heard herself say, "Reducto."

Few people took notice of Pansy's demise, certainly none of the authorities did.

October 31, 2112

The elderly woman, laboring for breath, sat propped up by bolsters and pillows, waiting. She had shooed away her children, step-children, and assorted decedents and attendants and had waited for midnight. At around 1:30, she smiled and roused herself. "Hello, my loves."

Luna smiled as Harry and Hermione bent over her and kissed her withered cheeks. "It has been too long."

"We know," Harry answered, chastised.

"At least you're here at the end," Luna added, breathing becoming difficult.

"We could. . . ." Hermione started, but Luna forestalled her.

"No, my sweet. It is my time. For everything, there is a season. This is my time to pass. Please do not help or hinder my passing. Just having you here is my comfort and my dearest desire."

Each sat on one edge of the bed and took one of Luna's rapidly weakening hands. "You both will always remember that, even though your seasons are longer, some time your season of passing will also come."

"We know," Harry replied. "We also know we cannot stay in society."

"I have not left the Temple in the Himalaya for nearly fifteen years, other than to visit you," Hermione said. "Some time, sooner or later, I know I will have to stop learning and pass on."

"I've stepped away from operations, leaving them to Jason and a few others," Harry added. "If this is, well. . . ."

"It is," Luna said softly, her eyes still closed.

"Then we will miss you, and we'll be going off to heal," Hermione told Luna. "You completed and balanced us. We will have to find a new balance."

"You will find it, if you wish it," Luna said. "For I shall never fully leave you. And some day. . . ."

"And some day, we'll join you," Harry assured her, although at that moment he and Hermione needed the assurance far more than Luna.

"I shall wait," Luna mumbled, barely audible. "Then, together, we will see what, if anything, eternity has to offer, once the transition is complete. . . ." She roused herself and looked at Hermione. "If you need to, you may make your second Horcrux."

"Never," Hermione said, "but thank you."

"Harry. . . ?"

"Rest, my love, until we join you."

"You are both creatures of light, despite the grey," Luna said softly, and smiling, she breathed her last.

The two near-immortal lovers kissed the cooling lips, and took their leave. There was much to learn and much to be done before they could allow themselves the luxury of joining their friend and love.