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A Time To Reflect

Prologue

Disclaimer: Not mine. That pretty much says it all. If JKR wants me to have Harry and company, I'll gladly take the gift, but I'm not holding my breath.

He hated this walk; this 'Walk of Heroes'. The place where all the dead from the second and thankfully final fall of Voldemort were memorialised. But he came here every year, multiple times a year, but especially on the so-called 'Freedom Day'. He avoided the crowds and parties as if the parties had the plague, and always headed here. He hated it, but he came.

It was a beautiful summer day, with people running around in summer clothes. *Why couldn't it be like in all those cheesy stories, where it's raining as some metaphor for the Universe sharing your pain or some other such metaphorical bullshit?*

He was glad of one thing, though. This area had been spelled carefully. With the final war against Voldemort getting so far out of hand that the division between the Muggle and wizard world had disappeared, International Confederation of Wizards Secrecy Laws be damned, there was no need to hide from the Muggles any longer. In fact, wizards had come out of the woodwork to help the Muggles survive, and were considered invaluable friends to the non-magically inclined now.

The spell work on this monument and graveyard was subtle, however. Rather than some gaudy magical display, the magic of the area was the opposite of a Repulsion Charm. It made people approach and ponder those who were commemorated here.

“Pity,” he said as his hand brushed across some of the names engraved in the stone. “There's one name missing from here, and he really deserves to be here.”

“Pardon?” asked an attractive woman. Her posture and tone fairly screamed disbelief at what she had just heard.

“Apologies,” he said to her. “I was just complaining that there's one name that should be here that isn't.”

“They forgot someone?” she asked.

“No, the bastard's not dead yet, unfortunately, and he really doesn't qualify under the circumstances, anyway. You need to be a hero to be on this wall, not some little Malfoy clone that survived while everyone around died.”

“Was this person even at the last battle?” she asked.

“The thing was centred around the little bastard,” he barked, more to himself than to her. “The Ministry gives him all the credit for destroying that little prick we call Voldemort, and only

grudgingly agreed to build this memorial for the real heroes.”

“Not a really big fan of Harry Potter, I take it?” the woman asked with a wry smile.

“Depends,” he replied. “Fan of him as The Hero of the Second Voldemort War? Pardon my Anglo-Saxon language, but 'Fuck no!' Fan of tying him down and driving an icepick through his eye and into his brain? I'll be first in line.”

“Who was she?” the woman asked suddenly, and he was forced to laugh, although there was little humour to it.

“You're good,” he finally replied. “Yeah, I loved people up here on this wall. Dated a couple of them. If the little bastard was able to be killed these days, I'd be first in line to dig him a shallow grave, after making sure there were charms on it to make sure that everyone who passed it stopped to piss on that grave.”

She scowled angrily at him. “Did he do it on purpose? You talk as if you know his personal thoughts. Did he send them off to get killed while he sat back drinking Piña Coladas?”

“He might as well have,” the man snarled. “Listening to the idiots in the remnants of the Order, while his friends sat in cells in Voldemort's clutches. 'You're not ready yet!' they kept telling him.” He turned and punched a wall. “He should have realised that Snape hadn't been the only traitor in the group.”

“Hadn't Snape been -”

“Yes, he was deeply trusted by the Headmaster, to the point where he killed the Headmaster in an attempt to save Draco Fucking Malfoy. Little prick managed to survive the last battle and went into politics. He's the only one I hate more than The Hero.”

“Who was the traitor, if you know?”

“Some little prick named Simon Grandmarch,” he snarled. “New member, but supposedly with an in to the Unspeakables, and he was the one who convinced them to keep holding Potter back. And Potter was stupid enough to listen. Because he was, these people died.” He swept his arm out to point out the first twelve names.

“How many of them were you in love with?” she asked, the slight smile returning.

“Well, I dated a couple of them, as I mentioned,” he replied. “They all meant something to me.” He ran his hand slowly down the list. “Hannah Abbot. Sweet girl, the epitome of a Hufflepuff.” He blushed slightly. “And she could fill a pair of jeans like nobody's business.” He shook his head. “Susan Bones. Another Hufflepuff, and just as nice and just as sexy as her best friend. I used to talk to the both of them occasionally, and like to think we'd gotten to be friends.”

His hand struck Cho Chang's name. “I dated her once. Felt so bad over what happened when Cedric died in the Tri-Wizard Tournament. Interesting that it's something else you could probably

lay at Potter's feet," he sneered. "Maybe the Prophet wasn't as wrong as we thought. Daphne Greengrass," he said, suddenly changing demeanour. "I got to know her decently well, and she was what seemed to be the exception in Slytherin. I still remember the time she shocked me by asking if I wanted to go swimming with her. We used the Prefect's Bath, since it was certainly large enough. I also discovered that she was a fan of sauna. At least she appreciated the standing ovation."

The woman looked at him with her head cocked for a moment. "Oh," she said suddenly, as it struck her what the man meant. "Oh!" She blushed furiously.

"There were good times, oddly enough. It seemed that Daphne, Su Li, both Patils and even Luna liked to see just how embarrassed they could make me by giving me glimpses of ... shall we say 'some of their physical beauty'?"

"What about those last four?" the woman asked after she'd gotten her blushing under control. "The one's you didn't mention?"

He laughed angrily. "As if the first eight aren't reason enough that the bastard should die, those four definitely are." He let his hand glide across the four names. "Hermione Granger. Neville Longbottom. Ginevra Weasley. Ronald Weasley. They were my friends. And they died." He scowled. "At least the little shit who let them die can't die yet. It's part of that ritual that killed them."

"How do you know this?" she asked, more than a little puzzled.

"I got tired of trying to kill The Hero Harry Potter. Even tried that icepick through the brain trick. Still alive."

"Who are you?" she asked, backing away, as if it might help.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I forgot to introduce myself. Harry Potter, at your service."

A Time To Reflect Explanations

Disclaimer: I own none of this stuff – it all belongs to JK Rowling.

I'm taking a different route for the send-back method, one likely to step on some people's toes, religiously speaking. No offence is meant by it toward anyone – I just need it to work this way for the story, mainly because I've not seen anyone do it this way before.

“Well, I was wondering when you'd admit it,” the woman said. “I've been waiting to hear you admit it.” She stopped for a moment. “Would you really kill yourself if you could?”

“And then spit on God's eye and force him to send me to Hell where I belong,” Harry answered. “Twelve good friends died because I took one of Dumbledore's lessons too much to heart, and trusted someone that I shouldn't have.”

“Interesting about the number of women in that list you ran your hand down. Only two males in the whole group you considered your closest friends.”

“I always got along better with girls, especially after my six weeks with Ginny helped me get my head out of my arse as far as girls were concerned.” He smiled. “We realised that we really cared for each other, but I was never going to be together with Ginny, because she was too much like her mother, and Molly could be too much like Petunia Dursley sometimes, without meaning to be, and I finally made Ginny see that. I really cared for her, and wanted her safe, but ... we were never going to be married.”

“Which one would you have married?”

“Who the fuck knows?” he asked angrily. “They died long before I ever had a chance to figure that out!” He shook his head violently. “I'm sorry. I'm taking out my own self-hatred on you, and that's just not fair. I don't ask forgiveness because there is none.”

“Tell me about them,” she said, waving off his apology in a manner that said he was already forgiven. “Tell me why they were so important to you.”

“They were my friends,” he said simply. “That should say it all. They learned to look past the surface and see me. They learned to see the scared little boy who just wanted to be friends and be

loved.” His face contorted again. “Even if he didn't deserve it.”

“Bullshit,” she said softly. “You're still torn up over it fifteen years later. You put an icepick through your own eye. That sounds like a man screaming for someone to forgive him.”

“But the only ones who can forgive me, can't. They died because I'm too incompetent to think fast enough. The one remotely good thing about this was that I did get there in time to disrupt the ritual he was doing. That's what killed him, I understand. All his Horcruxes had been destroyed, so he was looking at stealing the life-force of those twelve. He succeeded, but it backlashed into me, and the explosion of energy killed everyone still alive at the ritual. They were dead, and it killed all of us. I got back up, though.” He felt tears start to leak from his eyes. “And if we assume that every witch or wizard can expect to live to at least eighty years old, if not a more believable hundred and fifty, then I can expect to live a minimum of another seven hundred to two thousand years. I thought at one point that it was the number of lives, but after about twenty or so extremely painful deaths, I gave up, since I'd already gone past the twelve that meant something.”

They looked at each other in silence for a moment as he dried his eyes before she motioned to one of the benches. “Tell me about them. Describe them. Tell me about their personalities, their looks, anything you want to. I'll listen, and I think that you need to be shriven, to confess what you see as your sins. I'll swear an Oath that the information I hear from you will never be used against you, or to make money.”

He looked at her for a long moment. “Ron. Ron was tall, and somehow thin despite the fact that he could probably eat half a cow without thinking. He was a great Keeper once he got past his nerves, and I'm betting that he probably could have gone professional. He was quite the chess player, too – I don't think there was a single person in Gryffindor that he couldn't trounce. Hell, our school's resident chess Master lost to him, and I don't think I've ever seen McGonagall so proud. He, Ginny and Susan were all redheads, and they used to joke about Susan being a Weasley. From the look in their eyes a few times, I think that just might have happened had they lived.”

“Except for one incident in our fourth year, he was one of the two truest friends I ever had. I would have trusted him at my back. Perhaps not with my girlfriend, had I one, but anything else.” At her raised eyebrows. “Weasleys are a passionate lot. Somewhere around sixth year he discovered charm – and was almost literally able to charm the knickers off girls.” He began to laugh. “Oh Merlin! That makes me remember the one time that ... well, she certain acted like he did.” He laughed again, harder than before. “We were in the common room, and he started talking about having walked by the Charms classroom at some point in the afternoon; I don't remember the time of day, but it was important. He started talking about this girl who'd been bent over in a closet, obviously retrieving something. He was nearly waxing lyrical about how absolutely perfect this young lady's rear end was.”

“He was stopped when Ginny suddenly shouted, 'Yes!' in a rather ... uh – she sounded like she wanted to jump him – and then she actually did! She threw herself on his lap and said, 'Take me!' As he sat there blinking, trying to figure out what was wrong, she told him that *she'd* been the girl bending over in the closet, and that he'd been talking about trying to date – and otherwise – his own sister.”

“He turned white for a moment, then bright red, and then grinned – still bright red, mind you – and said 'Well, I deserve the best, don't I?' She told me later that that was the sweetest thing he had ever said to her. We all started laughing, and he hugged her tightly. They'd been close before, but now she actually paid heed to whether or not he thought a boy was good enough for her.”

Harry smiled. “They were wonderful people, and I miss them both terribly. Yeah, she was sexy as all hell, and I can remember quite a few times 'accidentally' getting a good grip on that bum of hers while we were kissing, but ... well, she was too feisty for me, but I did love her. Still do, in a way. Her family enjoys a good argument too much, it seems to me, while they bring up bad memories for me. But Ginny was one of a kind, and Ron wasn't the only one vetting her intendeds.”

He sighed deeply. “Hermione. My bushy-haired bookworm of a friend, who never realised that the way she filled out those turtle-neck sweaters was a joy to behold. Except for that problem with our sixth year – and I'm not convinced that there wasn't some sort of outside interference there – she was always there for me. When no one else in Gryffindor Tower believed that I hadn't put my name in that thrice -damned Goblet of Fire, she did. It was really only after she started dating Ron that I suddenly realised how pretty she was.” He blushed slightly. “And that she liked her sweaters tight.”

“She wasn't perfect by any measure – no one was. She could get an idea in her head and worry it to death, without ever getting all the facts. She never did learn the truth about house elves during her lifetime. She had a problem about being right – she had real trouble admitting it when someone proved her wrong. It was rare that she did something wrong, but when she did, it was like getting a Malfoy to marry a Muggleborn to get her to admit it.”

“How about the rest?” the woman asked.

“I didn't know the rest of them nearly as well as I did those three, much to my shame, but I got to know them well enough to call them friend. Daphne? She went against the stereotype of the pureblood Slytherin. She apparently kept her distance from Malfoy and his crew, and took the chance in seventh year, once Snape and Malfoy were on the run, to get to know other people. We took the chance, and that led me to discovering that she was ... well, I discovered one day when she decided to get comfortable when the group of us met in the Room of Requirement why she had warming charms on her winter weight robes. Stunned the rest of us – all girls, now that I think about it – to discover that she was a natural platinum blonde. She was honestly puzzled about our surprise.” He smiled. “Sweet girl, though. Wouldn't have minded dating her at least once.”

“If she walked around naked under her robes, I'd imagine not,” the woman replied with a smirk.

“I deserved that,” Harry admitted, “but she wouldn't have deserved it. She was just a nice girl who really wasn't aware of how devastatingly attractive she could be. I think I'd have suggested she send some pictures to that American publisher Hefner. She'd likely have taken their prize for the year.”

“Hannah and Susan were – to hell with this. I'll get repetitive if I take the trouble to describe them

all as beautiful. They were. Every one of them. I was blessed with having close friends who were beautiful, each in their own way, and who liked me. I remember doing a detention with Professor McGonagall when I sent someone to the hospital wing when they suggested that the girls were my harem.”

“Why did you beat the person so badly?”

“To suggest that all ten of them were scarlet women like that? I was damned if I'd let their reputations be tarnished like that. Hermione had already dealt with it in fourth year.” He thought for a moment. “That 'harem' incident led to the only kiss on the lips I ever received from Hermione, in thank you.”

He shook his head. “How do I describe the others, really? Beautiful, smart, vivacious, forgiving – the Patil girls had to be in order to be my friend after the disgusting way I treated them in fourth year – and just a joy to be around. I could spend a year talking about them and not scratch the surface of why my living while they don't is such a crime, and why I'll fight God Himself to make sure I go to Hell, where I belong.”

“Because you think you deserve it,” she said blandly.

“If I hadn't trusted the wrong people, then those twelve would be here today. I get to live another thousand years minimum because of those people who deserve life a lot more than I ever did. Don't tell me that I deserve forgiveness or should forgive myself.”

“So you deserve hell because you weren't fast enough to save your friends?”

He looked at her and answered with a simple “Yes.”

She actually staggered back in surprise, and then stalked forward, pushing into his face. “So if God or an angel showed up and told you that you were being an ass with your self-pity and self-hatred, you'd actually attack them?”

He shoved her away roughly. “If they chose to show up now? You're damned right I would? Where were they when I could have used their help? Where were they when I was locked in a cupboard for ten years, or the years after, while I was still being abused by the Dursleys? Where were they while I was in so much trouble during the school years? Where were they when the good people were dying?” He stalked closer to the woman and got into her face, as she had done to him. “You know the *only* thing that keeps me from becoming a Dark Lord and wreaking havoc on everyone and everything?” He jabbed his finger at the memorial stone. “The disappointment that those twelve would feel in me. As much as I'm Hell-bound whenever the arseholes upstairs decide I've had enough, I will not despoil their memories by becoming what they died fighting. So don't come in here feeling all high and mighty about things you know nothing about, bitch.”

He turned his back on her and started to walk away, but felt a Presence behind him. He dove behind a piece of the monument and pulled his wand. The woman had a wry smile on her face. “I don't think you could hurt Me if you tried, Harry Potter. I'm just a bit beyond you.”

“Well, if you're that powerful, then what do I have to lose?”

“If I was cruel, I'd say 'your ability to die', but that is beyond the pale,” She replied. “I will not do that to you.”

“No, instead you remind me of people who should be here, spitting on *my* grave,” he growled. “Damn you.”

“That's not quite possible,” she said with a small laugh. “I'm actually here to give you a gift, if you wish it.”

He stood and faced the woman, his face locked into a look of utter hatred. “Let me guess, a chance to talk with them one last time, so that they can tell me that I shouldn't be kicking myself? Or maybe them telling me that they can't pass into their proper reward until I release them? Then I can be all peaceful and happy with my thousand year sentence of life?” He spat on the ground at her feet. “*That* for your gift.”

“Actually, I had a different one in mind,” she said. “But first you need a lesson in metaphysics.”

“Wait, are you a god, or God?” he asked.

“I'm what this world would call God,” she replied.

His response was to launch himself at her, putting all the power he had available, magic and otherwise, into a punch in the woman's jaw; one that actually sent her flying backward and onto her back, although she was immediately on her feet.

“Man of your word, I see,” she said with a smile. “Although you'll find me particularly difficult to convince as far as Hell is concerned.”

“Ask Snivellus about me,” he growled. “I'm sure he'll convince you about my love of a challenge. Besides, I always get what I want, if you listen to him.”

“I'll have to wait for him to die first,” she said.

“Hang on for a while, then, and I'll send him to you. Sorry, your counterpart down below,” he corrected himself mockingly.

“You'll never believe that he really was on the side of Light, will you?” she asked with a sigh.

“Hmm, tattoo on arm that can only be gotten through murdering people? Check? Irrational hatred of anyone not Death Eater spawn? Check. Directly responsible for the murder of my parents? Check. Determined to make me easier to control by Voldemort? Check. Murdered the Headmaster? Check.” He looked at her. “Proof that you aren't God. Or that I really should have been supporting Voldemort, if you're a representative of the Light side.”

For the first time, he saw her truly angry, and believed that she might have deity level power at

her command. Lightning crackled around her for a long moment, and she drew to full height. Absently he noted that she was likely not wearing a bra. He simply smiled and stepped closer, getting into her face once more. “Go right ahead. You and every other person I’ve ever known tried to convince me that Snivellus was one of the good guys. Personally, if I ever see him again and decide to let him live, then I will do what I can to *earn* that hatred he has for me.”

“You dare mock the sacrifice that so many made?” she growled. “You dare ridicule the sacrifice your parents made, and that Albus Dumbledore made, and that Severus Snape made by being the spy?”

“I dare a lot, bitch,” he barked back at her. “Let’s work backwards. Snape. ‘Oh, but he was a spy and he had to act that way!’ Bullshit. He didn’t return to spying until he’d had *four years* to treat me as something worse than something he’d scrape off his shoe. He treated Hermione Granger, someone he thought was a worthless piece of shit that dared be more intelligent than a pureblood, better than he did me. ‘Oh, but he was feeling guilty for his part in your parents deaths!’ Who gives a flying fuck? He was supposed to be an adult, and adults are *supposed* to be able to let go of things like that. It was what I was always lectured about when I complained about how he treated me. ‘Professor Snape deserves your respect, Harry. And I’m disappointed that you can’t forgive him.’ Pity Snape never got the reciprocal lecture. If he did, he never listened to it.”

“Which brings me to Dumbledore. He worked so hard to make everyone believe that he knew everything that happened in Hogwarts. If you paid close attention, though, you found that the only things he *really* knew in Hogwarts were unimportant. Snape’s abusing his students? ‘Pish and tosh, Severus would never do that. I trust him.’ Snape takes points away from Gryffindors for daring to breathe? ‘He wouldn’t.’ He’s tried to prevent you from breathing? ‘Why must you lie, Harry?’ And then there’s the piece about him putting me with abusive people and making sure that he never checked up on me, and never did anything to stop them.” He paused and thought back, and then spoke again, mimicking the deceased Headmaster’s voice. “Five years ago you arrived at Hogwarts, Harry, safe and whole, as I had planned and intended. Well - not *quite* whole. You had suffered. I knew you would when I left you on your aunt and uncle’s doorstep. I knew I was condemning you to ten dark and difficult years.’ The old bastard *knew* I would be abused. But keeping me alive was far better than keeping me sane or happy. He was aware, and never did anything to mitigate it. He hid everything from me until it was too late for me to change anything. His excuse that he wanted me to have a happy childhood; that to put the weight of the Prophecy and all that shit was too much to drop on an eleven year old boy. Had I known earlier, I could have trained, and I could have been prepared to deal with that little shit Riddle.”

“And you would have forgone love,” she said quietly, but still quite dangerously.

“Mind telling me exactly what love has gotten me thus far? Parents who died long before I could have any real memories of them. The only memory I have is the last night of their lives. There was no love at the Dursleys, other than for themselves. And at school? Dumbledore loved me so much he sent me back to the Dursleys all the time.” He barked an unhappy laugh. “And the other side of the equation got people killed. Those twelve were chosen because they meant more to me than anyone else alive. I would have died for them. And instead, I’m stuck living for a thousand years.”

He took a deep breath. "So don't try talking to me about love. Love toward me has caused only pain, and love from me has caused only death."

She looked at him for a long moment, and the lightning stopped crackling around her. "You wanted me to kill you," she said finally. "Despite the press clippings, I'm *not* omnipotent, I'm *not* omniscient, and I sure as hell am not omnibenevolent. Ask Sodom and Gomorrah about me when I lose my temper."

"PMS much?" Harry asked somewhat snidely.

"Another thing. I'm not female either. Nor am I male. I am an anthropomorphic manifestation of the concept of deity. You talk much easier to women than you do to men, so I decided to show up in female form." She smiled. "I also noticed that you rather appreciate the form I chose."

"Well, as I would have said even before this thing happened, I'm not dead yet. I've just decided never to partake again."

"So you chose celibacy ... why?"

"Because I don't want to run the risk of falling in love again. Despite all the stories about me sleeping with this girl or that one, I can't get behind the idea of a simple no-feeling fuck. I want to care for the person." He turned to the monument. "And all the girls I would have considered it with are listed right there. So never again. Especially since I'll outlive her by such a psychotically huge margin."

She looked at him for another long moment. "My original gift to you was going to be one of the ones you mocked. You were going to get some time to talk to each of them. But I've another gift for you now. It will involve some judicious mind woogieing, but I think it will be a much better thing overall."

"Okay," he said slowly. "Two things. What's the new gift, and what the hell is 'mind woogieing'?"

"If you're going to succeed at what I want you to try, then I'll need to take away some of your suicidal thoughts." She raised a hand as he started to get annoyed. "I'm not a witch, so I won't be Obliviating you. You'll just ... there really aren't the words for it, okay?"

"Okay," he replied, still speaking somewhat slowly as he tried to process her comments. "So a mind woogie is playing with someone's thoughts without making them forget anything."

"As good as any other description," she answered with a smile. "As for my gift? How would you like to return to the past and have a chance to fix things?"

His eyes widened. "I could go back and make sure that they don't die?"

"You can at least try to prevent it."

He thought for a long time before speaking again. "Okay, some questions in no particular order of

importance. Will I keep my memories of now, will I keep the lifespan, and what sort of restrictions will I have?”

“In order – yes, no, and none whatsoever. You can't change anything if you don't remember it. Sending you back while keeping the lifespan is even crueller than leaving you uptime to mourn. As for restrictions, I don't think that they're a good idea. It makes you pay more attention to the restrictions than to the actual goal.”

“So if I want to go back and immediately tell Dumbledore to start looking for the Horcruxes, I can?”

“If you think that will help, yes you can. Assuming, of course, that you go back to before he dies.”

“Is it a crap-shoot as to when I land?”

“Yes and no. I'm a god – *the* God, if you will – but I've pointed out that the press releases are a tad overblown. I can tweak the quantum barriers, but Heisenberg still rules. I can guarantee that you won't jump back to being a baby, or even to well before Hogwarts, but I can't promise that you'll land at 6 PM on September 1, 1993, for example. Basically, I can guarantee that you *will* end up in your Hogwarts years.”

“Okay, so the curse of the lifespan is gone, and I can fix things. What's the downside?”

“Depends on how you look at it. You'll be in a position to be killed by Riddle, and if you die back then, you're still dead. This universe will cease to exist, for all intents and purposes, as of the moment that you go back and make a big enough change. You die back then? You're dead. End of statement. Make sure you take out Riddle first.”

“Prophecy the same? No shunting me sideways into an alternate or something, with a different prophecy?”

“Nope. This universe. Same '*The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches*' bullshit you dealt with before.”

“Good. If I've no restrictions on my actions, and know what's coming, then I'm ahead of the game. I'll take your offer.”

“I'm glad you did.” She grinned widely. “No sense in dithering around here. Let's send you back.” She stepped forward and put her hands on his shoulders. “You'll forgive me for this, but I find it easier to do the mental work I need to with close contact.”

“Sure, no prob-mmph!” he replied, ending it the way he did as she leaned in and proceeded to kiss him on the lips. It was quite a kiss, however, as it made him feel quite light-headed, and he developed tunnel vision as he greyed out for a moment.

As his vision returned to him, he found that things had changed. He saw everything in front of him as though it was a very highly colored dream. There were hundreds and hundreds of faces staring

down at him from stands that had been magicked there. And there was a Horntail at the other end of the enclosure, crouched low over her clutch of eggs, her wings half-furled, her evil, yellow eyes upon him, a monstrous, scaly, black lizard, thrashing her spiked tail, heaving yard-long gouge marks in the hard ground. He said the first thing that came to mind.

“Oh, fuck!”

A Time To Reflect The First Task

Disclaimer: Do not use without a helmet. Do not meddle in the affairs of dragons, for you are crunchy and good with ketchup. Do not think that anyone other than JK Rowling owns any of this.

Note: This chapter is later than I wanted it to be, due to a computer crash that ate everything in the original version of this chapter that followed the word 'correct' in the third paragraph. This led to me rewriting the way that Harry finished the first task, since I had independently come up with the exact same solution that DrT had for TriWizard Redux. I think my new solution works a bit better.

But it means that I'm writing a little slower, because I'm trying to catch back up to where I should be.

As his vision returned to him, he found that things had changed. He saw everything in front of him as though it was a very highly colored dream. There were hundreds and hundreds of faces staring down at him from stands that had been magicked there. And there was a Horntail at the other end of the enclosure, crouched low over her clutch of eggs, her wings half-furled, her evil, yellow eyes upon him, a monstrous, scaly, black lizard, thrashing her spiked tail, heaving yard-long gouge marks in the hard ground. He said the first thing that came to mind.

“Oh, fuck!”

A gasp went through the crowd. “Hmm, I guess that the crowd can hear me. Nice if they'd told us that the crowd could listen to everything I say.” There was laughter in the crowd now, so he knew that his thought process was correct. “Hmm, again. I wonder.” He pointed his wand toward the egg that was his target and said, “Accio egg!” The egg resolutely remained exactly where it was.

He stared at the dragon again for a long moment, and then tried something as if met his gaze. *Legilimens!* he thought, and found himself touching the mind of the creature.

<I am not so easy to control, human!> was the bellow he received in response.

I don't want to control you, or even steal your children. What I do want is the extra egg that they have you guarding.

<Extra egg?> she thought, and looked down. *<Ah, the gold one. Why do you wish it? It is rather*

attractive, after all.>

True. Perhaps I could return it to you later, after I have gleaned its secrets. He paused. Actually, let me admit something to you. I am from the future, and I am here to fix a great wrong. I was placed here. In the original time, before I had learned to speak to you, I summoned my broom and flew around you, annoying you greatly, the way that an insect would annoy me. I need to recover that egg to be allowed to continue forward in this contest, and change what needs changing.

She stared at him for a long moment, and he could feel himself being probed, but it was far gentler than anything that Snape or even Dumbledore could do. He got the feeling of a smile, and smiled himself when she reached down, gently picked up the egg and placed it well outside her nest.

A feeling of amusement flowed at him. *<Let us have some fun with these watchers, shall we?>* She sent him the image and he laughed aloud, startling the spectators.

People gasped as they watched him pocket his wand and walked forward to the gold egg. He then reached up and unclasped the chain holding her to the ground and climbed on her back at the juncture where neck met with torso, where her wings would not strike him. With that, she took to the air, Harry riding behind her neck, laughing happily. He was now aware of some of the 'mind woogie' that God (or whatever she really was) had done, and thanked her.

They spun around the sky, and Harry could see Charlie on the ground nearly tearing his hair out at the spectacle. He knew that he was making his 'legend' grow even more, but this was worth it. He was back and able to save the lives of all his friends, he could tell people how he really felt about them, and he was doing something he'd never thought possible. He was riding a dragon!

He could feel her preening, and realised that their link was still open. *Something else no one ever bothered to learn about dragons*, he thought with amusement.

<We find it interesting to let them treat us as dumb beasts. It makes mealtimes easier, at least, and by allowing them to deal with reserves, we find mates easier.>

We should probably land, my lady. As much fun as this is, you have a clutch of eggs that should probably be taken care of.

<You are a credit to your kind. I wish that more were like you.>

Perhaps I can talk to the redhead that you're approaching now. He's a friend, and loves your kind. I think he'd likely give up the ability to procreate to be able to be closer to you than he already is.

<He would want to think twice about that,> she thought at him with some amusement. *<There is a female of your species who would rather like the idea of at least practising the act with him as often as she can. Tell him to speak to Sheila. I know that he would be pleased with it as well.>*

She was landing as she told Harry that, so people were treated to the sight of a wind-blown Harry suddenly bursting out laughing. "You understand English? I could have just talked to you

normally?”

There was a shimmy down the Horntail's neck scales that Harry just knew was laughter of some sort. “I just might decide to go into dragon 'handling' when I finish school, you little minx,” he said as he climbed off. “I should probably reconnect the collar now, since I'd imagine they'd all feel safer.” He reached down and picked it up, and she stretched her neck upwards to make it easier for Harry to fasten it to her. “If I can, I'll come down and see you again before they take you back to the reserve.”

Charlie and Hagrid were staring at Harry for a long moment before they met each others eyes, and with a shared grin dropped to their knees (the ground shook very slightly when Hagrid hit) and they began to chant, “We're not worthy! We're not worthy!” as they kowtowed to him.

Harry was laughing rather hard as he finally managed to choke out, “Arise, Sir Rubeus and Sir Charles!” The two stood, laughing themselves, and Hagrid pulled him into a rough hug. “I knew yer could do it, “Arry!” he said. “More style ter it than anyone else!”

“Hell of a finish, at least,” Charlie agreed.

“Yeah, well, that was her idea,” Harry admitted. “By the way, you might want to find a teacher of a skill called Legilimency and you might also want to look up Sheila, according to her,” he said, jabbing his thumb back at the dragon.

“I wouldn't stand a chance with Sheila! She's shot down every handler at the camp!”

“According to her, it's because none of them were Charlie Weasley. *She* seems to think that Sheila is rather taken with you.”

Charlie looked up at the dragon. “So they understand English,” he finally said. “They've let us run around being silly for their own amusement?”

No matter what species they were, no one mistook the mock-innocent look of “Who, me?” on the dragon's face.

Laughing, Harry said, “Actually, I think they're telepathic. Legilimency requires eye contact, and I can still feel her tapping me mentally, occasionally. Probably a surface thing, if only to get the language and general feel for the person. You get along pretty well with almost all the dragons, don't you?” Charlie nodded. “It's because they understand that you love them for who they are. I'll bet you've had handlers that didn't last very long because the dragons just wouldn't be still around them, and tried to hurt them?”

Charlie nodded, then shook his head. “Well, let me get you to the first aid tent, because Madam Pomfrey won't be happy until she knows that you're not bleeding to death out here.” He led him up to the tent in question. “I need to get back down there and see to her. I'll see you around, and see if I can get you to her again before we take her home.”

Madam Pomfrey bustled over to Harry as he stepped inside the tent. "Dragons!" she said, in a disgusted tone. The tent was divided into cubicles; he could make out Cedric's shadow through the canvas, but Cedric didn't seem to be badly injured; he was sitting up, at least. Madam Pomfrey examined Harry carefully, talking furiously all the while. "Last year dementors, this year dragons, what are they going to bring into this school next? You're very lucky ... I've no idea what made you think that you could just walk up to a dragon, let alone ride the beast ..." He got an insight to the woman as he saw suspicious wetness in the corners of her eyes.

"She's not a beast, she's quite intelligent," he said softly. "And thank you for caring about all of us students." He stood and hugged the woman gently.

When the hug broke, he saw a smile on her face. "And thank you, Mr Potter. It's nice to know that my efforts are appreciated."

"Whether or not I ever said so, they always have been, ma'am. You must be a saint to put up with us for so long."

"Maybe they'll name a hospital after me when I'm gone," she responded with a small smile.

"Then let us hope that such a hospital doesn't get built for many more years," he said, giving her another quick hug, which she returned this time.

The tent flap burst aside suddenly, and Harry turned, knowing who he'd see – Hermione, followed closely by Ron.

"Harry, you were brilliant!" Hermione said squeakily. There were fingernail marks on her face where she had been clutching it in fear. "You were amazing! You really were!"

Harry walked over to the two of them and pulled her into a hug before releasing her and running his hand down her cheek, a soft healing spell on his lips. The marks disappeared. "Such a pretty face shouldn't be marred by worries." She blinked in surprise at the comment before blushing coyly.

He turned to Ron, who was white. "I ... someone looks like they're trying to kill you!" he finally said.

His look hardened slightly. "No shit, Sherlock," he finally said.

"Harry, I'm ... I was a jealous idiot, and I ..."

"I actually do understand, Ron," Harry interrupted. "I forgive you, but I won't forget this. Please don't ever do this to me again, either, because you won't get a third chance to hurt me like this." Then, as Ron looked about ready to stop pretending that he was the manly sort and give in to a good cry, Harry pulled him into a hug – a good, solid, manly back-slapping hug. "Don't take this wrong, but I love you, Ron. It's why it hurt so much. You're my brother in all but blood."

"Never again," Ron said seriously. "I'll die first."

“Please don't,” Harry said. “Madam Pomfrey? As your soonest convenience, could you tell the Headmaster that I *need* to speak with him? Make sure you tell him that the one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches.”

The school's healer looked at him in puzzlement. “All right. I assume that the phrasing is important?”

“Very much so. He'll likely want to come running to me immediately ...” He paused and asked for some parchment and a quill. Although she wasn't wearing her backpack, Hermione handed him both almost immediately. “I'd ask where you had those, but I'd likely become very jealous of the quill,” he said before remembering that he wasn't this forward originally. “I do not believe that I just embarrassed you like that, Hermione,” he said in an attempt to mitigate the damage. “Please forgive me.”

The bushy-haired girl was blushing furiously as she said, “You're forgiven, Harry.”

“I may think that a lot, but I shouldn't be so crass as to vocalise it in front of you,” he answered. “Thank you.”

“As long as it's not too crude, go right ahead,” she said with a voice that surprised Harry. It was shy, but also a little husky at the same time.

She's flirting with me! he thought, and started to do a little dance in his mind as he wrote. Finally, he rolled up the parchment and handed it to her. “He'll want to set up a meeting with me when he hears you tell him what I said, so let him know that the meeting needs to involve these people, and *only* these people. Stress that I said *only* the people on that list.” He smiled. “I know this is very weird, but this *is* me we're talking about,” he finished with a laugh.

She smiled as well. “I understand not being able to talk about things, Mr Potter. I am the head of the medical staff for the school, after all.” She bustled off to the others again, and the three of them left the tent to get Harry's scores, which turned out to be one point shy of perfect, since Karkaroff had given him a nine.

“You're in the lead, Harry!” Hermione squealed, surprising him by throwing her arms around him and bouncing. In the original time-line, this would have likely made him laugh and maybe hug her back, but there was a much wiser mind in the head now, and he was being forcibly reminded that a girl that he was attracted to was rubbing her body against his, although she wasn't aware of the potentially erotic aspects of her jumping.

He threw his arms around her to stop her. “Stop!” he strangled out.

Startled, she did so. “What's wrong Harry, did I step on your foot? Did I hurt you or something?”

“No,” he answered slowly, trying to figure out how to say it without embarrassing her. “Um, fourteen, boy, fifteen, woman,” he finally said equally as slowly as before, pointing first to himself on the first two, and then to her starting when he said 'fifteen'.

She thought for a moment before her eyes went startingly wide, and she blushed furiously and tried to break away. “No,” he said. “I stopped you because I was liking it too much, if you understand me. You are not going to run away and pretend that this never happened, unless you tell me right now that you want to.” He held his arms around her.

She looked into his eyes for a long moment before saying, without ever breaking eye contact with Harry, “Ron, if you have anything you want to say to me, now would be the right time, because I have a choice to make.”

Showing far more maturity than Harry could remember from Ron at this point in their lives, Ron said, “Honestly, I think you're pretty, Hermione. But we fight too much, and I'm not ready for a long term thing. If you want to date Harry, I'll just sit back and bitch and moan about how he always gets the best things in life.” He ended his statement with a grin that they both could hear.

Hermione turned her head to look at Ron and said, “Thank you. I'm attracted to you both, but ... I think I want to explore things with Harry for a while.”

Harry said, “Besides, there's another redhead in the school that you might want to talk to. I understand that Susan Bones thinks you're kind of cute.” He shrugged. “Personally, I think it shows that she's a bit insane, but then again, I'm a guy who is rather solidly interesting in the *female* of the species, thank you very much.” He thought for a moment. “I'd go find her and see if perhaps she might be interested in going to a dance with you, if perchance one were to happen this year. After all, we had to have had *some* reason for bringing dress robes.” He met Ron's eyes. “And we'll talk to maybe Parvati and Lavender to see about some reworking of those robes. Parvati's got an eye for fashion, and I'm betting that the two of them just might manage to find a way to make those things look good on you.”

“You know something,” Hermione said with an air of certainty.

“More than I'm willing to admit to out here,” he replied. “That meeting that I insisted on with the Headmaster? Your names are on there. It's vital that this meeting happens.” He looked in her eyes. “But for the moment, there's something far more important to do.” He lowered his face toward hers, and smiled as her eyes closed softly and her mouth opened very slightly. Their lips met, and suddenly their bodies were crushing even tighter together as the kiss seemed to take on a life of its own. He had missed her for so many years, and his feelings of loss and something that could only be described as rebirth coursed through him. She moaned softly against him as their tongues met, and he found himself embarrassed as she gently pressed her entire body against him, since he *had* responded as a fourteen year old boy would to having a pretty girl snogging the hell out of him.

They broke, and her eyes sparkled with mirth. “I'm not ready for that yet, but it's nice to know that you think of me that way.”

“Oh God, I'm ...” he started to say when it hit him that she really was here, that this was not a dream. Somehow it had taken this long for it all to strike home that he really was in the past, with a chance to save their lives. He choked back a sob and hugged her tighter, trying hard not to cry uncontrollably.

Their tender moment was interrupted by the quiet sound of clicking from the bushes. “*Accio camera!*” he snarled, and as a familiar camera shot toward him, he yelled “*Reducto!*” and blasted it to smithereens.

“How dare you!” screeched the voice of his least favourite reporter. In his original timeline, she'd continued to be a thorn in his side, writing articles that somehow both condemned and praised him at the same time. The public was about to lynch him before he finally defeated Riddle, which had luckily been her downfall, since he had 'accidentally' stated in public that she was an unregistered Animagus. Her prison sentence was probably excessive for the crime of not registering, but people in power suddenly realised how much she might possibly know about them, and chose to keep her away from those who might want to know that information.

“I dare a lot, Rita,” he said. “I apologise for the camera, but I was in the midst of a tender moment here, and heard someone spying, so I took measures to deal with it. I promise to buy you a top of the line new one, Bozo,” he said to the cameraman, who simply raised his eyebrow at the use of the name.

“Ah, child, be careful about trying to play with the big boys. Little boys who think they're big boys get hurt.”

“Someone should tell that to Draco Malfoy, then,” Harry said. “He tries to run with the big dogs, but it's hard for a toy poodle to run with wolves, except as lunch.” He looked her in the eyes. “And as for me? I'm a bigger boy than you might think, Rita.”

Hermione snickered softly against him and whispered, “I'll say.”

“Shush, you,” he said with a small grin. “There's a lot of things I can quote at you, but probably the best one right now is this: 'Do not start with me. You will *not* win.' I can back that up, too, Rita.”

“And just what can you do to me?” she asked, the ridicule obvious in her voice.

“Make sure that everyone knows that you're an illegal, unregistered Animagus. You are a particularly ugly little beetle, to go with those particularly ugly glasses of yours.”

“And your proof of this claim is what?” she mocked.

“Don't need any. We'll all just see to it that any beetle we see around us is crushed and gotten rid of. Who'd complain about the death of one little beetle in the scheme of things?” She looked startled. “I know your secret, Skeeter. As I said, you will not win if you push against me. You are not allowed on the grounds except during the actual events, so I think we're safe in that regard. Beetle in winter? Kill it. Pure and simple. No murder charges either.” He stared at her coldly.

“You wouldn't?” she gasped.

“How would we know?” he asked innocently. “We could simply capture every beetle we see and

subject it to the Reversal Charm for Animagi. Of course, being in a jar when we do that could get ugly for you.”

Rita Skeeter scowled at him. “What do you want from me?”

“Something I think you're ill-equipped to handle, to be honest, but I'm going to give you *one* chance to prove me wrong. Stick only to the truth when it comes to writing about people. You want to interview people? Feel free. Don't use that ... ah, to hell with it.” He pointed his wand at the acid green quill that was still scribbling away and vaporised it. “Don't buy a new one of those. Get one that quotes exactly. Be honest in your reporting and I'll leave you alone. Start embellishing again and I'll destroy you.”

“You're only fourteen. What can you possibly do to *me*?” she asked, the mocking tone once again in her voice.

He murmured for a moment, and Rita glowed a brilliant sparkling blue. “What have you done to me, you half-blooded little prick?” she asked, her eyes going wide a moment later. “Your mudblood whore looked this up for you, didn't she?”

Harry smiled as he snapped his wand at her and fired off two spells almost simultaneously. The first shot her back against a tree, where the second spell made her stick fast, unable to move. “Rita, luckily we both know that you're usually better at not saying what you're thinking. Otherwise you'd never have made it as far as you have. Right now I've cursed you with a week of telling the unvarnished truth about what you think whenever you open your mouth to speak. If you cross me again, I'll make it permanent. And one of my friends is one of the best curse-breakers in the world. He'll know how to make it such that it'll take *years* to break, if ever.” He stalked over to her. “And if I ever hear you speak about Hermione in such a manner again, I'll kill you, pure and simple. She's a better woman than you'll ever be, and more than I deserve. I'll destroy you literally, if you make me.”

There was fear in her eyes as she nodded her understanding. He released her from the tree, and made a shooing motion to her. She took off at a surprising speed.

He turned to face Hermione, who looked at him with a mixture of shock and – if her blouse was any indicator – some arousal at his comments. “I'll understand if -”

“No one has ever felt that way about me before,” she said. “I was always the ugly bookworm.”

“You're anything but ugly,” he replied, “and bookworm has nasty connotations. You're a woman who loves her studying.”

“That's the second time you've called me a woman, rather than a girl. Why?”

He grinned and looked down her body once and then met her eyes. “You have to ask why?”

“Yes. I'm only fifteen, and in certain meanings of the word, still innocent. That doesn't qualify me

as a woman.”

“But you are also quite mature, emotionally speaking. Far more so than someone like Rita Skeeter for example. Why is she considered a woman? Because she's – pardon my crudity – spread her legs to climb the ladder? Doesn't work for me. That strikes me as particularly *im-* mature. So if someone like her can be considered a woman, then why not you?”

Her heart was in her eyes. “If you keep talking like that and acting like that, Mr Potter, I just might have to keep you around forever,” she said softly.

“I shall endeavour to treat you as you deserve, then, dear lady,” he said, bowing extravagantly to her before offering his arm to her, and then clapping Ron on the back. The three of them headed toward the castle, but not before Harry made a slight stop to the Owlery to send a letter, once again wondering where Hermione was keeping the quill and parchment. (He was hoping to get a chance to go searching sometime soon, he had to admit to himself.)

Harry entered the large meeting room that the Headmaster had set aside and pulled Hermione onto his lap. “I want to get in some kissing time before everyone starts arriving.” Before they could do anything more than look into each others eyes, the door opened again and Cedric Diggory walked in, the orange paste he'd worn for his burns gone, leaving behind a vague pinkness where it had been.

“Good go there with your dragon, Potter. And thank you. I've talked to my House-mates, and none of us will wear those badges.”

“As long as you can charm them to not flash that Potter Stinks message, go right ahead and wear 'em. You *are* the real Hogwarts champion, and I'll say that in the Great Hall at breakfast, lunch or dinner, whichever one has more people.” He laughed quickly. “Heck, get rid of that extra slogan and *I'll* wear a Support Cedric Diggory badge.”

Cedric looked at Harry for a long moment. “You should have been in Hufflepuff.” He looked to Hermione. “You definitely have good taste in boyfriends, Miss Granger.”

With the most wicked look in her eye that Harry had ever seen, she replied, “I wouldn't know. I've not had a chance to taste him yet.”

Harry stared at her for a moment, surprised by the comment and barely noticing Cedric's guffaws. The surprise suddenly gave way to other images, and he was suddenly telling her without a single word that he was intrigued by the idea. She looked rather startled as she parsed some information that she hadn't when they'd first kissed earlier that day.

Harry reluctantly moved her off his lap, and smiled his own wicked smile when he saw her eyes look where she'd just been sitting and widen. He was amused and a little aroused when she unconsciously licked her lips.

The rest of the room began to fill, Harry being surprised that Dumbledore had been able to get Krum and Fleur away from their keepers, but pleased at the same time. The Weasley family – all nine of them – came in as a single group and sat as one, but not before Molly could come over and give Harry a quick hug, and begin to complain about what they were doing and how they'd allowed Harry to compete. He hugged her back and eventually she took a seat. Ginny was looking daggers at Hermione. Remus walked in with a large black dog at his feet, which proceeded to look at Harry and do the closest thing to a wink that a dog could do.

The Ravenclaw contingent came in as a group, bringing Su Li, Cho Chang, Luna Lovegood and Padma Patil in, as well as her twin sister Parvati. Neville, Hannah and Susan entered at the same time, Neville fairly deep in conversation with Hannah about something down in the greenhouses.

The last to enter were Albus Dumbledore, who walked into the room behind Daphne Greengrass and Severus Snape. All three sat down.

“Excuse me, Headmeaster?” Harry asked calmly.

“Yes, Mr Potter?” Albus Dumbledore asked, sounding somewhat confused.

“We seem to have an extra person at this gathering, one who was specifically requested not to be here.”

“I believe that Severus has a point of view that can only add to the conversation, Harry,” Dumbledore began in a grandfatherly manner.

“I disagree, Headmaster. I had specific reasons for not wanting him here.” He pulled his wand and did a complex wand motion. “Well, at least you kept half of it. Nobody else is here who shouldn't be other than him.”

Severus Snape sneered at Harry in his characteristic manner. “Do you honestly believe that I would want to listen to anything that you have to say, Potter?”

Harry grinned at him, a less than pleasant smile on his face. “Either that or you're afraid to leave your student with the Headmaster of the school. Are you attempting to insult him by staying and making sure that we don't do something rude to your student?”

Before Snape could respond, Harry turned to Daphne and said, “My apologies for putting you in the middle of this, but unlike your Head of House, *you* have a right to the information, I believe. If it wouldn't end up with everyone in your House – including your Head of House – shunning you, I would offer the hand of friendship.”

She snorted. “Most of those little boot-lickers shun me already. I accept.” She held up her hand, and Harry took it with a smile. “Pity that Granger got to you first,” she purred. “That would really drive the House insane.”

Harry saw Severus Snape nearly vibrating. “Problem is, I think that a certain person next to you

would likely poison you 'by accident', if he could manage it before his head exploded.” He smiled softly. “Besides, I am quite happy with Hermione. I appreciate the offer, though.”

He turned back to Snape. “Since you were not an invitee to this gathering, I am politely asking you to leave.”

Snape smiled his oily smile and sat back in the chair, making himself comfortable. Harry turned to the Headmaster. “I have information for you, sir, but it will not be given with that man in the room, when you knew quite well that I specifically insisted that he not be here.”

Albus frowned. “Harry, you need to learn to work with other people. I believe that he is uniquely suited to this meeting, based on the small snippet that you quoted to Madam Pomfrey.”

“Why? Because he's the one who heard it in the bar and went running to Voldemort? I should trust him because the fact that I am an orphan can be laid quite clearly at his feet?” He turned to Snape, who was starting to rise from the chair and pull his wand. “What you heard was 'The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches ... born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies ...' You never heard any further because you were caught eavesdropping and were kicked out.”

“Is this true?” Remus asked dangerously. “Were you the one who took the prophecy to Vol ... to You Know Who?”

“Are you actually going to believe the ramblings of a fourteen year old glory hound?”

“Compared to your word? Hell yes!” Remus said. “Remember, I went to school with you, Severus. I remember what your word is worth.”

Harry watched Dumbledore, and saw that there was no intention in the man to chase Professor Snape from the room. He stood and walked toward the door. “Remus? I'll talk with you later about setting up this same meeting, minus the Headmaster and Professor Snape. I had wanted to let the Headmaster know about some things, but since he is proven that he can not be trusted, I feel that he should be left out of the loop.”

“How dare you insult the Headmaster's integrity, Potter!” Snape bellowed. “Just what I would expect from the Gryffindor Golden Boy, however.”

“Now Severus -” Dumbledore began.

“Cedric,” Harry said, ignoring the Potions professor and Headmaster, “You set up a meeting, and inform the person setting it up that ... oh, let's say Zacharias Smith is specifically forbidden to be at the meeting. Smith walks into the meeting just ahead of the person you told to set up the meeting, and sits down. Are you going to trust that person ever again?”

“Not unless they give me a good reason to trust them, and I haven't heard one yet. In fact, in the scenario you set up, I would probably not trust them anyway, because the person doing the actual

set up should have come to me and given his reasons as to why Zach should be at the meeting. To spring him on me when I asked otherwise is actually a power ploy to show who's really in charge.” With that Cedric stood and joined Harry by the door. Hermione was on her way as well, and in moments, all the students save Daphne were with him, including Fleur and Viktor. Daphne looked at Harry for a moment before looking to her Head of House, and then stood and joined the other students. What surprised Harry was when Percy stood and joined the group, which also surprised Ron, Ginny and the twins.

“Bill? Charlie?” Ron asked. A minute later, the only ones remaining at the table were Molly, Arthur, Snape and Dumbledore.

It was when Molly stood and walked over to Harry that the Headmaster seemed to slump in defeat. “You had best have a good reason, young man,” she hissed at him. “Albus is a respected man!”

“Who specifically ignored me,” he said in a conversational tone. “He assumed that I would refuse Snape entry to the meeting on purely childish grounds. Did you notice that he never really stepped on the professor when he was going after me? I have had Snape on me since my very first day here, acting as if I were a pampered prince who needing bringing down a peg, while giving Draco Malfoy the exact treatment that he accused me of being used to. Yet if I don't use his title, most of the adults complain that I must give him respect. Why? Because he's a teacher? Because he turned on Voldemort after setting him on my parents and the Longbottoms? Because he thought he was saving my life in first year when Quirrell-mort was trying to hex me off my broom? I fell farther than that when the Dementors showed up in my third year. I remember him coming into the hospital wing literally foaming at the mouth, accusing me of setting Sirius Black free, even though the door had to be unlocked to let him in, and that door had been the only entry into that room. The day he treats me with a modicum of respect is the day that I might think about calling him Professor when I am anywhere other than in his class.”

Harry threw a powerful reflective shield up as he finished speaking, and the gonging noise as the curse struck it was terribly loud in the room. “Severus!” Albus barked. “Leave this room now!”

Severus glared at Harry as he left the room, then turned to Daphne Greengrass. “Return to the Slytherin Common Room now, Miss Greengrass.”

“Unlike you, professor, I was requested in this meeting,” she said.

“Ten points from you, Miss Greengrass, and a weeks' worth of detentions with me, starting immediately.” He paused, then said dangerously, “Now, Miss Greengrass!”

She stood as tall as she could and said sharply, “No. I was requested, and you were specifically asked *not* to come. I have a right to be in this meeting, and you do not.”

“I will see you -”

“Shut up, Snivellus,” Harry growled. “Do you remember the two mottoes that cropped up in regards to my father? The main one was the Potter family motto – *Audaces fortuna iuvat* . His

personal one, one that I'm sure he said to you many times, was '*Non ini me. Non vinces.*' I just quoted that to Rita Skeeter a little while ago, and backed up my point quite well. I'll say it to you again in English, since I think that you might not understand it otherwise. Don't start with me. You will not win. She is here for the exact same reason that you should *not* be. Now leave."

Severus Snape drew himself to full height in preparation of delivering some scathing retort or grand pronouncement, but suddenly found himself sliding out the door and slamming into a wall across the hall with some considerable force, driving the wind from his lungs. He lunged back for the door, aiming for Harry, who was rather obviously the one who had ejected him, but the door suddenly slammed in his face such that they actually heard him impact with it. Daphne had a look of innocence on her face.

Impishly, Harry created the illusion of a halo over her head, making the others laugh. All but Albus Dumbledore, that is. "Was that truly necessary, Harry?"

"Yes. Now, can I have an oath from you that none of what we talk about in here will be told to Snape? No, before you say it, I will not call him professor for the reasons that you heard. I am not in his class."

"Have things fallen so badly apart that you would require such an oath from me?" the Headmaster asked, looking quite hurt.

"You actually have the testicular fortitude to ask that after what you've seen and heard here so far?" Remus asked him incredulously.

Harry threw a series of spells at the walls of the room, and laughed slightly at the muffled "Ouch!" from the other side of the doorway. "Anti-spying spells. No scrying, no remote seeing or listening, or any of the other methods of learning from outside. Any listening spells are simply picking up a hissing now. The spells I cast tend to bite back at the people trying to circumvent them, hence Snape's cry of pain."

He turned to the Headmaster. "You were given a list of people, all of whom are here. The list also specifically stated that I did *not* want Severus Snape or Alastor Moody in the meeting for reasons that would become obvious in the meeting. You invited Snape anyway, and yet *I'm* the one showing no trust. You will need to rein him in regarding Miss Greengrass, by the way."

"I felt that he would give a unique view on the situation, since he had been the one to hear the words you quoted."

"And it didn't strike you odd that I knew the words that you've fought so hard to keep me from hearing? I know the rest of it too, sir. Doesn't it strike you odd that I've somehow heard the first prophecy of Professor Trelawney's without ever getting to the Hall of Prophecy in the Department of Mysteries? After all, when she prophesied that Pettigrew would rejoin Voldemort at the end of my third year, you referred to it as her *second* valid prophecy."

"How did you learn of it, Harry?" Dumbledore asked.

“Oath first, sir. Explanations after.”

Somewhat sadly, Headmaster Dumbledore swore the oath that Harry requested, and they sat down to speak.

“Simply put, sir, I heard the entire prophecy from you at the end of my fifth year at Hogwarts.”

“Harry,” Hermione began.

“I know, Hermione. This is my fourth year. You now have all the data you need.”

“You're a time traveller?” Padma asked quickly, only seconds ahead of both Hermione and Cho, who were both giving the beautiful Indian girl dirty looks.

“Have you any idea how dangerous that is?” Dumbledore asked, horrified. “The damage to the time stream could be immense! You can't make any -”

“I already have changed things irrevocably, sir. In the original time stream, I Summoned my broom and showed why I play Seeker. I also never harassed Rita Skeeter into laying low for a while.”

He looked around the room. “Before anyone can ask me why I came back, I'll tell you. Cho, Cedric, Padma, Parvati, Hermione, Ginny, Ron, Luna, Neville, Daphne, Su, Hannah, Susan? You were all dead, Sirius Black was dead. Twelve of you at the same time, all because you were my friends. *All* of you at the hands of Voldemort or his followers. That goes for the dog at your feet, Remus.” Padfoot shot to his feet and looked carefully at Harry. “I'm going to let all of you in on a few secrets. You've heard me mention Pettigrew. Peter Pettigrew is alive, and Sirius Black is innocent of the charges that put him into Azkaban without a trial. I have seen Pettigrew with my own two eyes.”

“What happened that was so horrible that you needed to endanger countless lives?” Dumbledore asked, the horror still in his voice.

“Voldemort's final ritual backfired and killed everyone in the room. Including me. The problem is, the ritual he had been performing was supposed to siphon the life force of the people that he had kidnapped and put it into him. He could then take fatal damage and get up from it.”

“The wrong person got the immortality, didn't they?” Luna asked.

“Yes. Twelve of you died at the hands of Tom Riddle just to give me a lifespan of about two thousand years.”

“Did you keep the lifespan when you travelled back?” Remus asked.

“No. That was one of my conditions when the chance was offered me. No extended lifespan, no restrictions on what I could do, and no memory wipe from the trip.” He stood and began to pace. “Do you have any idea how painful it is to have to pull an icepick out of your own eye, because

jamming the damned thing into your brain didn't kill you?"

"Why would you do such a thing?" Hermione asked, sounding on the verge of tears.

"Because I couldn't become a Dark Lord and take my suffering out on everyone else."

That was a response that no one expected, and they all sat back heavily in their chairs. Finally, Albus broke the silence. "My deepest apologies, Harry. I see with that comment how badly I have managed to fail you. I should have trusted you, and you were correct to demand the oath from me."

Harry was confused. "Why would that statement ... I'm confused."

Cedric spoke up. "You were being a proper Hufflepuff again," he said with a small smile. "Would the reason that you couldn't take it out on everyone else be that you felt that those who had died before would be disappointed in you?"

"Of course," Harry answered in a voice that made it clear that it really was that simple to him.

Hermione stood and kissed his cheek. "It's one of the reasons I love you, Harry Potter."

He shook his head. "The important thing is that I can deal with him this year, and possibly manage to deal with all his Death Eaters at the same time." He looked to Cedric. "And save the life of the real Hogwarts champion."

"Good heavens!" Albus said. "Mr Diggory will die this year?"

"Not this time around," Harry growled. It was obvious to everyone in the room that the anger was not at the Headmaster, but at the situation.

He looked to the other contestants in the Tournament. "First time around, I was just a 'leettle boy', and I acted it, and got to the cup with the help of Alastor Moody. It turns out that Moody is actually stored in his own trunk, and has been replaced by Barty Crouch Junior."

"Bartemius Crouch Junior died in Azkaban, Harry," Dumbledore said softly.

"No, his mother did. When you die Polyjuiced as someone, it locks you into that form. Mrs Crouch was dying anyway, so she convinced her husband to make the switch. Well, Junior got free of his father's Imperius. By the way, Professor, see if you can call off the search for Bertha Jorkins. She's dead by Voldemort's wand, if not his hand. Seems that Pettigrew can use the Riddle wand as well."

"Anyway, Barty has been running around the school, and will Imperius Viktor to eliminate all the competition but me. The TriWizard Cup will have been turned into a two way Portkey, and in the original time stream, Cedric and I took the Cup together." He looked to Cedric and said thickly, "The last words you ever said were 'Wands out, you reckon?' I will not watch that happen again." He clenched his fist and leaned forward onto the table, the emotion raw in him. "It will not happen

again!" he yelled, raising both fists and bringing them back down on the table.

He had merely intended to get rid of some of his frustration by hitting the table. What he got rid of instead was a chunk of the table, which sat on the ground beneath him, smouldering. "My apologies," he said to the rest in the room. "I have felt responsible for Cedric's death for nearly twenty years now, and now that I'm back here, I swear to you Cedric, if I have to break every bone in your body to keep you from touching that Cup, I will. You can hate me for it, but -""Why does it

"You're saving my life," Cedric said simply. "If it weren't for the magic of the contract to compete, I'd pull out of the Tournament. But I have to do my best."

"What do you need from us?" Albus said. "Other than to detain the false Moody, I mean."

"Actually, I need to make sure that his father is rescued, because otherwise Junior will kill him in February or thereabout of this upcoming year. We should leave Junior in place, since when we discovered it in the original time stream, the real Moody was still alive in the trunk. We don't know if Junior was in constant contact with the homonculus form that Tom is in right now."

He grabbed some parchment from the table and grinned at Hermione, who blushed furiously. After a moment of writing, he slid it to the Headmaster. "Get Bill there to help you if you can. This is where the surviving Horcruxes are stored. If you *don't* take a curse-breaker with you to at least the Gaunt house, then you'll likely lose the use of your hand. We need those found and destroyed before May. Luckily, as I said, I know where they all are."

He frowned. "That leads me to Snape. In the original time line, we didn't know that the locket was in 12 Grimmauld Place, so we went to where we *thought* it was. An ugly time later, after you had drunk a poison in order to empty the bowl that held the thing, we came back to Hogwarts to find it overrun with Death Eaters that Draco Malfoy had helped into the school. To make a long story short, we ended up coming across Malfoy and Snape on the Astronomy Tower. You pointed out that Draco didn't have the killer instinct. Snape, however, proved that he did as you kept begging him 'Severus, please!' I watched your already dead body plummet from the Tower after Snape hit you full in the chest with the Killing Curse. I saw it with my own eyes, sir. After all the chances that you gave him, he proved his true colours."

He looked sadly at the Headmaster. "Sir, it would be in your best interest to remove him from this school. He is unfair to all the students, including his own Slytherins, although in the opposite direction, if you will. He treats Gryffindors like they are his own personal verbal punching bags, and it's going to stop, sir. I can imagine that there are many years worth of students willing to complain about Severus Snape and his teaching methods."

"Why does it fall to you?" Molly asked. "I know that you say that you travelled back in time, but why must it be you that deals with it? Why can't the adults – well, other adults – deal with it?"

Harry smiled and put on his very best Trelawney-in-a-trance voice. "*The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches ... born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the*

seventh month dies ... and the Dark Lord will mark him as his equal, but he will have power the Dark Lord knows not ... and either must die at the hand of the other for neither can live while the other survives ... the one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord will be born as the seventh month dies ...” He coughed once and someone pushed a glass of water to him, which he gladly drank. “Gah. Don't know why I go for the showmanship on that. But that's the entirety of the reason that I'm an orphan I spent some time hating the professor for leaving me with the Dursleys, but now I'm just annoyed at him for it. He did the best he could at the time, and once I was there, nothing could be done to remove me.” He turned to face Dumbledore. “That being said, “I'm moving into Potter Manor this summer, Professor, whether or not I've eradicated Tom. I've had sixteen years of those things, and see no reason to subject myself to more.”

“I want to argue with you,” Dumbledore said after a moment, “but I am seeing that you must be the person that you state that you are – a Harry Potter in his thirties, in the body of his fourteen year old self.”

“I'd like to show some Pensieve memories to the group, if possible, to show that I'm not being especially inventive.” Upon the Headmaster's nod, Dobby was called, and the Headmaster's Pensieve was brought. Harry pulled several memories, and showed them one by one. The first was his memory of the end of the Tournament and Cedric's final words. He showed them all the way through to his return and 'Moody's' unmasking. When they pulled out, Cho was crying and holding Cedric tightly. “You have my word that I will do everything I can to keep that from happening to you, Cedric.”

“You'll need someone with you!” he said. “To hell with you trying to save my life; what about yours?”

“I made it to my thirties, Cedric. Tom can't kill me when he's so weak from his rebirth.”

“He didn't look weak to me!” Hermione shot back.

“Compared to his power later, this will be a picnic. After all, he'll not be facing a fourteen-year-old with a fourteen-year-old's power. I'm in my thirties in a number of ways, although I was obviously woogied a bit to make sure that I could find girls my body age attractive again You saw what I did to Skeeter out there. Could I have done that yesterday, from *your* point of view?”

“No. I don't want you to die though,” Hermione finished in a small voice.

“I don't either, Hermione, but it my be the price for coming back to save you guys. I was an idiot the first time around, and you twelve died because of it. I will literally die before I allow that to happen in this stream.”

He showed the memories of Snape's treatment of the Gryffindors, and then moved to Dumbledore's murder. Finally, he showed himself breaking in to the ritual that Voldemort had been performing, and waking up after it had gone so terribly wrong. They watched him caress the cheeks of each girl, even going so far as to kiss Hermione and Daphne's foreheads. “I'll be with you soon,” he said in the memory just before it faded out.

“Three drownings, one *Reducto* to the face, an ice-pick to the brain through the eye, and a few other attempts later, I realised that the one person who didn't deserve to even live now had exactly the type of immortality that Tom had been after.” He turned to Hermione. “Let me put it to you this way, Hermione. If it prevents the group of you from dying, I will willingly accept the punishments of both Loki and Prometheus *together* , for eternity.”

“And I won't let it happen,” she replied. “You have risked your life for us, and whatever you came from in the future. You love us, and we all love you in one way or another. Can you see the Headmaster allowing you to experience eternal damnation?”

“Can't you see that it's worth it to me, though, to know that the group of you survived this time around? My death may well be a requirement this time. I accept that. One life in return for twelve or thirteen? That's a bargain beyond belief! Especially given where I'm heading when I do die.”

“Where, pray tell do you *think* you're going?” Remus asked, his voice cold in his anger.

“Where I belong, of course. I already told the one you sent me back – God, if you will – that I will make such a racket that she'll *have* to send me to Hell. I will accept nothing else, for my crimes.”

“Which didn't happen,” Cho said simply.

“It did, or I wouldn't have the memories of it,” he replied. “Metaphysics is a bitch, isn't it? It has to have happened for me to remember it. Therefore, even if I'm changing it, I have earned my place in Hell.”

Cho stood and walked over to him. “Forgive me Hermione and Cedric, but he needs this.” He kissed him gently. It was a pleasant thing, that seemed to say nothing but 'Thank you' to him. “You have so much pain, and it ... I'd like to think that we can still be friends in this time-line.”

“Well, if you don't have to get over Cedric's death, it should be easier.”

“I don't want you to go to Hell,” she said softly. “Knowing that you went there to keep me alive would tear me apart, and I'm betting that the rest of your friends would feel the same way.”

“She's right,” Cedric said. “If the cost of me living is you in a state of eternal damnation, then I'll fight you every step of the way.”

“Don't you see that it's worth it to see you survive? You're all worth it. I'm not. I proved that the first time through.”

There were multiple sharp inhalations around the table. “Harry James Potter,” Hermione said softly, “Do you truly think that I would fall in love with a man as worthless as the one you seem to be describing? Do you think that I think so little of myself?”

“No, but you don't know the me that's lived these past years without you guys.”

“The one who swept me off my feet with words earlier today? The one who loves so deeply that

the loss of his friends scarred him horribly? I think I know him. He really is just an older version of the man I fell in love with.”

He shook his head. *How can I make them understand?*

“You don't,” Hannah said. “I could read it in your face. You're trying to figure out how to prove that you're the scum that you think you are. You can't, because you aren't.” She stood. “Hermione, you're either going to have to be willing to be the first girl in a harem, or live with the fact that there are several girls here who would like to kiss him in thanks.”

“Go ahead,” was Hermione's response. Harry could hear the mischievous tone as she said, “I'll figure out the sign-up sheet for the harem later on.”

Daphne laughed loudly, and then sobered. “May I have permission to stay in one of the other dormitories for the night, Headmaster? I do not believe that my Head of House will take my defiance terribly well.”

“Hmm, yes. I shall need to talk to him, and see if I can get him to mend his ways. If he does not, he will be gone.” At Harry's look of disgust, Albus added, “And it will be measured in weeks, not years.”

“Is there anything else that we need to cover?” Harry asked finally. “If not, I think we should get something to eat and head back to our respective dormitories.” Moments later a rather sumptuous feast was on the table before them.

A Time To Reflect

Meetings and Outcomes

Disclaimer: Safety precautions should always be followed when in the water. Snorkel and scuba gear are not toys. Caution: Choking hazard exists. These characters do not belong to me; instead, they belong to JK Rowling.

Back in the Gryffindor Tower, several of the students still up were surprised to find Daphne Greengrass entering the common room with Neville, Ron, Harry, Hermione, Ginny and Parvati. Harry was carrying the egg, of course, having never had a chance to put it back in his dorm room.

“Not that we mind you guys adding an extra knock-out to the list of girls,” Seamus said as he looked at Daphne, “but what gives with bringing someone from Slytherin into Gryffindor?”

Ron surprised them all – given his known thoughts about the house of silver and green – by saying, “You guys should have heard her. She was invited to a meeting that Snape wasn't, and when he left in a huff, he tried to order her to leave as well. She basically told him to get stuffed, no matter how politely she said it.”

“Welcome to Gryffindor Tower, dear lady,” Dean said, bowing over her hand. “I thought you should be greeted by a gentleman -”

“- but you got to her instead,” Seamus interrupted with a grin. Dean's hand went behind his back, and those in view saw a rude gesture toward Finnegan.

Daphne had a small amused smile on her face. “I'm pleased to meet you, Mr ...”

“Thomas. Dean Thomas. The drooling sandy-haired one is Seamus Finnegan, and you already seem to know Mistery Potter, Weasley and Longbottom.”

“Yes. Gentleman all. If anyone will listen, I will definitely tell them that the Gryffindors that I've met are a wonderful group of people.”

“She'll be sleeping in the fourth year girls dorm, before you ask, Seamus,” Parvati said with a scowl on her face, as if she'd just eaten an entire lemon in one go.

“I was merely going to be a gentleman and offer -”

“-and of course you'd offer to be right by her to protect her, right Seamus?” Harry asked.

“But of course! A gentleman could do no less!” Seamus said with a laugh. “Seriously,” he finally said to Daphne, “welcome to Gryffindor Tower. I apologise if my act made you uncomfortable.”

“Actually, it helped make me feel as if I *am* welcome in your common room. Thank you.”

“If the Golden Trio welcome you into the Tower without a peep – if *Ron Weasley* is impressed with someone from Slytherin – then you are more than welcome here,” Dean said.

“Then I suppose that I have you to thank for my warm welcome,” she said, and kissed Ron on the cheek.

Blushing furiously, he replied, “Nah, I'm just a git who's finally learning to pull his head out of his ... uh ... well, you understand. Harry's the mover and shaker here.”

“Yes, but Hermione would likely hurt me if I tried to kiss him,” she said with a smile.

“Nah, it just shows how lucky I was to get there first,” Hermione replied.

“Must be something in the water,” Harry murmured.

“Silly man,” she said, kissing his cheek. “We should head to bed, though, it's a bit late.”

Eyes twinkling, he replied, “This early in our relationship?”

She smacked him on the arm perhaps a little harder than intended. “Prat!” she said through a deep blush. “Come with me, Daphne,” she said, turning and heading up the stairs.

“And there, gentlemen,” Harry said, “is the reason that God gave women beautiful posteriors. Because if they have to walk away from you, it should at least be an enjoyable experience.”

“Harry!” squeaked Hermione's embarrassed voice from upstairs followed by the sound of multiple girls giggling.

Harry waited on the couch the next morning for Hermione. He wasn't sure if a major change had happened, or if his being that forward had forced her to confront her attraction to both boys early. He couldn't have imagined that scene with Hermione demanding that Ron make a choice before sixth or seventh year, first go-around.

Parvati and Lavender came downstairs. As soon as she caught sight of Harry, Parvati blushed furiously and almost ran from the common room. “Daphne and Hermione will be down shortly,” Lavender said with a grin before moving to catch up with her friend.

Harry waited a few minutes more before he heard the two girls coming down the stairs. Hermione stopped at the bottom and looked at Harry, worry evident in her face. He smiled at her. “Came to

your senses last night, huh? Don't worry, I don't have a problem with it. Let's head on down to breakfast.”

Hermione looked relieved and relaxed. Harry turned and headed for the door, opening it for the two girls, and escorting them to breakfast. Daphne sat with them when she saw the looks that the rest of Slytherin seemed to be giving her.

“Potions won't be any fun today,” Daphne said. “You embarrassed him by getting him out of the meeting, and then I argued with him.”

“Well, he's going to be watched, whether he knows it or not. “Expect him to take the points from Gryffindor, since you stayed there overnight, so he'll 'insult' you by calling you one.”

“If I'd known you guys were that friendly, I'd have tried to end up there. I'm too ambitious, though,” she shrugged, and Harry enjoyed it for a moment.

Interesting. I wouldn't have looked at a fourteen or fifteen year old and found them sexy two weeks ago, but now I'm enjoying the memory of what she'll look like under her robes in a year or two. I guess She reset my hormones at the same time when she sent me back. Still feel a little like a pervert, though.

“You okay, Harry?” Hermione asked. “You zoned out for a moment.”

“Ah, just thinking about some of what you guys heard last night.”

“You are *not* deserving of Hell!” she hissed quietly.

He blinked. “No, I wasn't thinking that,” he said equally as quietly. “Just realising that some extra changes had to have been made in the bounce back. Certain ways of thinking that work better for me now than if I were acting like a thirty-something.” He looked at the two, who were now quite curious. “Basically, I can act as if I'm fourteen, which this body is, rather than the thirty-something that the mind is,” he whispered. “It's much easier to deal with everyone. Even if I *could* pass my N.E.W.T.s tomorrow.”

Hermione's eyebrows rose, and even Daphne perked up somewhat. “We are *so* studying with you ,” Daphne breathed.

The group walked into Potions class that Friday several minutes early and sat down. As the professor entered the room. He said nothing, but sneered at the group, including Daphne in the sneer as he looked around the room.

“Don't think your little performance means that you'll be getting a free ride around here, Potter. You are a spoiled child, and I will break you of that arrogance of yours if it is the last thing I do.”

Harry looked at him and replied, with no malice in his voice, “The attempt will be, professor.”

Snape rose to full height and opened his mouth as the door opened to let the rest of the class into the room. He silenced himself quickly, but Harry knew that he would be paying for his response throughout the class.

Out of the corner of his eye, about halfway through the class, while Snape was looking toward the Slytherins, Harry saw Millicent Bulstrode 'accidentally' hit Daphne's face hard enough to make blood flow from the blonde girl's nose. "Ten points from Gryffindor for not being more careful, Miss Greengrass."

"And how, precisely, does Gryffindor work into this, Professor?" Harry asked conversationally.

"Given where she spent the night, I would think that would be obvious," the man said with a smirk.

"Ah. You consider it by injection," Daphne said through her hand. She stood and gathered her things, heading for the door, but not before letting several drops of her blood 'accidentally' fall into the cauldron. Oddly, neither Millicent or Snape caught that. She swept from the room as majestically as one with a bloody nose can.

"You'll take the points for it anyway, so I'll say it. That may well have been your last mistake, sir. She's a real Slytherin, as opposed to the ones you've been brewing recently."

"And how would you be able to judge?" sneered the Potions professor.

"Oh no, I won't ruin the surprise for you. You'd best make sure your resume is up to date, though."

"And how will you manage that?" Harry's response was merely to smile beatifically.

Snape got so furious that he stalked away, rather than physically assault a student. In doing so, he forgot to take more points from Gryffindor.

About twenty minutes later, thick orange smoke began to pour from Bulstrode's cauldron, and it boiled over dangerously, thick bubbles popping and releasing noxious fumes with every pop. "Everyone out!" Snape bellowed. "Now!" In a near panic, the Slytherins left.

"Why are you still here?" he asked the handful of remaining Gryffindors.

"Waiting for the stampede to end," Harry said, "and being stupid Gryffindors, making sure that everyone got out safely." He left with a smile.

They were met by Daphne, who was looking well. The Gryffindors smiled at her and headed to dinner with her. She and Hermione seemed to be whispering about something, and Harry smiled at the image.

"So how soon will our dear Potions professor be seeing his downfall?" he asked somewhat theatrically into a lull in their whispering.

“I have no idea what you mean,” Daphne said in a far too innocent voice. Harry's only answer was a snort of laughter.

“I'm going to disappear tomorrow,” he said once they had gone back to the Tower. Daphne had once again come with them. “I need to make sure that the clue is the same as before.” He looked to Daphne. “Oh yes. Dobby?” he asked softly, and the house elf appeared. Hermione started to turn a colour that does not look good on anything human. “In a moment, Hermione. Dobby, could you grab all of Daphne's things from Slytherin and move them here to Gryffindor? If her Head of House is going to treat her like a Gryffindor, she might as well be one.”

“Dobby will do!” he said before popping out.

“Harry, how could you -” Hermione started.

“How much do you know about house elves?” he interrupted.

“I know that they're unpaid slaves!” she replied, her voice becoming shrill. “How can you condone such treatment of a sentient species? I thought better of you, Harry!”

He looked at her coldly. “Kindly study the results of what will happen to a house elf if they are freed, Miss Granger,” he finally said in a chill voice. “I look forward to hearing the results of your studies. You might wish to actually interview those you profess you are trying to save.” With that, he stood and left the Tower, but not before he heard Ron say, “Smooth going, Hermione. You've lost your boyfriend after how many days?”

He stalked through the school, since curfew was not yet called, and found himself on the seventh floor, in front of the portrait of Barnabas the Barmy. He stomped back and forth in front of it for several seconds before a door appeared.

What he found inside was a surprise – a quiet room in what he recognised as the Granger home. He had been there once, to be the one to tell them of their daughter's death and his part in it. Rather than the expected ranting and raving, they thanked him for the information.

“I'm sorry, Drs Granger, but ... Hermione is dead due to one man's intense stupidity. I thought you should know from a person who knew her, rather than some cold and impersonal Ministry employee.”

“Thank you,” Emma Granger sniffed. “It means a lot.”

“What will be done to the idiot?” Dan Granger asked.

“Unfortunately, rather than being put into Azkaban for the remainder of his life, where he belongs, the worthless prick gets parades and the like from a grateful public,” Harry snarled.

“How did he manage that?” Dan asked.

“By surviving, rather than getting there on time and saving the lives of twelve far more deserving people.” He bowed his head. “Your daughter is dead because of me, and if it were possible for me to die, I would stand here and let you kill me,” he told the shocked couple. “As it is, I give you full permission to take out all your frustrations on me. I can't be killed, dammit, so if you want to do things like slit my throat or bash my head in with a fireplace poker, I'll let you with no fight. I'll just ask that we move it to your bathroom, so that you have less to clean up.”

Dan had looked furious for a moment, and then did as Harry had suggested – he grabbed the poker and slammed it against Harry's head as hard as he could.

Harry awoke a time later with a blinding headache that was rapidly fading. “Damn it to hell,” he growled. “Why can't I die like I deserve to?”

“Because you obviously have a purpose,” Dan said sadly. “I'm sorry for hurting you.”

“I'm not. It's the one good thing about this curse – you can kill me as many times as you want, and I'll come back for more.”

“I took my grief out on you, son, and that's wrong.”

“No it's not!” Harry yelled indignantly. “You crushed my skull with that poker, and I came back. My purpose is to be the punching bag for all the families, I know that much. So strike away, as often as you want to.”

“It's all right to admit that you loved her,” Emma said.

“I still do!” he yelled. “But she's not here because I was two thousand types of idiot! You don't have a daughter any more because some arrogant arsehole took his fucking time getting to save his supposed friends, and she paid the price for it!”

He shook his head and looked around the empty building that the Room of Requirement had created for him. “Why did it make the Granger home for me? All it does is make me depressed.”

“Because the castle is mildly ... well, sentient isn't the right word,” 'Emma Granger' said as she stepped out from the kitchen area with a cup of coffee. “We're representations of them, and we'll act pretty much as their daughter would expect them to. Not necessarily how she consciously wishes they would, but how she knows them. It's pretty safe to assume that I'll react to you the way that the real Emma Granger would.”

“It's like that Holodeck in the Star Trek show,” he said with admiration.

“If you will,” she said. “You need to be shriven, in a way. You need to talk about her, and who better than to her parents. Destroying things won't work, as you've learned, and you certainly are too angry to talk to her right now.”

“It's just that ... well, I forgot how single-minded she can be on a subject, especially when she's in the wrong. I fully expect that it will be at least a week before she's willing to approach me and talk as we used to, and then she'll hope to gloss past the incident. Your daughter ... excuse me. Hermione is not one to admit when she's wrong. She fights it as long as possible.”

“Then why do you love her?” Emma asked and took a sip of the coffee.

“She's beautiful, and caring, and sweet, and she's even physically attractive.” He developed a wry smile. “I never did tell her that I enjoyed the fact that her sweaters fit her so delightfully.”

He sighed. “She's such a wonderful person at times, but she has got to curb that tendency to try to help before learning all the facts about what she's trying to do. She just accused me of being a slaver, for God's sake! She's trying to help the house elves, but doesn't realise that the freedom she's offering them will kill them – they need to be bound to someone. In the time I came from, even years after her death the house elves saw her as their equivalent of Voldemort – someone who wanted them all dead. All because she refused to learn. And that's why so many other students mocked her.”

“The question you need to ask yourself is whether or not you'll forgive her.”

“I forgave Ron for calling me a liar. I think I can forgive her for calling me something without all the facts.”

“So she won't get any real punishment? You've already said that she'll try to avoid taking real responsibility for her actions.”

“I did, didn't I?” He thought for a long moment. “I suppose that I should go back to the Tower, since I'm going to forgive her, no matter what. I didn't come back to save her life just to lose her from my life. Even if we did have one of the shortest romances on record.”

Emma took another sip from the coffee. “So when are you going to tell them that you'll likely not survive the final battle with Voldemort, if things go the way you want?”

He looked at her, stunned for a moment, before laughing. “Of course you'd be able to know that! You're not really Emma Granger!”

“You're avoiding the question,” was all that she said.

“Honestly? I don't intend to tell them. If I survive, it's great. If I die to keep them safe, then great. But I'm not about to get them worrying about me for the next several months, because they'll probably try to come with me, and that is not going to happen.”

Dobby appeared in the room. “Master Harry Potter sir? Miss Grangey would like to speak with you when you are willing to speak with her. Miss Grangey has spoken to Dobby about house-elves, and she is sorrowful at the loss of her friendship with Master Harry Potter sir.”

“Loss of her friendship?” Harry asked, puzzled.

“Well, it's the very first time you have ever spoken to her and not called her by her first name,” Emma said. “Even when you were terribly angry with her over the Firebolt, she was still Hermione.”

“Okay, another reason to return to the Tower quickly.” He stood and started to leave. “Have I been shriven yet?”

“That's a personal thing, to be honest,” Emma said. “Go to her, Harry.”

“I will. Thank you, ma'am.” The representation of Mrs Granger smiled and faded out, coffee cup and all as Harry exited the room.

He ran all the way back to Gryffindor Tower, worried about Hermione, and shot through the portal as soon as there was enough room, remembering to thank the Fat Lady as he did so. Hermione looked up and smiled, but lost the smile almost immediately. She stood and faced him, trying very hard to keep her lower lip from quivering. “Mr Potter, I owe you a very large apology. I made some horrible, unfounded assumptions, and lost your friendship because of it. You were absolutely correct concerning the house elves, and I will endeavour to learn more about a subject before I try to do something about it.” Softly, at a level Harry was sure she hadn't meant him to be able to hear, she added, “If only the cost hadn't been so high to learn the lesson.”

He pulled her into a hug. “Even if you decided not to be my girlfriend, you will always be my friend. I'm sorry that my formal tone made you think that I was breaking everything off with you.”

She pushed away from him and looked up into his smiling face. “You really ... oh, thank you!” she cried, tears starting to flow from her eyes. She cuddled up against him, and he could tell that she was listening to the sound of his heart beating.

It was about a minute later that he saw her frown. “Wait, you said something about me not being you girlfriend anymore? When did that happen?”

He cocked his head in puzzlement. “The other day, when you and Daphne came down together. You looked worried, and when I mentioned that you'd come to your senses and that I didn't have a problem with it ...”

She turned white. “You thought I'd broken up with you?” she asked in horror.

He laughed softly. “Hermione, I'm thirty-something in here,” he said, tapping his head. “I've done some really ugly things. I expected that, once you'd had a chance to hear my history and could think on it. I'm not hurt by it. Really!”

“Harry, I need to say this to you, so please let me, alright?” He nodded to her, and suddenly found his face pulled down to hers, where she gave him the most searing kiss he had ever received, one that made the blood in his body head rather resolutely below his waist. When she finally released him, she was pressed against him tightly. “Harry James Potter, I am in love with you. I am sorry for giving you the impression that we were breaking up. I fully intend to help you with that not so

little problem that I seemed to have caused – intentionally, I might add – at some point that you will let me do so.” She dropped her voice to a whisper. “Maybe give you the gift of making me a woman.”

His eyes widened, and he kissed her in response. When he was done, he could feel her heart pounding, they were holding each other so tightly. “What were you so worried about, then? What had you worried that I wouldn't accept what you had to say?”

She bit her lower lip and tried to push away from him, but he held her closely. “Tell me. I can't think of anything you can tell me now that might make me not want to be with you.”

“Call Daphne over. She needs to be here too.” Daphne was looking at the two of them and smiling, but looked confused when Harry motioned her over.

“What's up?” Daphne asked.

Harry cast a few charms, and they knew that no one was going to be listening to them or bothering them. “Her worry that I'm going to hate her in a minute. I misunderstood her the other day, and thought that she had broken up with me. She thinks that whatever she has to say will make me hate her.”

“Some people do,” Daphne said, now biting her lower lip.

Harry looked at the two of them for a moment and then smiled. “So I take it that you really enjoy what Daphne wears under her robes?”

Hermione's eyes widened. “How do you ... oh, she was your lover in the future?”

“No, she just got very comfortable around me to the point where she was willing to take off her robes. I assume that there are charms that imitate a brassiere?”

Daphne smiled. “Yes, and I already need them at almost fifteen.”

“So is it that the two of you just enjoyed looking at each other or -” Harry began to ask.

Daphne blushed furiously. “I ... uh, well, Hermione awoke to find me pretending I was a baby, if you understand me.”

Harry looked at Hermione for a moment and then back at Daphne. “Do you have any idea of just how jealous I am of you right now?” he asked with a smile. “In the previous time stream, once I got my head out of my arse, I grew to adore the way that Hermione fills out her sweaters. My fantasy was to someday be in a position where she would have no problem walking around in front of me in a sweater and high leg knickers. Of course, I'd be advertising my appreciation of the outfit the whole time ...” he trailed off, blushing himself now. “I never had the chance to be that lucky. I suspected that you,” he said, looking at Daphne, “were likely bisexual, based on the fact that you always seemed to show a ... ah ... *pointed* interest in the other girls we hung out with.”

Hermione asked in a small voice, "How many lovers did you have?"

"If you and I make love someday, Hermione, then you will be getting my virginity. *Both* time streams. I have never made love to any woman. There was some small amount of petting with Ginny and I. She had some very pretty bras and knickers that I got to see and get my hands under, but at no time did any of them leave her body." He paused. "Y'know, based on that time stream, Ginny and I will never be boyfriend and girlfriend this time around. I know her too well."

"What if we make that sign up sheet for your harem?" Daphne asked. Her eyes were twinkling.

"For the time being, all girls must be vetted by Hermione. She gets final say over who joins and who doesn't." He smirked at the girls, calling their bluff.

Hermione grinned and nestled against his chest again. "Good, that means that it's just Daphne and I at the moment, with Parvati being a possible, given the way she was staring at Daphne and I all last night. Just as pointed an interest, to use your phrasing, Harry."

"Daphne and me," he said, correcting her grammar. "If you drop Daphne from the sentence, then you'd use the word me, so it should be used anyway." He shook his head. "So you think she'd not have complained had the two of you climbed into her bed and chosen to ... ah, tire her out?"

"We could always find out tonight," Daphne said wickedly.

Harry closed his eyes. "Please. The images that are coming to mind are too pleasant, and I really don't need to be advertising as I climb into bed tonight. The guys might take it wrong." What Hermione had said finally sank in completely. "Wait. You were actually *serious* about both you and Daphne?!"

"Don't you want us both to be serious about it?" she asked quite seriously.

"The brain might be thirty-something, but the hormones have reset to fourteen, Hermione. Let me explain it. Heterosexual male here," he said, waving his hand as if drawing attention to himself. "Two sexy women, both of whom I happen to really like as friends as well. What do you think my answer is?"

"Then where's the problem?" Daphne asked.

He met both pairs of eyes for a moment before answering. "Losing the friendship of either of you. I was going to die a virgin in that other time stream. If there's a worry about losing either of you as a friend, I'll die a virgin this time around."

Hermione smiled widely. "Looks like you have yourself two girlfriends, then, Harry." After a moment's pause, she asked, "Which one of us do you want to make love to first?"

He met her eyes and locked his gaze to hers. "No offence to you Daphne, but once I knew that Ginny and I weren't going to work out, all my fantasies about losing my virginity were about Hermione. The library, a broom closet, Snape's desk, the Great Hall, the prefect's bathroom -" He

stopped suddenly and snapped his fingers. "That reminds me. I might as well do it this weekend. I'm going to hit the prefect's bathroom and submerge the egg and listen to it to make sure that the clue is still the same as last time around."

"Okay," Hermione said brightly. "It's good that you're doing it soon."

"Well, knowing how to solve it is easier this time. I already know how. At least I won't be waiting until January this time." He looked at them. "If it is the same clue, then ..." He paused. "No insult intended, Daphne, but Hermione is likely to be the one chosen, if they don't change things." He cocked his head. "Could be both, I don't know how they'll work it."

He looked at the two of them. "I'll explain after I've heard the egg, in case the clue might have changed with the time stream changes. It shouldn't have, but I've learned my lessons about arrogance. It gets people killed."

"We'll wait to find out what the clue is, then," Hermione said. After a moment, she said, "It's been quite a few years for you. Do you even remember the password for the prefect's bath this year?"

He grinned. "Pine fresh. I checked the other day, just to be sure."

They woke the next day to discover that Professor Snape was on indefinite leave until a potential legal problem could be worked out. The Slytherins were looking at Daphne with undisguised hatred in their eyes. Harry looked back in their direction and let a little of his power flow into his eyes. Those who looked at him quailed.

He checked the sign up sheet for the prefect's bath and discovered that no one would be using it in the middle of the day, between the hours of two and five pm, so he warned Daphne and Hermione so that they could help run interference for him while he slipped into the room.

He was there at two pm, slipping inside quickly. He had been dressed normally, and quickly slipped into the warm water, putting the egg under the surface and opening it, listening to the gentle music with words that he could not yet hear play. He smiled. *So far, so good.*

He took a deep breath and dipped his head below the surface and opened the egg once more.

"Come seek us where our voices sound,

We cannot sing above the ground,

And while you're searching, ponder this:

We've taken what you'll sorely miss,

*An hour long you'll have to look,
And to recover what we took,*

*But past an hour- the prospect's black,
Too late, it's gone, it won't come back"*

He grinned as he surfaced. "Perfect! The clue hasn't changed." he said.

"Glad to hear it," Daphne said to the accompaniment of the rustling of fabric. He spun to find himself surprised by their mode of dress.

It was nearly five o'clock when he exited the prefect's bathroom with Hermione and Daphne. "Have I mentioned what a wonderful day it is?" he asked with a happy laugh.

"I understand getting laid can do that for you," Daphne said with her own joyous laugh. "It certainly improved my day!"

"Mine too, even if I'm going to be sore for the rest of the day," Hermione said, mock-glaring at Harry. "I think you bruised me a little."

"Sorry," he said honestly. "I was ... um, inspired, shall we say? I have a problem, though."

"What?" Hermione asked, sounding worried.

"I can only ask one of you to the Yule Ball that we know nothing about yet. They won't announce it until the tenth of December. Which one of you do I take to the ball?"

A Time To Reflect The Second Task

Disclaimer: Do not taunt Happy Fun Ball. Contents under pressure and may explode. Too much pressure may lead to explosion hazard. This all belongs to JK Rowling.

The solution was obvious, but it ended up causing quite a few problems in January. Harry had officially gone to the Yule Ball with Hermione, but had spent quite a few dances with Daphne. Even that had not caused the problem. The problem came from the dances that Hermione and Daphne shared openly, as well as the one dance that the three of them performed, which seemed to end up giving them an excuse to do a lot of holding and touching of each other.

The Daily Prophet had a field day with this, declaring the Hermione was playing the field on Harry, and that she had obviously bewitched the Boy Who Lived. They stopped just shy of calling her a whore, although the words 'scarlet' and 'woman' were found in uncomfortable proximity to each other.

The hate mail for Hermione started to come in a few days later. Several of them were Howlers that were highly verbally abusive, and Harry quickly learned that a quick *Finite Incantatem* stopped those things before they even went off. Nine times out of ten, the wording that sounded so good when screamed from a Howler looked absolutely ridiculous written on the page, and they kept some of the ones that seemed the silliest. What Harry didn't tell them is that he was also tracing these people down to return the favour.

He lost his temper the day that the letter exploded on Hermione, coating her in a goo that was absorbed quickly and proceeded to make her look as if she'd aged at least a hundred and fifty years. Her hair turned white and stringy, and she had deep lines in her face. He kissed her and helped her to the infirmary, telling Daphne to keep that letter.

Madam Pomfrey was able to reverse the curse on Hermione, but insisted that she stay overnight for observation. Harry stayed with her until Madam Pomfrey chased him out, kissing her eyes repeatedly and telling her that he looked forward to being with her long enough for her to develop that look naturally. She had narrowed her eyes at his clumsy attempt at being charming, and he shrugged. "I'm still a verbal klutz around pretty girls, even after the original me made it to his thirties. It was meant well, but even *Felix Felicis* can't make me a smooth talker." He smiled wryly by way of apology, and she softened and smiled back at him.

When he left that night, he and Daphne took a moment to write up a form letter for the Howlers he was going to send in return.

I'm glad that you've learned how to write a Howler. Congratulations. However, others know that secret as well, and also know how to trace back where a Howler came from.

What I am wondering is where you get off believing that you have a right to have any say in the situation. Who I am with is my issue, and my issue only. Neither female in the relationship has performed any form of beguilement upon me, as verified by members of the Hogwarts teaching staff, such as the Headmaster, Albus Dumbledore.

Or does it give you a feeling of power, attacking a young girl from a distance, knowing that she'll never see you face to face, so that you can spew all your vitriol out in proper Death Eater fashion without ever facing the consequences?

Well, there are consequences, as I'm sure you're learning now.

“I like it,” Daphne said with a smile. “When are you sending them out?”

“I was thinking tonight, so that they could be delivered in time for people to be sitting down to breakfast. Which means I'll need to get to the Owlery shortly.” He copied the letter onto the twenty-five sheets of parchment that were necessary, and then headed out to send them. Daphne came along.

She was surprised when they got there, because it was then that he cast the Howler incantation on the letters – three times per letter. He then cast one final charm on each letter, and the characteristic red faded away.

He turned and saw her look as twenty-five owls winged their way into the night. “I'm angry,” he said with a shrug. “Especially since they are determined not to send any to the pureblood princess, because it *must* be the mudblood's fault,” he said with a growl. “I hate that term, and have since I first found out what it means.”

She pulled him close and kissed him. “I know that I'm not Hermione, and that she means more to you than I do, but we both love you, Harry. Well, to be honest, it's more lust in my case at the moment, but I also saw how honourable you are, and that *will* melt a girl's heart.”

“I did fall in love with you a bit in the original time stream, and hope that we can be something here. But for now, Hermione is and always will be my primary worry.”

“Of course,” she replied. “You've loved her longer than you have me. I'm not stupid, Harry, and I know you're not calling me stupid. Any properly working polyamorous relationship works best with a primary relationship and then secondary relationships. You and Hermione are the primary, and the relationships between her and me and you and me are the secondary ones. I understand

this and accept it. I never expected to find something like this while I was in Hogwarts, to be honest.” She snuggled against his chest for a moment before saying, “My worst problem right now is that I can't stay in Gryffindor Tower forever. As much as I enjoy sharing a bed ... uh, room with Hermione, I really should be getting back to my House at some point.” He looked at her for a long time, making her slightly nervous. “What? What's wrong?”

“Don't take this wrong, but are any of your immediate family Death Eaters?”

“No,” she replied. “We've tried very hard to stay neutral.”

“Write to your parents or whomever and tell them about the situation here at school. You've thrown your lot in with The Boy Who Lived, and now everyone from the Head of House on down is after you, with Snape's approval, of course. If nothing else, you'll know how they react to the news. If they say that you're on your own, then I shall give you the protection of the House of Potter, for whatever that means here at school.”

“Oh shit,” she breathed. “That's right! You're the last member of the family!” She thought for a moment. “I'll bet that's why some of the people were complaining, too, even though they never mentioned it. The Potters are a well known Light family, and *any* family marrying into it is considered a good thing. But Hermione is a Muggleborn.”

“And therefore not worthy of being loved, in their eyes, whether or not they realise they're saying that.” He shook his head. “I wonder how many of them had the 'but it should have been *me* ' attitude running through their heads?”

Hermione was back in fine form in time to be at breakfast. Harry told her this, in fact, with a humorous leer at said figure. As they sat at the table, the owls flew in delivering their mail, and Harry was struck by a feeling of *deja vu*. A moment later, from over at the Ravenclaw table, he discovered why.

“I'M GLAD THAT YOU'VE LEARNED HOW TO WRITE A HOWLER. CONGRATULATIONS. HOWEVER, OTHERS KNOW THAT SECRET AS WELL, AND ALSO KNOW HOW TO TRACE BACK WHERE A HOWLER CAME FROM.”

“WHAT I AM WONDERING IS WHERE YOU GET OFF BELIEVING THAT YOU HAVE A RIGHT TO HAVE ANY SAY IN THE SITUATION. WHO I AM WITH IS MY ISSUE, AND MY ISSUE ONLY. NEITHER FEMALE IN THE RELATIONSHIP HAS PERFORMED ANY FORM OF BEGUILLEMENT UPON ME, AS VERIFIED BY MEMBERS OF THE HOGWARTS TEACHING STAFF, SUCH AS THE HEADMASTER, ALBUS DUMBLEDORE.”

“OR DOES IT GIVE YOU A FEELING OF POWER, ATTACKING A YOUNG GIRL FROM A DISTANCE, KNOWING THAT SHE'LL NEVER SEE YOU FACE TO FACE, SO THAT YOU CAN SPEW ALL YOUR VITRIOL OUT IN PROPER DEATH EATER FASHION WITHOUT EVER FACING THE CONSEQUENCES?”

“WELL, THERE ARE CONSEQUENCES, AS I'M SURE YOU'RE LEARNING NOW.”

The dishware on the Ravenclaw table was dancing from the force of the Howler, and Harry could see a girl whose name he didn't know staring at the bellowing letter with a white face. The Howler, when it finished, detonated loudly, knocking people off their seats and blowing food and pumpkin juice away in a rather impressive radius.

“Was that quite necessary?” Professor McGonagall asked, her lips in a very thin line.

Harry looked at Hermione for a long moment and answered his Head of House without ever moving his eyes from his girlfriend. “Yes, Professor, I believe that it was.” Hermione blushed prettily.

Harry took to training at that point, having made sure that the clue was the same. He gave all three of the other contestants hints as to how they might solve the clue and they joined him in his training. Igor Karkaroff was less than pleased to see his champion befriending the other champions, but Viktor told him – albeit politely – that he could either deal with it or do the other, as he quoted Luna Lovegood. The young blonde had caught Viktor's eye and had startled him. She was not one of the fan-girls that would trail him everywhere, and they had fallen to talking after the first task. It had been her that he had taken to the Yule Ball, much to everyone's surprise, and when Professor Flitwick expressed some gentle concern about the age difference, Luna had simply pointed out that he had been the very soul of honour and decency, and that his gentlemanly attitudes had made her somewhat weak in the knees. She had apparently admitted to Ginny that she would not likely have complained had Viktor decided he wanted to part those same knees, but their relationship was still quite chaste.

This had surprised Harry, since he didn't remember that relationship from the first time around. She'd danced around him, along with the other ladies, and he had gathered, based on some of the comments that he overheard, that many of the girls were likely in sexual relationships with each other, if not romantic ones. He had never walked in on open sex, but looking back, he could see where his innocence had simply prevented him from noticing hand placements many a time. Luna seemed – if his memory served correct – to be involved somewhat with Susan and Hannah, who were not involved with each other. He shook his head. *None of my business.*

The training did involve quite a few offensive and defensive hexes, and the group – currently the twelve Harry hoped to save plus the champions – worked hard together. Cho and Cedric's relationship seemed strong, and Harry was happy for that this time through. He didn't know if it had been this strong the first time and he hadn't noticed, or whether his telling them of Cedric's potential death made a difference. He was a little bothered by Fleur's interest in him, since when she really turned on the charm, she could affect him. He quickly had sat down and taught *everyone* Occlumency, which meant that Ron could now be in the same room as Fleur and not drool his brains out onto the floor.

Some people were curious as to Harry's insistence that everyone be able to fight to a high level.

Ron specifically asked. Harry answered him, "To be honest, I want everyone to be able to fight for their lives. I am telling Cedric that he dies if he follows me, but he was chosen as the real Hogwarts champion. He best embodies Hogwarts. Can you see a Gryffindor or a Hufflepuff abandoning someone just because they might get hurt or killed if they do so?" Ron shook his head. "Exactly. I fully expect that no matter what, I'm going to end up facing Cedric down for the Cup at the centre of that damned maze. I have to fight Voldemort, and I just might have to lose my chance to Portkey back in order to save that honourable fool's life."

Harry laughed. "That's one of the nice things about the Killing Curse. It can be stopped, by something heavy and physical. That's why I have every single one of us working on seeing how fast we can create a slab of marble. Think about the amount of time it will take for the words 'Kill the spare. *Avada Kedavra*' to be said. Roughly five seconds, plus the pause while that dimwit Pettigrew parses the statement. Allow for six seconds. However, I've gotten Cedric down to a thickish slab in roughly three to four seconds. I want maximum speed on that for him, because I know somehow that he will be coming with me whether or not I want him to. If he gets killed this time, it'll be because he was bested by a better opponent, rather than being struck down without a chance to fight."

"And that's what I ask for, Harry. I'm not abandoning a fellow student to Voldemort's tender mercies."

"Nor will I," Viktor said. "I am glad you are teaching us mind skills. Will make it easier to fight off Imperius if false Moody tries."

"I think we all will be with you in the centre, 'Arry," Fleur said. "Zat thing you described sounds like a 'omoculus. If you can kill it before it gets a body, you should be in good shape." Her eyes sparkled. "And I think your girlfriends will agree with me when I say zat your shape is already good at fourteen. I think I should avoid you when you reach eighteen."

"Why?" Daphne asked mischievously. "Maybe you could take him for a test run now?"

"Now?" Harry squeaked. "Here? In the meeting room?"

Fleur's look went equally as mischievous as Daphne's. "I 'ave never done it in front of an audience before." After pausing for a beat, she added, "Zat could be because I 'ave never done it before, zough." She walked over and hugged Harry. "I am sorry, but you are so much fun when you get embarrassed."

"Merlin knows that you're attractive, Fleur, and I won't deny that the memory of your swimsuit during the upcoming challenge from my first time around likely kept most of the guys in the school awake for a few days or so, remembering just how nicely skin-tight silver fabric hugged you. But I will not consider anything with you, if you happen to be serious, unless you get both Hermione and Daphne to agree." He laughed. "Besides, the first time through, you ended up staying in England and becoming rather close to a certain curse-breaking Weasley. And by close, I mean that he knew whether or not you had freckles anywhere on your body."

“Well, zat was zen -”

“-this is tao,” Daphne intoned. “Sorry. Punster in me broke free.”

Fleur blinked at her for a moment and then began laughing. “It was not done to mock, so it is all right. Zank you; zat was funny. As I was saying, 'oweever – ze first time zrough, zat is 'ow it 'appened. We can only see 'ow it 'appens zis time. And zis time, I find you enjoyable to be around.” She kissed him on the cheek and walked over to talk to Hermione while Harry simply shook his head.

“The more I change things, the weirder this gets,” he said to no one in particular.

“Are you really complaining?” Susan asked as she walked up with Ron. “Oh, I never thanked you for pointing Ron in my direction.” She also kissed his cheek.

“It was what I remembered from my first run through. You liked him, and he certainly seemed to have noticed that you existed. It was up to you guys, but you never had the chance. So I nudged Ron.”

“And being notoriously thick -”

“I'll say,” Susan purred.

Ron's face suddenly matched his hair, but he bulled onward. “- it took me a while to act on it.”

“And I'm betting that you're glad you did,” Harry said. Ron's beaming grin told him all he needed to know.

Tonight must be the night for confessions or something, Harry thought as they were ending their session, because Cho had walked up to him to talk, while Cedric waited for her.

“Thank you for this, Harry. Cedric means a lot to me.”

“I know,” he replied. “In the first time stream, we ended up dating next year, and I think it was because you were trying to reconnect to him somehow. It was a doomed relationship.”

“I'm sorry that I did that to you,” she said honestly.

“Why? It wasn't you, and if I have my way, you'll never be in a position to feel that way.”

“Thank you,” she said seriously, and brushed her lips across his. At his startled look, she said, “Cedric knew I was going to do that.” He looked over at Cedric, who was smiling.

As she turned away, she looked over her shoulder and said, “If you ever get that far, I recommend the prefects bathroom for ... certain activities.” She blushed mightily.

Hermione walked over and said softly, “Where do you think I gave him my virginity?”

Cho grinned. "Smart woman. You should have been Ravenclaw." She flounced away, laughing.

"Tonight was weird," he said when the room contained no one but him, Hermione, Daphne and Ron. "How many intense conversations did I have with people?"

"Well, the second task is only days away," Ron said. "I think we all remember that the old Tournaments had death tolls, and we really don't know what's going to happen. So even if we know you're going to survive, there's that desire to make sure you're aware of some things."

He met Harry's eyes. "If I thought it was possible, I'd be in that graveyard you showed us, and I know that Hermione and Daphne would be too. I know you want to be alone there, to try to keep us safe, but the more you have at your back, the more likely it is that *you'll* survive. And that's a good thing to us, Harry. You might as well be a Weasley, so you're damned well going to survive this."

Harry awoke the day of the second task to find Ron sleeping in his own bed, which meant that Ron had not been grabbed as 'what he would miss most'. He headed downstairs to see if any of the girls were available. Parvati came down and told him that Hermione was in fact missing, so he bit his lower lip. *Okay. Can't argue with the choice there. Now to see if my different way of dealing with things works this time around.*

'Moody' had noted that Harry seemed not to be able to find a solution – having mistaken not looking for not finding apparently – and gotten a bit antsy about it, and had hinted to Neville about gillyweed. Harry smiled and thanked Neville for the suggestion, getting a return grin from Neville.

Daphne was at breakfast, which clinched it for Harry. He walked over to her and kissed her cheek and whispered, "Looks like it was Hermione they chose. Sorry."

"Don't be," she whispered. "They only time that they could have gotten me, I wouldn't have been wearing a robe, and I really don't -"

"- that view is not for the rabble," he said with a grin.

"Potter, you're not welcome here," Malfoy drawled at him.

"Speaking of rabble," he said conversationally to Daphne. Turning to Draco, he said, "Child, when I want your opinion, I'll write it down for you to repeat back to me."

Draco sneered at that comment, and Harry could see his right arm muscles tightening. "You might want to think twice about shooting me under the table, Malfoy. I can see you planning it, and if it happens, I *will* retaliate. And I'm a fan of hitting back harder than the person hit me."

"You're too goody-goody to do that, Potty," he sneered mockingly. "You'd never -" He stopped because Harry had leaned across the table quickly and punched him in the nose, hard enough that he felt the cartilage break.

“That's for just being verbal about it. Imagine what I'll do for a stinging hex. Now imagine what I'll do for stronger spells.” He let his voice go cold as he spoke, and he could see eyes getting wide. “And by the way, Daphne is under my protection, both as a fellow student and as a friend of House Potter. You might want to think twice about trying to get at her for imagined slights.”

“You'll get yours,” Pansy hissed.

Harry simply snorted. “I've already gotten mine,” he replied, and kissed Daphne lightly on the lips. “And I protect what's mine.”

He was given a detention with Professor McGonagall that night for breaking Malfoy's nose.

They stood on the shore and were told, as they had been the first time that Harry had been through the process, that they had sixty minutes to locate and rescue what they would miss most. Grinning, he dove in as soon as the timer was started and performed the self-transformation that he had planned. Moments later, he was swimming through the lake as one of the indigenous merfolk. He glanced over at Fleur and once again admired the way that the swimsuit she wore clung to her lithe form. *I'm not dead yet*, he laughed internally. *I especially enjoy the way her 'built-in gauges' are reacting to the water temperature. That is going to be one lucky child she has some day.*

The swim was fairly simple, at least for one of the merfolk. He transfigured a piece of rock on the bottom to a trident, and swam. The grindyflow seemed to be more than willing to give him a wide berth as he swam, and he hoped that Fleur might not have the same trouble with them this time around. It wasn't that he had a problem with rescuing Gabrielle, but if she was set on helping him in the graveyard against Riddle, then she had damned well better be able to fight.

As he approached the hostages, he goggled slightly. Cho, Gabrielle and Luna were in their robes, but they had apparently managed to get Hermione when she wasn't in hers. Her white blouse was transparent and making it obvious to anyone who could get close enough to see that she had taken to using the same spell that Daphne always used. *At least she was wearing a blouse.*

He swam over and gently cut her free of her bindings and then carefully created a set of Hogwarts robes for her, sliding them onto her body and closing them just as the first of the others arrived. Happily, it was Fleur. Harry waved and began to swim toward the surface, returning to his proper form before reaching the surface.

He coughed out the last of the water as she started to awaken and shiver. He cast a Warming Charm on her and whispered in her ear, “I liked the view, but I think it would have been better if you were awake to see me looking at you.” She cocked her head in curiosity. “I created your robes, Hermione. You weren't wearing robes when they caught you. You were in your skirt and blouse and shoes.”

Her eyes went wide and he felt her searching beneath the water for a second. She hissed in his ear, “Did Daphne tell you if she's got my knickers?”

It was turn for his eyes to widen. “She didn't say. Uh, do you trust me to make you some that you can slip on?”

“I'll live without for now, but I'll beat the Headmaster senseless later on today,” she said with a laugh.

He laughed with her. “Your lips are blue, darling,” he said with a grin. “I think I'd best warm them up.” With that, he kissed her soundly. When he had finished, the other three had surfaced with their hostages, but more importantly to him, he had a death grip on Hermione's bum.

He had placed first once more.

A Time To Reflect The Third Task

Disclaimer: Caution – Pruning shears are not a toy. Handle carefully. Edges sharp – severe cutting risk. Once again, these characters and situations do not belong to me, but to JK Rowling, and I am merely playing with her creations. No damage to her copyrights is intended.

Note: Forgot to mention another of my 'tips of the hat' to another author. In this case, it's the Viktor/Luna thing, which I've only ever seen in chem_prof's work on FF.net. Also, you'll recognise one more thing in here that DrT has done. You'll know it when you see it.

“Are you sure that you weren't meant to be the Hogwarts champion?” Cedric laughed as the group sat around the table laughing. “You *are* in first place!”

“Quite sure,” Harry replied. “I came back from the future *after* you were chosen, and am using capabilities gleaned from learning in the future. Someone cheated to get my name in, and I intend to cause them some problems. What's that saying? 'Cheaters never prosper'? Well, they did last time, and it ended up destroying me mentally. I honestly can't tell you how much it means to me that you've accepted me as a friend *after* you've been told all that happened.”

“Risking death for others *ven dere* is no need?” Viktor asked, relaxing with his arm around Luna's shoulder. “Is sign of greatest friendship *dere* is. How could ve not return friendship?”

“You're trying to save my Cedric's life,” Cho said, voice throbbing with emotion. “We all realise that coming back might kill you. In fact, there may be a balance required, that you pay with your life to see that these people live.” She sobbed once quickly, but then looked at him with steel in her eyes and voice. “I can't speak for the others with certainty, but I can speak for myself and Cedric. If we live because of this, then we are damned well going to do everything in our power to save you as well. If God was willing to come down and talk to you, then she'll damned well stand before us and explain why you have to die.”

“And now you see the real reason I sent you back, Harry,” said a voice familiar to him. “The healing that you have done, and the friendships that you have forged are priceless. You are better friends with these people now than you were before, and you were close to several of them then.”

“Are you -” Cho asked softly.

“I am the entity that many call God, by whatever name they choose. No one religion has me exactly right, mind you. I'm female because Harry relates best to women. As the American comic book readers might understand it, I'm an anthropomorphic manifestation of a concept. In this case, Deity. The eighth of seven siblings, if you will.”

“You aren't taking him when this is done,” Cho said simply.

“Even if it means you have to die again?” God asked.

Cho looked to Cedric, who took her hand, and they both stood. “If our dying keeps Harry alive, then the price is worth it,” Cedric said. “I like life, that I won't deny. But since he's come back, I've been living life with more gusto than I would have first time around, because I've had driven home that life is precious. I've been paying attention to the important things,” he said, brushing his hand along Cho's cheek. “For that, I can never repay him. I know he'd never ask for repayment, either.”

“I came back to keep you alive,” Harry sputtered. “My whole purpose is to make sure the group of you survive!”

“At the cost of your own life?” Luna asked.

“If need be!” he yelled.

“Price is too high,” Viktor said. “So we make sure price is not paid.” He crossed his arms as punctuation, obviously considering the conversation closed, and God had a self-satisfied smirk on her face.

Harry, on the other hand, stalked out of the room in high dudgeon.

“Can't say as that was unexpected,” Ron said. “He doesn't take very well to the thought that any of us might die. I don't like thinking – don't say it, Hermione – thinking about it, but Cho just might right. Is he back here to perform some balancing act? His life for ours?”

“No,” was the simple response. “I don't think he's thought about my sending him back, really. Why would I send anyone back, just to save twelve lives? If it was *only* for that, I wouldn't. But can you imagine the kind of Dark Lord he might have become, knowing that he had a thousand years or more to live? You've heard some of his self-loathing. He would do everything in his power to ensure that he was bound for Hell when he was finally dead. After over a thousand years ruling, do you have any idea just how widespread the destruction could get? He would be as bad as Riddle would have been, had Riddle won in the original time line.”

The others were silent for a long moment. Hermione finally spoke, quietly. “Since we can't do anything about what could have been, can you at least tell us who, if any of us, he'll be with when this is done?”

God laughed, a happy and amused sound. “I'm not omniscient,” she said, “but think back to the

memory that he showed you of when he awoke with the huge lifespan. He kissed the foreheads of two women. Make of that what you will. But remember that there is no guarantee that it will happen that way.” She paused. “I think I'd best go talk to Harry now. See if I can get him to calm down. Remember that part of the reason that he's so angry at the moment isn't because he's mad at you, but because he's deathly afraid that things will play out the same way this time around. He's wrapped his brain around the possibility that he might die, and doesn't want to allow for the possibility that anyone he came back to save might die this time around. And that now includes you, Mr Diggory, since he came back to a time that you still survive in. He quite literally means it when he says that he will die before he permits any of you to be killed.”

She looked at the sombre faces and said. “I'll speak with Harry now.” She walked toward the door and faded out.

He returned to the Room of Requirement, needing to talk to someone. He opened and smiled ever-so slightly, because he was once again in the Granger home, but this time with both parents waiting for him.

“You need to talk,” 'Dan Granger' said. “So talk.”

'Emma' swatted him on the arm. “Apologies for Dan. He was never completely housebroken.”

Despite his deep indignation at what he had heard at the impromptu party, he found that amusing, and wondered if his own parents might have acted that way. “I'm sorry, it's just that ... I just ... how do I make them see?”

“Pretend I know nothing of what you speak,” Dan said. “Try to explain your anger and indignation to me.”

“I came back in time to try to save the lives of twelve people – one of them being your daughter. Well, you know what I mean.” Dan nodded. “I managed to go back to a time before when even Cedric Diggory was murdered. Now I have all these people trying to throw themselves into danger, where they'll likely get themselves killed, thereby negating the very reason for my being here!”

“Really?” Emma asked. “As I understand it, the first time around, none of them had any real chance to defend themselves from what was going to happen. Is that correct?” Harry nodded to her. “So, now they've all been made aware, and they've all been training as best they can. You've taught Viktor Krum the Occlumency necessary to be able to throw off the Imperius that Crouch Junior is going to hit him with. Fleur is a much better fighter now. And Cedric trains like a madman.”

“Would you like to know why he's training like a madman?” Dan asked. When Harry nodded at him, the reply was, “So that he's not useless to you when the two of you end up in the graveyard. You've sworn to keep him alive, even if you verbally allow that he might die. Well, he's sworn that you'll not be facing Voldemort alone either, and that he'll fight to the cost of his own death to

keep you alive.”

“But ... that puts us at cross purposes!” Harry exclaimed.

“Only if you're trying to commit suicide when you kill Voldemort,” Emma said simply. When Harry's face shut down at the comment, she smiled wryly. “And now we reach the heart of the matter.”

“Yes,” said another voice. Harry turned to face She who he thought of as God. “You're fighting so hard to keep them alive and kill yourself at the same time that you forgot that they're people who care for you, and in a few cases, actually love you. Has it occurred to you that Hermione might well be devastated by your death? That Cedric might develop a deep despair that he might never completely recover from because he wasn't good enough to save the life of a fourteen year old boy?” She shook her head. “You need to talk to them, Harry. They love you. They all do, in various ways. The Weasleys are your siblings in all but blood, and the feeling goes both ways. As they see it right now, both Hermione and Daphne have every intention of being with you in five to ten years, and giving you as many children as you want. Fleur has been dreaming of you at night. You have become a knight in shining armour for her. Susan and Hannah and Neville and the rest all care deeply for you as friends. Admittedly a few of them wouldn't mind more, but are happy with just friends.”

She put her hands on Harry's shoulders. “Is it really fair of you to take that from them? They want you alive. You think you need to pay for the deaths upstream from here, but they haven't happened, and hopefully never will. Why must you pay for something that didn't happen?”

He stood back and blinked at her for a long moment. “Because I'm afraid. If that happens again, I just know that I'm going to become a Dark Lord. I'll have two thousand years to earn my place in Hell, and I'm afraid that I just might do everything necessary to ensure it. That scares me. It would be so easy to slip over and destroy everything, just by letting myself go a little mad. And the world will pay for my mistake.”

“Then you need to make sure that it doesn't happen, don't you?” Emma asked. “And then you need to wait until you're out of school and make Dan and I grandparents.”

Harry stood, lost in thought for a long moment before looking up. “I'll try. That's all I can promise for now.”

“That's all we ask,” Dan said. He walked over and hugged Harry, and Emma followed suit. They then faded out, leaving the Granger home untouched.

God pulled him close. “We love you, Harry, and don't want you to hurt yourself. You surprised me by realising the reason that I sent you back in time.”

“Introspection is something I'm quite familiar with. I've had years to perfect it. I've known it for quite some time, but didn't want to scare the others.”

“They know now. I told them.”

“What was the reaction?” he asked, fearing the answer.

“After a lull in the conversation, Hermione asked who you'd end up with romantically speaking. She loves you very much, Harry.”

“Are you serious? Right after being told that I could become the worst Dark Lord in history, she asked if ... what was she thinking?”

She laughed. “That the man she loves is going to succeed, and that she'll someday give him the family he so richly deserves. Not one of them is scared of you, Harry. They're scared *for* you, and want you happy and healthy.”

He shook his head in wonder. “Thank you, God. I suppose I ought to go back to them and apologise for leaving in high snit.”

“It looked more like dudgeon to me, but going back would probably be good,” She said with a smile. “You had a party going, after all.”

The group of Hogwarts students that had been gathered after the first task were gathered once more, at the Headmaster's request. They sat talking amongst themselves about nothing in particular until the door opened, and the Headmaster himself stepped into the room.

"I shall avoid the old Muggle joke and explain why I have called you all here today. It is in regards to Severus Snape." Daphne, Hermione and Harry sat straighter in their chairs, awaiting the announcement. "After far too much politicking, I have finally been permitted to terminate his employment at this school."

"Why did it take so long?" Daphne asked. "Some of the evidence that I brought forward, as well as the others that I contacted for affidavits should have had him looking for a new position within days."

Dumbledore smiled, but it looked as if he had swallowed something unpleasant. "Ah, Miss Greengrass, you forget the power of politics to prolong things. The Board of Governors felt that terminating him in the early part of the school year would reflect badly upon them, plus certain other factions felt that with him in charge, their children were going to do better in school. You recall, for example, that Lucius Malfoy is one of the members of the Board." He sighed. "It took some of his prior students - dare I use the word 'victims' - threatening to take this before the courts that finally permitted us to remove him."

The Headmaster looked at Harry. "I am so terribly sorry, Harry. I truly thought that he ... ah, but the road to Hell is paved with intentions such as mine."

"Which is better, sir? To become cynical and deny everyone another chance at redemption, or to

assume the best of everyone unless they prove you wrong? I know the type man you are, and you, like everyone else, are merely human. But you believe in chances, and I wouldn't want you to be any other way, sir. But if you feel that the words are necessary, then I'll say them. I forgive you."

"That means more to me than I can ever say, my boy," the ageing man said with a smile. He looked to the rest of the students. "Professor Sinistra will take full-time duties as Head of Slytherin House from this moment forward. She has been made aware of this fact. I will continue to teach Potions until a proper professor can be found for the subject, which may not be until this school year has ended."

"There is one other piece of information that I believe you will find to be pleasant, Harry," he finished with a smile.

After a moment of waiting, Harry grinned and said, "You're just going to make me ask, aren't you?" At the Headmaster's silent smile, he said, "All right then. What information do you have for me that I might enjoy?"

"Searching with William Weasley was quite fruitful. We have been to all the places listed on your parchment, and have carefully retrieved all but the snake. I fear that the Horcrux stored in the snake shall be ... well, from the memory you gave, I fear that you shall have to deal with it in May."

Harry leapt to his feet and ran to the man, pulling him into a hug. "I've only got one of them left to deal with? This is *great* news!"

"Actually, we have them stored at the moment. Bill believes that destroying them at the moment could be catastrophic in nature, with a high likelihood of killing the one doing the destruction. Needless to say, this would have to be done six times. Finding one person willing to sacrifice their lives for such an endeavour is difficult enough. Finding four? Nigh unto impossible."

Harry thought for a moment. "What if Riddle destroyed them?"

"Not to be insulting, Harry," Hannah said, "but how do you plan to get him to destroy them? I can't exactly see you walking up to him and saying, 'Sir? I'm trying to kill you permanently, so I need you to destroy your soul pieces.'" She paused. "Well, actually, this is you. I *can* see you doing that, just to annoy him," she said with a laugh. "What I can't see is him agreeing."

Harry just grinned and tapped his scar. "Ah, but I have an in, dear girl. The Moldie one and I have a link. If I let him get back to a body, using my blood, it will get much stronger, but the link is there now. He affected me in first year, so it should work."

Dumbledore's eyebrows were nearing his hairline. "That could work, Harry. I shall speak with William and see what his opinion is on the matter." With a somewhat indulgent smile, he said, "You can understand that we do not wish to put you in greater danger than you are already in."

"I understand sir. But this is going to be really amusing if it turns out that this can be dealt with by

a simple 'Finite Incantatem' by me.”

Bill Weasley looked at Harry in shock as he finished the last Horcrux. “I do not believe this! These things were booby-trapped with more ... I'd have ... I'm a curse breaker – one of the best and that's *not* arrogance speaking – and I could not get past the protections on these things. You walk in and cast '*Finite Incantatem*' and they simply ... stop!” The indignation in Bill's voice was quite evident, and to Harry, quite humorous.

Harry was laughing. “Bill, I have an in, as I pointed out to the Headmaster.” He tapped his scar. “I apparently have just enough of Tom's aura that the Horcruxes saw me as him. So obviously, if 'Tom' wanted to do something to the Horcrux, it must have been for a good reason, so it let him.” He paused. “They may have been parts of his soul, but I don't think that they were all that sentient, were they?”

“I'd say not,” Bill said. “I think they'd have fought more if they were.” He grinned at Harry. “You should start taking Runes and Arithmancy. I have the sneaking suspicion that you'd make one heck of a good curse breaker.”

“I'll give it some thought,” Harry said with a smile. “I've got to decide what I'm going to do with my life this time around, if I'm lucky enough to survive. I don't trust the Ministry not to use me one way or another, so most Ministry positions are right out. I'm the last scion of the Potter family, so I'm now an adult in the eyes of the law, thanks to an ancient law that favours purebloods. I'll be moving into the Potter manor – and by the way, I want to hire you to make sure the wards are solid – so I'll not be worriting about those damned Dursleys anymore.” He blinked. “Worriting? I've been paying too much attention to Tolkien again.” He shook his head. “So yeah, I just might think about curse breaking for a living. Won't need the money, but it might be fun.”

“Well, here's hoping you do, little brother,” Bill said, clapping him on the shoulder. “Hey, if Ron considers you family, and Mum and Dad do as well, then that's good enough for me.” He smiled wryly. “Ginny wishes you were family in a slightly different way, of course, but -”

“I remember from the first go around. We got to some pretty heavy snogging the first time through, I admit, but ... well, she's a bit too much like your Mum, and your Mum sometimes gives me flashbacks to the Dursleys. I love your family to pieces, but the arguing is too close to home, y'know?”

Bill smiled widely. “Why do you think Charlie and I moved out? I'm in Egypt for a reason, little bro.” Harry laughed and then surprised them both by giving Bill a quick hug.

“That was something none of you ever actually said to me first time around. I think I like this redo.”

Dumbledore approached him a few days later with another large smile and led him to his office.

“We have rescued Bartemius Crouch Senior,” he told Harry. “He is unable to speak at the moment – at least coherently – but it is not believed that he will remain that way for long.”

“Where is he?” Harry asked.

“At the moment, he is in the Long Term Care ward in St. Mungos,” was the answer.

“Find a way to protect him. Send Winky along or something. In a year from now, in the old time stream, someone died in there because the security isn't high enough, and they were guarding that prophecy we were talking about.” He paused. “What say we go to the Department of Mysteries and pull that little bugger out of there, so that he doesn't have an excuse to try going after it physically?”

“Planning ahead, I see,” Albus said with a smile.

“It's the height of arrogance to plan for this working perfectly, sir. I need to be prepared for the worst.”

“Excellent thinking, my boy. Either way, we shall go this summer and retrieve it.”

“It might be better to take a day during the school year, before the final task,” Harry said. “That way word can get around that it's been heard, and the Order of the Phoenix won't need to post a guard all the time.” He shrugged. “If Tom survives the graveyard – which I'm hoping he won't, to be honest – then the word that it's been heard will pretty much force him to put all his interest on me, rather than trying to get through a door.” He grinned a nasty grin. “My Occlumency shields are far better than he'll be expecting.”

Dumbledore's face fell slightly. “I know that it was not me, and yet it was. I apologise for the decision that I undoubtedly would have made, Harry. I trusted the man, and it seems that I should not have done so.”

“I've said it before, and I'll say it again. I would rather you keep trusting in the goodness of mankind, rather than become the bitter old man that it would require you become if you stopped trusting. You did what you thought best. So what if time proved otherwise? At the time you made the decisions, they really were for the best. I forgive you. I'll keep telling you that I forgive you until you believe me.” He swept the elderly gentleman into a hug.

“It does my heart good to see that my decision to leave you at the Dursleys did not damage you in the ways that matter most.”

The two sat and talked for a time more about more inconsequential things, before finally breaking for the evening.

The day of the Third Task came, and Harry found that once again, the Weasleys had come to cheer him on, although this time it was the entire family. He pulled the Headmaster aside to remind him

to grab Crouch Junior as soon as the competition started.

This time around Harry was first into the maze, as opposed to entering with Cedric. He knew the way that the other three tended to think, and was bound and determined to make it to the Cup before anyone else.

He knew quickly on that he had not done one very important thing – mapped out the maze. He was lost in extremely short order, although his use of the '*Point Me*' spell had the same use it did last time – pointing him in a north-west direction. He didn't find the golden mist that seemed to turn everything upside down this time, but he ran into Hagrid's damned Blast-Ended Skrewts. Knowing that killing them would hurt his first friend's feelings, he cast the strongest Immobilus he could – and they all froze in place.

His travels kept rearranging on him. He would have sworn that the maze didn't rewrite itself in the original time stream, but this one seemed to. Every few minutes, a strong breeze would come up and blow mist past him, and when it cleared, the maze had different look to it. He was pleased that he did not hear the scream of Fleur this time, and kept moving.

He skidded to stop – literally; a small divot of sod flew a short distance in front of him – when he rounded a corner and once again found a sphinx blocking his path. This one looked different than the previous one had; where the first one had the winged body of a lion and the head of a human woman, this one was leonine from the waist down, based off the upper torso, which was that of a shapely woman. Golden fur ran along the entire body, fading as it approached the face, which was flesh, but had the same golden hue.

“Crap,” he muttered. “I should have realised that they'd change the maze on me. They'd only *had* seven months, after all.” He looked up. “Milady sphinx,” he said. “What is your riddle?”

“You know the rules then?”

“If I get it right, I pass. If I get it wrong, we fight. If I choose not to answer, you let me find a different way to the centre.”

She nodded with a smile. “You do understand. Excellent. Very well, here is my riddle:

This thing all other things devours;

Birds, beasts, trees, and flowers;

Gnaws iron, bites steel;

Grinds hard stone to meal.

Slays king, ruins town;

Beats high mountains down.

What is it?

Harry began to chuckle, and it soon became a full blown belly laugh. “Of all the riddles to give me, you had to *give* me that one?” He got himself under control and bowed low to her. “Even had I not read the great J.R.R. Tolkien's works, I would know beyond a shadow of a doubt that the answer to this specific riddle is that which I have an intimate knowledge of – time.”

The sphinx nodded, sketched her own bow, and moved aside to allow him passage. “Good luck with your hunt, wise one,” she called after him.

He continued to run, at least once jumping over a giant spider with a move that would have made an Olympic gymnast drool in envy. Finally, at the corner ahead, he could see the faint glow that he knew was the Tri-Wizard Cup – and his ticket to the graveyard where Riddle awaited.

He sprinted to the corner and turned it, ready to see the Cup – and found his fellow competitors sitting around a table, playing Exploding Snap. “It is about time you got 'ere, 'Arry,” Fleur said with a wicked smile.

Cedric created a chair for him to sit in. “Get yourself rested before we take that Cup. Don't want to be facing Dark wizards when you're not as fresh as you can be, do you?”

“But ... how?” he asked as he dropped into the conjured chair.

“Depends,” answered Viktor. “Cedric walked. I flew.”

Fleur looked at Harry for a moment. “You went zrough ze maze, 'Arry. We went over it. Cedric cast a Fezzerlight Charm upon 'is shoes, made a ladder, and walked 'ere.” He smacked his forehead with his palm. “Viktor Summoned 'is broom, and I cast Spider Walk and climbed and ran ze maze.”

“We knew that we had to beat you here,” Cedric said. “The only way any of us could think to do that was to go over the maze, rather than through it. Did you meet the sphinx? I saw her as I jumped over her. She waved, in fact.”

“Shouldn't she have tried to stop you? She had wings,” Harry said, confused.

“Apparently she was told to stay on the ground. Nobody expected us to do this, I'll bet, so she stayed where they told her to.”

Harry shook his head. “All that work to try to beat you here, and I was out-thought. You thought outside the box. Thinking worthy of a Slytherin.”

“Nah – pure Hufflepuff. Loyalty to a fellow school chum.” He grinned at Harry.

Harry stood a few minutes later. “I supposed that I'm as rested as I can get for now. Shall we all take the Cup together, then? I promise not to touch it before you guys – you worked too hard to make sure you'd be with me. Just ... stay safe, okay?”

“We will try, friend Harry. Dat is all we can promise.” Harry nodded his acceptance.

The four champions stood at the cardinal points around the Cup. “We touch it on three?” he asked, getting nods all around. “One ... two ... three ...” The jarring pull behind his navel happened once more, as it had the first time around, and the four of them were sent flying through the ether.

They had left the Hogwarts grounds completely; they had obviously traveled miles – perhaps hundreds of miles – for even the mountains surrounding the castle were gone. They were standing instead in a dark and overgrown graveyard; the black outline of a small church was visible beyond a large yew tree to their right. A hill rose above them to their left. Harry could just make out the outline of a fine old house on the hillside.

“Right,” Harry grumbled. “As if it would be prettier this time around. Okay, keep your eyes open for any movement.”

Fleur pointed almost immediately to something in the distance. It appeared to be a robed individual, and they were carrying something.

“Right!” Harry hissed. “That's Pettigrew, and he's carrying the homonculus body of Voldemort. That monument over there should be the Riddle one, which means that there's a cauldron in front of it. Spread out and don't forget your marble shields.”

Harry Conjured a knife from the air and then whispered, “*Accio Nagini!*” Suddenly, a snake shot from the grass and flew toward the Riddle monument. Harry chuckled and moved behind it, and was rewarded with a wet smacking sound. The hissing that he heard after the impact was actually making him giggle slightly, since he didn't know that snakes knew how to swear. This one had apparently learned.

Nagini came around the monument at a speed faster than Harry would have expected, but not fast enough to keep him from shouting “*Finite Incantatem!*” at the snake.

Nagini stopped suddenly and began to convulse. He suddenly realised that the Horcrux had not been the snake itself, but rather something it had swallowed. It was also quite obvious that what had been done to her was ultimately fatal without the Horcruxes help. As a kindness, he chopped off her head and brought the knife down the length of her body. It stopped about halfway down, and he reached in to find a jewel about the size of a child's fist. It was a star sapphire, and he was fairly certain that it was probably Ravenclaw's gem. He waved his hand over it, cleaning it, and then dropped it into his pocket.

He could hear a hissing voice calling for Nagini. *Where are you, my Nagini?* he heard in parseltongue.

Chuckling to himself, he replied, *Bugger off, unless you want to become a meal!*

A high voice screamed into the night, “I will kill you when I see you, Potter!”

“Not likely!” Harry yelled back. “I’m more man at fourteen than you’ve *ever* been, you old has-been!” With that, he rolled out from behind the monument and fired off a spell with as much power as he could safely put into it. “Laser!” he yelled, and a beam that was violet in colour, but almost invisible, shot out of his wand and impacted the side of the cauldron, almost at the bottom. Instantly, a hole the size of Harry’s head appeared in it, and the fluid contained within began to pour out at an astonishing rate.

“No!” came two simultaneous screams. “You fool!”

“*Accio* Pettigrew!” he yelled as he shot back behind the monument. A loud crack sounded, and Harry looked to see that he had either killed or at least knocked out Peter Pettigrew. He was about to call Voldemort to him when a green beam shot out toward him.

Reflexively, he threw up a shield which reflected the sickly green Killing Curse off in a random direction. He could also see three other spells shoot toward the direction of the Killing Curse. He tried again to reach for the homonculus body of Riddle, but instead, the bundle shot off toward the direction that the Killing Curse had come from. A moment later, the tell-tale sound of Apparation sounded through the graveyard, and Harry began to curse mightily.

In response to his anger, he looked down at Pettigrew and Transfigured all his clothing into a single mass of solid steel. He then made sure that the man was still alive, and Stunned him again for good measure.

“Damn it to hell!” he screamed to the heavens.

“We’re all alive, Harry,” Cedric said. “We’re ahead of the game.”

“And Voldemort escaped, damn it,” Harry whispered. “I failed. I failed at my task.”

The group reappeared to the shock of everyone, each jointly holding the Cup. The silence was deafening – how could this have happened? There was supposed to be a single winner! What was more unusual was that there was an extra person along for the ride.

“Headmaster Dumbledore! Remus Lupin!” Harry called out. The two appeared quite rapidly and looked down at their extra passenger.

“Pettigrew!” Remus snarled.

“That’s impossible!” Cornelius Fudge said. “Pettigrew is dead, murdered by that psycho, Sirius Black! That’s an imposter, trying to ruin the good name of an Order of Merlin winner!”

“Wrong,” Harry said. “Wake him and give him Veritaserum. I’ll bet he can tell you who he really is.”

“Who do you think you are, ordering me around?” Fudge bellowed at him. “I don’t care if you *are*

The Boy Who Lived, you will not speak to me that way!”

“Who does he think he is?” Cedric asked. “He thinks he's the guy who captured this moron, who was trying to resurrect Voldemort. And guess what? He did capture this guy! There were two of them, though, and the second one got Voldemort away before we could stop him.”

“Voldemort is dead, you silly fool,” Fudge sneered at Cedric. “I thought Amos would have raised his son better than to tell scary stories like that.”

Harry turned to Dumbledore, ignoring Fudge, which made the Minister turn a colour Harry had only ever seen on Vernon before. “Did you capture the false Moody?”

“Yes, and the Polyjuice Potion has worn off. It is, in fact, Bartemius Crouch Junior.”

“Impossible! He died in prison!” Fudge said.

“Then how is he currently under guard up at the castle?” Albus asked calmly.

“I'll need to see this for myself,” Fudge blustered. “Let me call some guards to me and we'll just see about this!”

“Minister?” Harry said calmly. “If you bring Dementors onto the grounds, be aware that I will chase them off.”

Fudge laughed. “What can *you* do about it? Most adult wizards can't cast the spell necessary, how is a little child like you going to manage it?”

Harry grinned and pulled out his wand. “*Expecto Patronum!*” he yelled, remembering the feeling of the kisses that both Hermione and Daphne had given him this morning. A bright silver stag erupted from his wand and charged around the stadium. “Next question, Minister?” he asked impudently.

It had not been a good time for the Minister. Two men had returned from the dead apparently, and both were working for Voldemort. Amelia Bones had quickly been called in, which made Fudge even angrier than before, because he now knew that he was simply unable to sweep the stories under the rug – Bones was well known for being something of a hard-nose about the law. Both men were taken to the Ministry and placed under guard with people that she trusted.

Fudge had blustered his way back out of the castle.

Harry was not taking part in the party that seemed to have erupted in the school. Everyone was cheering on the champions, and congratulating them that it had been a joint victory.

“Cheer up, Harry,” Dumbledore said as he sat down next to the sombre young man and cast a privacy shield. “He must find a new method to return himself to a better form. Perhaps he can try

the same one again, but he will not likely use your blood, which will lead to a weaker link between you than in your previous run through the time stream.”

“I have further good news for you as well,” he said. “I have had a look at the Arithmantic equations, and had several trusted Unspeakables check them through as well. What Tom did not know when he split his soul into seven pieces was that it is now impossible for him to create another Horcrux. There is a certain point at which your soul can become no smaller. He has reached that barrier. There will be no more Horcruxes.”

“That *is* good news,” Harry said. “Oh, sir? I found out what was making Nagini into a Horcrux.” He reached into his pocket and pulled out the sapphire.

Dumbledore's eyes widened so far that Harry felt that it was only the older man's glasses that kept them in his head. “This must be Rowena's scrying jewel!” he breathed reverently. “He chose artefacts of the Founders, and none have known what happened to the jewel. Until now.”

“So what happens to them now?”

“Well, it appears that in each case, the last known owner died without heir. Hepzibah Smith was no relation to young Zacharias. It seems that the laws concerning salvage come to play. Since there are no living members of any of those families, you are now the proud owner of several priceless Founders artefacts.”

“What am I going to do with a scrying gem?” Harry asked plaintively.

Dumbledore waited for only a moment before saying, “Improve your Divination marks, perhaps?”

Harry stared at the man for a long moment before beginning to snort, and then chuckle. At the point that Albus Dumbledore dropped the privacy shield, the rest of the room was treated to the hysterical laughter of one Harry Potter, who was now banging the table with his fist as he laughed.

“Actually,” Daphne said later on, “you could probably use it to find where Voldemort is.”

Hermione was vibrating at the moment. She considered Divination to be a 'woolly science' at best, but this was an artefact from a Founder! “Argh,” she finally growled. “I want to ridicule scrying, but ... there are too many studies showing that it really happens; that it works.”

“You've been turned off it by a woman who might as well be a fraud,” Harry said. “She tries to live up to the image of her great-great-grandmother, but hasn't the talent. Divination itself isn't bad, it's how she teaches it. It doesn't tell you specifics – usually – it points you where you need to go.”

“So what are we doing with it?” Hermione asked.

He smiled. “I was thinking of having a setting made for it, so that the stone could be placed into it

and put on a chain.”

“Who would you give it to?” Hermione asked.

Harry could hear the hope in her voice. “Well, since I was thinking of giving the Slytherin locket to my Slytherin love, I was thinking that my own little Ravenclaw should wear the sapphire.”

She cocked her head. “Who's your girlfriend in Ravenclaw?” she asked, sounding slightly hurt. “Su Li?”

He kissed her forehead. “If you hadn't been so sure that Gryffindor was the best place for you, Hermione, where would you have ended up?”

“Ravenclaw -” she started to say, and then blushed shyly. “Oh.” A moment later, her head shot up. “You can't give me something so precious as an irreplaceable artefact!”

“Why not?” he asked. “You gave me something even more precious than the gem. You gave me your heart.”

She blushed again.

The ride back to King's Cross station was unusual for Harry. He'd seen both Viktor and Fleur off as their respective schools returned home, but both had promised him that they would see him again soon. In the car, he sat with Hermione and Daphne flanking him, both now wearing their respective necklaces under their clothing. Across from him sat Ron, who was helping make space in the cabin for both Luna and Ginny by letting Susan Bones sit on his lap. From her giggles, Harry had the feeling that Ron had at least once wordlessly told her that he enjoyed her figure.

The ride was basically quiet, but for Harry, it would occasionally bring tears to his eyes as he remembered the original time line, and the friendships then. Things had changed, but there was something deep and moving for him to be sitting in the same place that he had made his first friends in the magical world, knowing that the years ahead were completely unknown to him.

“I love you guys, you know that?” he said thickly. “A year ago in my own personal memories, I knew that I'd never see you guys again, and that I had what felt like an eternity to wait before I'd have any hope of speaking with you again. Now I can sit with you, lose at chess to Ron, and ... I don't think I'll ever be able to tell you just how much you mean to me.”

Luna met his eyes. “I'm glad you came back. I'd never have approached Viktor if not for you, and now I have a boyfriend who doesn't mind my eccentricities.”

“And have you noticed that you're not quite as flighty anymore?” Ginny asked.

Luna nodded, her eyes sparkling. “For a flier, he grounds me well. And I help him fly in ways he never expected.”

“Isn't that what love is about?” Harry asked with a smile.

The train pulled into the Kings Cross station shortly thereafter, and they all disembarked. As they prepared to exit to the Muggle side, Harry said, “You might wish to get your parents watching, Hermione, and anyone else you can get. I'm going to defy Vernon, and I expect that he'll likely lash out physically.”

“I'll talk to my parents,” Hermione said. “They'll likely offer a place to stay for a while. I know you don't need it,” she hastened to add as he opened his mouth, “but the Muggle authorities are going to want some address that they can reach you at.”

He nodded, and they headed out one by one, Harry waiting until last. Almost immediately, he was approached by Vernon Dursley. “Well boy, get your things and bring them to the car. I've not got all day to stand around and wait for you freaks to arrive.”

“I'm not going home with you,” Harry said simply.

“Excuse me?” Vernon asked, purpling. “I made this drive from Little Whinging to pick up your freakish little carcass, and you dare tell me you're not coming? Who do you think you are?” he finished, his voice getting rather loud at the end.

“Someone who has gotten sick and tired of being treated as a slave at your house,” Harry replied conversationally. “Someone who has decided that there comes a point in one's life when abuse is simply not to be tolerated anymore.”

The Grangers and other families were edging closer, but Vernon did not seem to notice that. “You ungrateful little ... we gave you a home and a place to sleep, and you dare impugn our generosity?”

“Hmm, better vocabulary than I'm used to from you. As for your generosity – can I assume that you refer to permitting me to sleep in a cupboard under the stairs for ten years? Or are you referring to the fact that you let me sleep in a bedroom that you lock from the outside? Or maybe you refer to the year that you put bars outside my window to keep me in, because you didn't want me returning to my school? How about the fact that I am forced to do all that prize winning landscaping that you and yours win awards for, for the honour of eating your leftovers, which I was the one to cook in the first place?”

This was too much for Vernon. He reached out and grabbed Harry's arm in a death grip, one that Harry knew would bruise in a short time. “Excuse me, is there a problem here?” asked a man from nearby.

“No, just taking my unruly nephew home. He likes to cause trouble. Just got back from a school for criminal boys.”

“Oh, you mean Hogwarts?” the man asked.

Vernon snarled. “You're one of those freaks, aren't you? Keep away from me!”

“I've heard dentists call a number of things – some even compliments – but I don't think we've ever been classed as a whole as freaks.”

“Is there a problem here?” another voice asked.

“I want all you freaks to just keep away from me!” Vernon growled. “I'm taking my freakish nephew home right now.”

“I don't think so,” the second voice said with a much colder voice. “Constable Wilkins here. We've a problem, and I need backup. I'm between platforms nine and ten, down by the far end.”

Vernon turned to see the speaker talking into a small microphone on his shoulder. Before anything could be done, Vernon pushed Harry away and waddled as fast as he could – as close to a run as he could manage – toward his car. Constable Wilkins said, “Stay here, please!” as he took off after Vernon.

A short time later, Harry was riding in the back seat of the Granger vehicle, having been offered a place to stay while the police did what they needed to do regarding his uncle. He leaned back into the seat and smiled, especially as Hermione leaned into his shoulder. *As much as nothing is clear anymore, this should be a good summer*, he thought.

A Time To Reflect

Summer Before Fifth Year

Disclaimer: Objects in the rear view mirror may appear closer than they are. These characters all belong to JK Rowling.

Note: The tip of the hat to DrT was the gem that Nagini had swallowed. And to the one reviewer – I'm sorry, but Hermione gets to stay alive a while longer. How much longer? Keep reading.

They sat in the back seat of the auto, holding each other gently. “I just wish that ... damn it,” he muttered.

“You didn't fail, Harry,” she said. “Cedric is alive, and friendships have been forged that weren't the first time around. Could you have seen Viktor and Luna together the first time through?”

“No, but it seems to make so much sense now. It's how she pointed it out – for a flier, he grounds her, and she helps him fly in ways he never thought of. They will either crash and burn spectacularly, or be the stuff of romantic legends for ages to come.”

The pulled into a restaurant parking lot as he finished the statement. “I think we should get something to eat before heading the rest of the way home,” Dan Granger said. “Otherwise it will be too late in the evening to get a proper meal.”

“I'll pay my way, sir,” Harry said. “You never expected me to be along with you at this point, so you shouldn't bear the additional financial burden.”

“You'll need that money, son,” he replied. “Don't worry about it.”

He shrugged. He had a feeling that this was a conversation he was not going to win, at least not in the parking lot.

The meal went well, except for Harry noticing that Mr Granger kept looking at how closely he and Hermione sat together. He sighed to himself and thought about the conversation that they'd be having soon.

It was about nine-thirty that evening that they arrived at the Granger home. It looked to be a decent size. He also noticed that there didn't seem to be any near neighbours. “Dentistry does quite

well for us,” Emma said with a laugh. “Actually, between our writing and our investing, we've turned what would be enough to live on into a pleasant little fortune.” At Hermione's puzzled look, she said, “Haven't you ever wondered how we can afford the things we do when we're dentists?” Emma asked. “We get paid by the National Health Service for most of our work, and there's not a huge call for cosmetic work where our offices are. Both your father and I write. He writes travelogues for magazines, mostly, but almost always with a humorous twist to them, and they bring in a decent amount of money. I write as well, and I even have a few books published under a pen name.”

“What sort of books?” Hermione asked excitedly.

“Depends on the pen name. If it's Lily Farmer -”

“Oh my god! My mother is Lily Farmer?” Hermione squeaked, suddenly blushing.

“I take it you're a fan?” Emma asked in amusement.

“Those books are passed around school amongst the Muggle-born girls,” was the reply. “The girls call them the next best thing to sex. Even some of the purebloods are asking for copies.” Her blush deepened. “I've worn out my copy of *Midnight Rendezvous*.” She did something no one at the table thought was possible – deepened her blush yet again. “I keep imagining Harry as Roland and myself as Evangeline,” she whispered.

“You kinky little thing!” Emma said with a soft chuckle. “I'll have to show you some of the scenes that I wasn't permitted to leave in for those two, even hinting.”

“I'm your daughter,” Hermione replied, sticking her chin up. “I'm not kinky; I just have a healthy respect for the amount of fun I can have!” She grinned widely at her parents, who were both shaking their heads and trying hard not to laugh loudly.

“There'd better not be any of that kind of fun happening under our roof, however,” Dan said finally. “You're both under-age.”

Harry winced slightly, hoping that Dan might not notice the wince. No such luck. “From your reaction, is it safe to assume that such activities *have* taken place at your school?”

“Yes, Dad, they have. And you need to understand -”

“- that this young man has apparently had sex with my under-age daughter while under-age himself. Fairly clear, correct?”

“Yes sir,” Harry said.

“I will not tolerate such things while you are a guest in my house, am I clear?” he asked, his voice rising slightly.

“Crystal, sir,” Harry answered with no inflection to his voice.

“I'd appreciate it if you not take that tone with me, young man.”

Harry simply nodded as he stood up. “I'd appreciate it if you'd send Hedwig along at some point, Hermione. I'll be heading elsewhere.” He reached down and grabbed his trunk, then touched the signet ring that suddenly became visible, and disappeared.

He appeared in the entryway of what looked to be a fairly large building. Torches flared to life and expose the well-appointed hallway of what was obviously the home of a wealthy family. *Well, the Potters were well off, I'm told.*

His thoughts were interrupted by the appearance of a house elf. “I is Memo,” the elf said simply. “It is good to see Master Harry return to Potter Manor.”

“I'm happy to be here, Memo. What, if anything, needs to be done around here?”

“House is clean, and awaiting family. Will Master Harry be living here from now on?”

“I believe so, Memo. I'm away from the Dursleys, and I need a home of my own. This looks like a good one.” He smiled for a moment, and then frowned. “I need to send a note to someone. Can you appear in a Muggle home if they know that magic exists?” Memo nodded. “I'll write the note, and if you would kindly take it to Hermione Granger?”

Hermione was facing down her father as soon as Harry was gone. “Well done, dad,” she said sarcastically. “Chase him off before there's any possible explanations! Blame it all on him!”

“What are you saying?” Emma asked with a smile, knowing where this was going.

“Well, I sort of pushed the question on him. Daphne and I looked up the spells to prevent pregnancy and then followed Harry to a place that we knew he was going to be taking a bath. Neither of us were wearing anything under our robes.” She glared at her father. “None of us were virgins when we left that room.”

Emma was openly grinning now. “So correct me if I'm wrong, but Harry was by himself when not one, but two young ladies who knew what they wanted entered the bath that he was in, and convinced him, as girls are wont to do, that they had a certain pesky problem that they wished dealt with, and effectively 'forced' a solution on him.”

“I'd argue the forcing, but you're basically correct.” She was going to continue, but a house elf appeared before her and handed her a note before disappearing again. Her face fell as she read it.

Hermione,

I should have remembered you father's temper, love. The first time through, he hit me with a fireplace poker when I told them of your death.

Feel free to tell them about what you know, and we can set up a time and place for a meeting, since I am quite certain that the only way I will be allowed back into that house is under extreme duress on your father's part.

I wonder which one of my parents was the loud and angry one? Dad was a bully, it seems, so he's a candidate, but Mum was Aunt Petunia's sister, and my aunt has a piercing voice, so it could have been her. But it's sad to think that family has to have that to exist.

We'll try to set up neutral meetings during the summer, since you obviously will not be permitted to visit me at Potter Manor. If not, we'll at least see each other on September 1st.

I love you.

Harry

She handed the note to her mother and picked up her trunk, carrying it upstairs to her room. A few moments later, both parents were in the room with her. “What does he mean about which of his parents was the loud one?” Emma asked. “And what does he mean about 'the first time through'?”

“Well, the loud one is the easiest to answer. The only examples of family that he's ever been faced with have at least one forceful personality willing to push their decisions onto everyone else. His first example is his Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, who are quite vocal about what a worthless freak he is. And by vocal I mean loud. Then you have Molly Weasley, who – as wonderful as she can be at times – can be very pushy about her desires for her family. Very much a 'my way or the highway' attitude.” She looked at her father. “And now he has a man who automatically blames him for taking my virginity, his attitude assuming that I had no say in the matter, and who apparently hit him with the fireplace poker in the first time stream.”

“First time stream?” Dan asked.

“Yes,” she replied. “Harry was ... his mind came back about twenty years, I think – I'm not exactly sure how much – to fix a problem. People had died at the hands of the Dark Lord that I've mentioned to you. That Voldemort fellow?” she asked by way of reminding them. “He's not dead. So, he ended up capturing twelve of us in the first time stream, and was going to use our life forces to make himself immortal. Harry apparently got there just a touch too late to save us, but did kill Voldemort. He ended up with the lifespan. He apparently told you two, and Dad hit him with a fireplace poker.”

“This was supposed to be a nice summer for him, one where he doesn't have to mourn the death of a classmate this time around, and instead, he gets to spend it alone in a family home that nobody lives in except him and some house elves. Forgive me if I'm not a happy girl at the moment,” she said, tears forming at the corners of her eyes. “The sad thing about this is that when it comes time for him to start a family, he likely won't, because he'll be afraid of becoming what he hates. He now *knows* that a family 'needs' the angry one, and he won't do that, so he'll assume that Daphne or I would be forced into the position, and he won't do that to us, either.”

“I'm a little uncomfortable with something I'm hearing,” Dan said.

Hermione looked up, fire in her eyes. “I'm bisexual, Dad. Live with it, or tell me to move out. One or the other.”

“Don't take that -”

“You saw what happened the last time you used that phrase, Dan,” Emma said with steel in her voice. “Don't try for two in a row.”

Dan turned and stalked from the room. “I'll get him calmed down. Maybe you can invite Harry back over here for tomorrow?” Emma asked.

“He won't come. You saw the neutral ground reference. Dad's fu ... screwed that up.” She fought back her tears again. “Is it too much to want him to have a happy summer for once in his life?”

Emma joined her husband downstairs. He'd opened a Newcastle Brown Ale and was halfway through it already. “Quite the start to the summer, isn't it?” she asked conversationally.

“Don't start, Emma,” he said softly. “I'm stuck between trying to keep her safe -”

“- by threatening off her suitors -” she quipped.

“- and letting some young buck come sniffing around her. And now he's got her convinced that he's some time traveller?”

“Dan? Remember that story she told us about last year, when she was using that thing they called a Time Turner?”

He sat up suddenly, almost sloshing the ale out of his glass. “Bugger me, you're right! I had completely forgotten about that.” He thought for a moment. “And I've managed to insult someone who came back in time to save my daughter's life, from what I can tell.”

“What about the other girl?” Emma asked.

“Same reasoning as with Harry. So what if Hermione likes girls too? So what if she likes girls *exclusively*? Is this other girl good enough for *my* little girl?”

“The problem is, Dan, you need to let her make her own mistakes. Maybe she's been luckier than anyone deserves to be and found her soul-mate, or two as the case may be. Maybe she'll get her heart broken, but we can't be there to stop it for her.”

She took his face in her hands. “You hurt her tonight, Dan, and you have to make up for that somehow. She thinks that you're unhappy with her because she's bisexual. You chased her boyfriend out of the house. All because you're threatened that you won't be the number one male in her heart anymore.”

His face fell. “It is that, isn't it?” He stood, downing the rest of the glass, and then headed upstairs to talk to Hermione.

Hermione sat at her desk, writing a letter to Harry when she heard the knock on her door frame. “May I come in, Hermione?” her father asked.

“It's not as if I could really stop you, even if I wanted to,” she replied before turning around to face him. She was surprised to see the look of deep sadness on his face. “I'm sorry, Dad, but you hurt me, and hurt Harry tonight.”

“I know, and your mother just made me realise why. Would you believe that it's jealousy?”

She cocked her head for a long moment before smiling widely at her father. “I'll always be your little girl, Daddy.”

“Yeah, but you won't be *just* my girl anymore, and that's what was bothering me,” he said. “I'm jealous of the fact that a little bit of your heart now goes to this boy who loves you so much that he came back in time to save your life, and to this girl you know. I screwed everything up because you're not mine alone anymore.”

“It's not screwed up, Daddy. Not totally, at least. We should be able to get in touch with Harry.” She hugged her father. “Just realise that he loves me like you do, and would die to keep me safe, just like you.”

Dan laughed. “I'll tell him that when we meet again.”

“I'll finish writing my letter and invite him somewhere neutral. We can invite him here from there.”

Harry finished the eight ounces of Newcastle that Dan had poured him. “I appreciate your candour, sir. Just know that -”

“I know. We'd both die for that girl,” he said. “Can I assume that at this point, your intentions toward my daughter likely involve someday putting a ring on her finger?”

Harry smiled and unfocused for a moment, telling Dan more than Harry realised. “Sir, I came back in time because twelve people who meant everything to me were killed by a madman. The first time around, I never really admitted to myself until it was too late that I felt something for your daughter.” He winced slightly. “One other girl as well, to be honest, but that's another kettle of fish.”

“The same girl that Hermione is sweet on?”

Harry smiled. “Daphne. Yes. Wonderful woman – well, girl right now – and ... well, I can vouch

for her as well. We know that Hermione wouldn't want us to, but either one of us would ... what's that phrase I came across once? Oh yeah – we'd take a bullet for your daughter. I love her more than I can possibly put into words, sir, no matter how much of a cliché that sounds.”

He frowned slightly and bit his lower lip. “I want to ask your blessing on putting a promise ring on your daughter's finger, sir. It's not an engagement ring, but it is a statement that one will follow, if she so desires, once she's old enough.” He chuckled as he heard a soft “Squee!” from outside the door. “Either that was your wife being happy about it, or Hermione has plans to say yes.”

“I may have made a bad decision earlier, but I feel I'm making a good one now. You have my permission to court and someday marry my daughter, should she find you worthy.”

“Of a woman such as her I'll never be worthy, sir, but I'll spend my life trying to be.”

“So sayeth the intelligent man,” Dan replied. “I still don't understand exactly what Emma sees in me.”

“A wonderful man with a sense of honour,” Emma said. Eyes twinkling she added, “The mind-blowing sex is pretty good, too!”

“Mother!” squeaked an embarrassed Hermione. She leaned over and whispered something in Emma's ear while she blushed that made the woman lean back and laugh the hardest Harry had ever seen anyone laugh.

Sirius was pardoned finally for his non-part in the deaths of all those people. There had been some wrangling, since a few people wanted him thrown back in prison for escaping his wrongful imprisonment, but it was quickly pointed out that since the prison term *had* been wrong, since no trial had ever happened, Sirius could not be said to have actually escaped – rather, he had exited the equivalent of a kidnapping. Harry spoke to him the day that he first walked in the open air once more with no fear of legal reprisals.

“Sirius, will you do something for me?” he asked.

“Anything, Harry. Anything at all.”

“In the original time line, you never actually claimed the proper title of Patriarch of the Black Family. I think it's part of the reason your mother still hangs on that wall.”

“But they're such a Dark family that I want nothing to do with them!”

“Yes, but think of it this way, Sirius – if you claim the right of Patriarch, and then start steering the family into the Light, by doing things like officially accepting Andromeda and her daughter as members once more, and getting rid of Bellatrix and possibly Narcissa, people will remember the Black family as one of the great Light side families in a few generations. And it will all be traceable back to your decision to officially claim Patriarch status.”

“How do you know Nymphadora?” he asked. “No, never mind, I forgot.”

“Haven't met her yet in this time line, and may never, but I recall that she was a very attractive young lady, with a thing for a certain man with a 'furry little problem' in my original time line.”

“Really?” Sirius asked with a mischievous grin.

“Yes, but don't force them too much, or they'll never end up together. You know what she can be like, and you know Remus.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Sirius replied. “I'll introduce them and see where things go from there.”

“Good enough. So, do you agree to take the leadership of the Black family? If you do, I can tell you that the head of the Potter family would look rather favourably upon suggestions of an alliance between the two great households.” Harry was grinning by the end of his statement.

“Wouldn't *that* just put Lucius Malfoy's knickers in a bind?” Sirius replied with an evil grin. “Let's get to Gringott's and deal with it right now.”

They returned to number 12 Grimmauld Place a few hours later to find the portrait of Sirius's mother on the ground with Kreacher dead beneath it. It appeared that he had attempted to catch the portrait and been crushed by it instead. There were few tears shed over Kreacher.

The only thing that really marred Harry's summer this time around was the report of a grave in Little Hangleton being robbed. It was a tiny cemetery, reported to be unconsecrated ground, and had been the grave of one Merope Gaunt. An Auror had been found dead in the graveyard as well, having bled to death after apparently putting up a valiant struggle. Harry's scar twinged on and off that summer after that, but there were no major painful flares from his scar.

This had been partially mitigated by the look on Sirius's face when he realised that he was going to be picking up his family's hereditary Wizengamot seat, which would require that he begin to be respectable.

The Weasleys, Harry, Hermione and Daphne, not to mention Remus, were particularly unsympathetic to his requests that they stop laughing.

His summer ended with the question of who would be taking the Defence Against the Dark Arts position during the upcoming school year. Despite the differences, Harry had a feeling that it would still be Umbridge. She hadn't had the chance to try to discredit him this summer as she had the first time around, but she had always been trouble. *Well, this time around, if she tries it, she'll not like the outcome.* “Harry? You're scaring me a little,” Daphne said from his left shoulder.

“Plotting against the evil ones?” Hermione asked from his right one.

“Just deciding what to do if we have the same Defence teacher as we had last time.”

“What are you going to do?” Hermione asked.

“Well, if we have Dolores Umbridge, she's got a Blood Quill she'll use for detentions. I'm a threat to her power structure at the Ministry, so I'll get a lot of detentions. Well, the moment she uses one on me, I get to hit her hard. I'm an adult in the eyes of the law, and can take it before the Wizengamot. If she's not careful, I'll end up bringing down the Fudge government. Not something I want to do, but if we can get someone in fast in his place, then we'll have a better chance of prosecuting this war against Tom.” He grinned. “And this time around, we get to deal with him quicker. He's mortal now, ladies. He can't make anymore Horcruxes. I even double checked the Headmaster's calculations.

Hermione was silent for a long moment. “I think that's the thing that proves to me more than anything else that you came back from the future. The Harry I knew up to the beginning of Fourth Year would have never even contemplated Arithmancy and Runes and classes like that. Now you say things like 'I checked the Headmaster's calculations for errors' without a thought.”

“Does that scare you?” he asked, worried.

“A little, but it helps prove how important we were to you,” she replied. Blushing suddenly, she added, “I find intelligent men sexy.”

Before he could even think it, Daphne had lightly swatted him. “That's for thinking what you were, Harry. You're a smart man, and we find you attractive. Deal with it.”

A Time To Reflect

The Start of Fifth Year

Disclaimer: The pen might be mightier than the sword, but no one ever got a sucking chest wound from a ballpoint pen. All this stuff belongs to JK Rowling, by the way.

The trip to Hogwarts to begin Harry's fifth year was far better than it had been last time. He was a prefect, as he should have been the first time, for one thing. The Weasleys arrived – as usual – at the last second and barely made the Express. Everyone had gotten themselves seated, Susan ensconced securely on Ron's lap, while Daphne and Hermione both smiled over the reactions to their new rings that Harry had bought them.

“You bought promise rings for them already?” Susan asked, bouncing in excitement on Ron's lap. The others tried very hard not to laugh at the look on Ron's face at this action – a mixture of enjoyment and a little pain.

“Yes, I did,” Harry said. “Susan? You might not want to do that on Ron's lap – I think you're hurting him a little.”

Ron was blushing. “I can live with the pain,” he said, groaning theatrically.

Hermione's eyes sparkled. “I think he wants you to kiss if and make it better, Susan,” she said with an impudent grin.

“When we get to school, Ron,” she said. “Not here in public.” Her smile was wicked, and Ron turned a colour rarely found in nature, but that went quite well with his hair.

The trip went well, up to the point that Draco Malfoy put in his yearly appearance. “Well if it isn't _”

“-Potty, the mudblood and the blood traitor,” Harry interrupted in a mocking tone. “You keep bragging about your family's fortune, Malfoy. Why don't you spend some of it and get yourself a better writer for your material? Obviously writing it yourself isn't helping any. Since you repeat it every year.” He leaned to Daphne and added, “The only thing missing when he does it is the 'Rawrk!' at the end to make his parroting complete.”

“How dare you -” Malfoy began, but was once again interrupted by Harry.

“I dare a lot, you bleach blonde little ponce. I said it once to your godfather, and I say it now to you. *Non ini me. Non vinces.* You figure it out from there.”

“Are you threatening me, Potter?” Malfoy asked incredulously.

Harry made a fist and rapped Malfoy's skull three times in succession, as if knocking. “Sounds hollow in there. Explains a lot. You head on out of here and I'll explain it to the smarter ones of the group. Vincent and Gregory should be able to understand what I'm saying.”

Malfoy pulled himself together. “Nice try, Potter. I'd watch myself this year, if I were you. Things might not work as well for you as you think.” He smirked and left the room.

“Ah, so they hired Umbridge,” Harry said once the door was closed. “Well, if she does this time what she did my first go through, then she's going to be in a world of hurt.”

“Oh?” Susan asked.

“First time through, she used a Blood Quill for detentions. What I plan on doing this time is setting up a Recording Quill on a notepad of mine, which will be tied to this journal book. Everything written on the pad will copy here. She'll destroy the pad and quill if she sees them, but I hope to have things set up so that enough will copy to cause problems. If not, I can still testify before the Wizengamot about her use of a Blood Quill.”

“Just be careful, Harry,” Susan said. “She has a reputation around the Ministry as someone you don't cross unless you want to be looking for a new job tomorrow.”

“She'll be looking for one when I'm done, if she's like she was first time through. If I have to, I'll declare Blood Feud between the Potters and the Umbridges. She *won't* like the sanctions that come from *that*. ”

“Blood feud?” Susan asked, face white. “Declaring war on her family?”

“I'd end up arguing that I was merely formalising what she had started with the use of a Blood Quill. I will not start it, but I will finish it.” He looked quite serious for a moment before shrugging and changing his entire demeanour. “Won't know until we get to school, so I won't worry until then.” He turned to Daphne and kissed her deeply, then repeated the performance with Hermione. “Think that's a good idea?”

“If it gets me more kisses like that – I'll agree with anything,” Daphne breathed. Harry just wiggled his eyebrows.

They made it to the school without a problem, and headed into the Great Hall to await the Sorting and the Welcoming Feast. As soon as his eyes brushed across the Head Table and saw the toad-like woman sitting there, an evil glint entered his eyes and he whispered to Hermione. “Think we should start a pool on how quickly I can drive her out of the school?”

“Give her a chance, Harry,” she whispered back.

“If she gives some speech that you take as declaring war on Hogwarts or education, then we'll know, won't we?”

The sorting finished, people Sorted where Harry seemed to remember them being last time through, and then the Feast began. He was pleased that this time there was no argument between Harry and Hermione, started last time by Ron's insensitivity to Sir Nicholas de Mimsy-Porpington, also known by the less pleasant sobriquet of Nearly-Headless Nick. (Less pleasant to Sir Nicholas, at least.) Ron being forced to decide about Hermione last November had apparently been the start of a process that he had never really started until seventh year the first time through for Harry.

Dumbledore stood and began his yearly speech. “Well, now that we are all digesting another magnificent feast, I beg a few moments of your attention for the usual start-of-term notices,” he said. “First-years ought to know that the Forest in the grounds is out-of-bounds to students - and a few of our older students ought to know by now, too.” Harry, Ron and Hermione exchanged smirks.

“Mr Filch, the caretaker, has asked me, for what he tells me is the four-hundred-and-sixty-second time, to remind you all that magic is not permitted in corridors between classes, nor are a number of other things, all of which can be checked on the extensive list now fastened to Mr Filch's office door.”

“We are delighted to introduce two new professors to Hogwarts. First is Professor Zbignew Brzheznov, a Potions Master, who will, of course, take over as Potions professor. The second is Professor Umbridge, our new Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher,” Dumbledore continued. “Tryouts for the house Quidditch teams will take place on the -”

He broke off, looking enquiringly at Professor Umbridge. As she was not much taller standing than sitting, there was a moment when nobody understood why Dumbledore had stopped talking, but then Professor Umbridge cleared her throat, “Hem, *hem*,” and it became clear that she had got to her feet and was intending to make a speech.

Harry snorted to himself and said quietly, “Here we go again!”

Dumbledore only looked taken aback for a moment, then he sat down smartly and looked alertly at Professor Umbridge as though he desired nothing better than to listen to her talk. Other members of staff were not as adept at hiding their surprise. Professor Sprout's eyebrows had disappeared into her flyaway hair and Professor McGonagall's mouth was as thin as Harry had ever seen it. No new teacher had ever interrupted Dumbledore before. Many of the students were smirking; this woman obviously did not know how things were done at Hogwarts.

“Thank you, Headmaster,” Professor Umbridge simpered, “for those kind words of welcome.”

Her voice was high-pitched, breathy and little-girlish and Harry felt a powerful rush of dislike that

was all too familiar in regards to this ... woman. “Well, it is lovely to be back at Hogwarts, I must say!” She smiled, revealing very pointed teeth. “And to see such happy little faces looking up at me! I am very much looking forward to getting to know you all and I'm sure we'll be very good friends!”

Professor Umbridge cleared her throat again with that annoying “Hem, *hem*” of hers, but when she continued, some of the breathiness had vanished from her voice. She sounded much more businesslike and now her words had a dull rote sound to them.

“The Ministry of Magic has always considered the education of young witches and wizards to be of vital importance. The rare gifts with which you were born may come to nothing if not nurtured and honed by careful instruction. The ancient skills unique to the wizarding community must be passed down the generations lest we lose them for ever. The treasure trove of magical knowledge amassed by our ancestors must be guarded, replenished and polished by those who have been called to the noble profession of teaching.”

Professor Umbridge paused here and made a little bow to her fellow staff members, none of whom bowed back to her. Professor McGonagall's dark eyebrows had contracted so that she looked positively hawklike, and Harry distinctly saw her exchange a significant glance with Professor Sprout as Umbridge gave another little “*hem, hem*” and went on with her speech. *I'd best have a talk with Professor McGonagall as soon as I can*, he thought.

“Every headmaster and headmistress of Hogwarts has brought something new to the weighty task of governing this historic school, and that is as it should be, for without progress there will be stagnation and decay. There again, progress for progress's sake must be discouraged, for our tried and tested traditions often require no tinkering. A balance, then, between old and new, between permanence and change, between tradition and innovation...”

He leaned over to Hermione. “Operation Destroy Toad Woman will commence as soon as possible,” he said. “This is the same damned speech from last time. Dumbledore and I embarrassed Fudge in May, and his revenge is to get Umbridge to take over slowly. Well, it isn't going to happen this time around, I tell you. She'll die first.”

Hermione cocked an eyebrow. “Isn't that phrase *'I'll die first'?*”

“Well, I don't expect anyone to die, but if I have to choose between the toad woman; a beautiful, sexy and vivacious fellow student; or me – well, I choose the toad woman.” Hermione giggled slightly at that, blushing.

“Hmm, looks like the feast has ended while we gabbed. Shall we gather together the first years and inflict them upon the rest of our classmates?”

Hermione stood, “I suppose so. Gryffindor first years!” She raised her hand and snapped her fingers as she repeated herself, and Harry took a moment to enjoy the fact that her robes were just a tad tighter fitting on her this year – especially across the chest. She looked down and whispered, “Stop staring at my breasts and help me!”

He laughed and stood next to her. “Can I help it if I enjoyed the view a little too much?”

“All right!” he said. “Is this all the first year students for Gryffindor?” They nodded as a group, looking a little fearful. “Have no worries, we'll get you safely to the Gryffindor Tower, and we can talk there, if you have questions. Sound good to you guys?”

The first year students lined up behind Harry and Hermione, and they led them to the tower, with Harry acting a little bit like a tour guide along the way. “You'll learn this as time goes goes by,” he said, “but I remember that when I was in your place, I was trying to look everywhere at once. I was raised in a Muggle household, after all, and didn't even know that magic existed, so to see the moving stairs and the paintings that can talk back to you was incredible! Don't ever lose that sense of wonder.”

They approached the painting of the Fat Lady. “This dear lady is the guardian of the doorway into Gryffindor Tower. I am sorry to say that I have never asked her name before today. She's always been known as the Fat Lady, and that's terribly rude.” He bowed to her.

“Hello dear,” she said fondly. “You're the first to ask me in over a hundred years, did you know that? My name is Dawn, but I will answer to the Fat Lady. May I have the password, please?”

“Mimulus Mibletonia,” Hermione said politely.

“Thank you dear,” the Fat Lady replied. As they were about to step inside, she caught sight of the ring on Hermione's finger. “Oh! Congratulations! Who's the lucky man?”

Harry grinned. “That would be me, Dawn. I have managed to befuddle her senses enough that she actually considers me husband material, and has agreed to wear my ring until we leave Hogwarts, at which point we will make that a wedding ring.”

“You!” Hermione huffed fondly as she lightly swatted Harry's arm. “I am not deluded, Dawn,” she said as she swept into the tower. As the door closed, she said as an aside to Harry, “That's going to be all over the castle by tomorrow, you know.”

“Good. I want everyone to know that I've snagged the two sexiest girls in Hogwarts,” he said with a smile.

“Oy,” Ron said. “You did *not* ! Susan's *my* girlfriend!” He was smiling as he said it.

“I'm going to tell her you said that,” Hermione said. “I expect you'll be a little confused after she kisses you senseless.”

“Well, I've not got much to begin with, so it's easy to kiss me senseless,” he laughed. “So, you've got the firsties here. Now what?”

“You've enough sense to choose Susan. As for you question? Now we let *them* ask questions,” Harry said. “To answer a few of them right off, though – yes, I did see Voldemort in May, as did the other three. No, I am not making it up, no matter what the Daily Prophet might say. And yes,

Hermione is wearing my promise ring, as if Daphne Greengrass from Slytherin.”

“You're engaged to a Slytherin?” one of the first years asked in surprise.

“Yup, and that's one of the things we'll try to teach you in these seven years at this fine institution of learning. Don't judge by a label. I am madly in love with a woman who happens to have been sorted into a different House than I'm in. If I listened to labels, I'd not have the pleasure of knowing her.”

“Biblically,” Hermione whispered so that only Harry could hear her.

“But I thought you were ... what about Prefect Granger?” one of the first year girls asked.

“That's one of the many things you'll end up learning about the wizarding world,” Hermione said. “Both Daphne and I are wearing promise rings, and we're both with Harry. It's not common, but neither is it illegal.”

“There are too many things to try to learn your very first night here,” Harry said. “If you remember only three things in the morning, let them be these – the prefects are here for you; you should never lose your sense of wonder at the magic that surrounds you; and the professors are here to help. If members of *any* House pick on you without reason, contact a prefect or a professor. You can tell the Houses based on the trim of their robes. You're wearing scarlet and gold, so you're Gryffindor. Black and yellow is Hufflepuff; blue and bronze is Ravenclaw; and green and silver is Slytherin.”

“Now that Harry's done with his pep talk,” Hermione said with a smile, getting a few of the first years to smile in return, “we'll need to get you off to bed. The boys' dormitories are to the left, and the girls' are to the right. The signs will be marked at each floor, and you won't be able to climb higher in the tower than the year you belong in. The boys will be unable to get up the girls' stairs at all. Your trunks are by your beds.”

With that, many took it to be a dismissal and headed to their dorms. The common room was left with just a handful of fifth years and above. “You've quite the talent there, Harry,” Ron said. “You herded them like a pro.”

“Well, given my history, I thought it a good thing to give them some info. I want to see if we can kill the rivalry between Gryffindor and Slytherin, by the way. I want to leave it on the Quidditch pitch, if we can. Since Snape is gone and not giving detentions for breathing in a Gryffindor manner, we should be able to do it.”

The next morning, Harry led a contingent of first years to the Great Hall for breakfast, with Hermione bringing up the rear with a huge smile. He led them in and showed them what was available, and bade them all to sit. Before they could begin eating, he grinned and said loudly, “Daphne, could you come here for a moment please?”

The blonde girl came over with a smile and greeted Harry with a chaste kiss. “Thank you,” he said. “You helped make a point I wanted to.” He turned to the first years. “This lady is my other fiancée, Daphne Greengrass. As you can see by the trim on her robes, she's in Slytherin House. You can also see that we're rather friendly with each other.”

“There will be people in my House that will try to pick fights with you,” Daphne said, picking up where Harry was going. “Let us know, and we'll do something about it.” She looked to Harry. “Now, may I go back to my breakfast, love?”

“I'm hurt,” he said dramatically, putting on a wounded air. “My presence isn't sustenance enough?”

“For my heart, yes,” she replied with a smile. “For my stomach, no.” She kissed him again and headed back to her table, where Tracy Davis uncovered her food again, having protected it from the others at the Slytherin table.

“We'll be dealing with Malfoy this year, I just know it,” Harry murmured to Hermione when the first years had begun eating. “He was inordinately pleased with Umbridge's taking over the Defence position, so he'll be lording it. There will *not* be an Inquisitorial Squad this year – if there is, I *will* declare feud between Umbridge and myself.”

Angelina came bustling in, and Harry suddenly realised that she was about to tell him about being made Quidditch captain, so he decided to have some fun. “Congratulations, Angelina! I'll be there for the tryouts on Friday.”

She blinked at him a few times and then laughed. “Trying to take the wind out of my sails, huh?”

“Sorry, but you had a vague 'Oliver Wood' look to you, so ... although I'd rather look at you than Oliver, to be honest.”

“I've got a boyfriend,” she said with a wide smile.

“And I've Promised to Hermione and Daphne. Doesn't stop it from being true. I fancy girls, so I looked at you more than Ollie.” He finished with an impudent grin.

She laughed again. “He's a keeper, girl. Don't let him get away.”

“I don't intend to,” Hermione said softly.

“I'm not a Keeper,” Harry mock-protested. “I'm a Seeker!” Angelina just shook her head as she walked away chuckling.

Professor McGonagall came by with their schedules, and Ron groaned. “The only way this day could be any worse is if Snape were still teaching. Binns, the new guy, Trelawney and Umbridge. Gah.”

History of Magic was its usual boring bit of the wheezy voiced Professor Binns, this time teaching

them something about the giant wars. Try as he might, no matter what he tried, he could not keep his attention on the ghost at the front of the room, so he instead began to write up a suggestion that either Remus or Sirius be hired to teach. A living teacher couldn't help but be better than a dead one.

“Ron, couldn't you at least pretend to pay attention in our first class of the year?” Hermione asked as they headed off.

“I tried, Hermione; I really did!” he responded in a voice that was almost a whine. “I'm trying to be a better student, but ... I really don't know how you do it. Something about that voice just puts me to sleep.”

“He's right. I knew better, but -”

“But you were taking notes!” she said. He handed her what he'd been writing. “Oh. Sorry.” She bit her lower lip. “I don't mean to be a freak,” she said softly.

“Too late then!” Pansy Parkinson yelled gleefully as she approached the Potions room in time to hear that. “You've been a freak since you were born!”

Harry spun and 'accidentally' struck her with the back of his hand squarely in the face. His nose was bloody. “Oh, I'm sorry, Pansy! Let me help you with that!” He realised quickly that he had actually managed to break her nose, so he cast a field healing spell to stop the bleeding. This left her with a nose that made her look even more like a pug dog and that couldn't be healed again for at least a month, at which point it would need to be re-broken first.

He turned to Hermione then. “You are not a freak. Vernon Dursley is a freak. Petunia Dursley is a freak. Dudley Dursley is the king of all freaks. You, on the other hand, are a beautiful woman that I am looking forward to marrying someday.” He leaned forward and kissed her eyes.

“Nauseating,” Malfoy sneered. “Consorting with animals like that mudblood -” He got no further, because he was suddenly plastered against the wall behind Harry.

“I had thought that I might wait until class started to take points,” the new professor said in a plummy tone. “Instead, I get to remove ten from Slytherin because Mr Malfoy insists on vocalising his bigotry.”

“My father -” Malfoy began, but was cut off once more.

“- is a bigot as well, and a Death Eater who managed to escape prison because he happened to have a large sum of money in Gringott's. No one with intelligence believes that he was under Imperius, and none with intelligence believes the campaign that it appears the Daily Prophet is beginning against both the Headmaster and Mr Potter.”

Harry thought for a moment that Draco Malfoy might well be channelling Vernon Dursley, given the colour his face had turned. “Puce isn't a good colour for you, Draco,” he said with mock

sympathy.

Once everyone had been seated, he began. "As you heard at the Welcoming Feast, I am Zbignew Brzheznov. Despite the name, I am quite British, as I imagine the accent tells you. I was going to make jokes about trying to earn enough money to buy some vowels for my name, but I'm afraid ... ah, a few of you in here are Muggleborn or have connections to the Muggle world. I will not insist that everyone attempt to pronounce my name, so I will answer to Professor Z or Professor B. I will feel flattered if you manage to correctly pronounce either my first or last names." He smiled. "I may also check to see if you accidentally tied your tongue into a knot."

"Professor Brzheznov?" Hermione asked.

"Yes, Miss Granger?" he asked with a smile.

"What will we be learning in this class?" She looked bothered by asking the question.

"Ah, you wish to know if I will actually teach or do as the prior professor did. I do not refer to Alchemist Dumbledore, either."

"Professor Snape was an excellent teacher!" Malfoy exploded.

"Tell me, Mr Malfoy – assuming that they were available as ingredients on the common market, what would be the likely outcome of adding phoenix tears to a potion containing basilisk blood?" Malfoy sat sullenly, unable to answer. Hermione had her hand in the air, but she was the only one. As the teacher turned, Harry winced. "Is something wrong, Mr Potter?"

"Not exactly. I don't know for certain about it, but I doubt that the potion would be very much good after the tears were added."

"That's putting it mildly. Miss Granger, will you explain only what the reaction would be? I wish to see if anyone other than yourself and possibly Mr Potter might know *why*."

"If you survived the explosion, you'd be in St Mungos for a long time," she replied.

"Excellent way of putting it, Miss Granger. Ten points for your studious nature."

The silence in the room was deafening. Harry whispered softly, "And thus is the difference in teachers proven."

"Indeed, Mr Potter? Is it safe to assume that your prior professor was loath to grant points to your Household?"

"He used to take points for things such as Hermione actually answering the question he had asked. I got detentions for being arrogant and for breathing, but mostly for being related to James Potter. If he gave anyone in Gryffindor points, then it was under duress."

"I see. Well, back to the point we were originally covering. Why would there be an explosion, Mr

Potter?”

“I assume because the phoenix is the epitome of Light side creatures and the basilisk is the epitome of Dark creatures. I remember Fawkes and that basilisk going at it back at the end of second year.” He shook his head. Looking up, he saw the stunned looks of everyone in the class. “What?”

“Am I to understand that you have seen a battle between a phoenix and a basilisk?” Brzheznov asked excitedly.

“Yes, sir. Fawkes was helping me. He blinded it so that I wouldn't be killed instantly.”

“Might I ask ... no, that's personal. Never mind.” The professor was gobsmacked, to say the very least.

“I don't mind. I was trying to rescue a student that Lucius Malfoy put in danger -”

“You can't prove that!” Draco yelled.

“Not in a court of law, but we talked. He *knows* that I know he did it.” He shook his head.

“Anyway, we went down into the Chamber of Secrets, where we discovered two things. First, Lockheart is a fraud who got all his fame by Obliviating the people who really did the things in his books. Second, firing a spell out of a broken wand is a bad thing. There was a rockfall, leaving me the only one to face Voldemort and his pet basilisk. Fawkes pecked the beggar's eyes out and I ended up getting bitten by a broken fang as I jammed Gryffindor's sword through its brain. Would have died except for Fawkes again, who cried on the puncture wound.” He pulled his sleeve up to show the professor the bite wound.

“There is something special about you, Mr Potter. The reaction from the venom and the tears should have been violent, and yet I can see your arm is whole. Is there any proof of this altercation?”

“Unless someone's managed to get down there, the basilisk carcass should still be down there,” Harry replied with a shrug. “I'll take you to it if you want.”

The new Potions professor looked at Harry for a long moment. “Yes,” he finally said a little shakily. “That would be satisfactory.”

The rest of the class was not as exciting as that, but Professor Brzheznov proved to the Slytherins that they had been done poorly by with Snape's teaching methods, if such could be called teaching. Harry looked up the Headmaster quickly, asking him to set up a meeting time with the Potions professor, so that they could go down after the basilisk. “Good heavens,” breathed Dumbledore. “There was so much going on that I simply forgot that there was a basilisk corpse in the bowels of this school. Are you aware of the amount of wealth you will have from the sale of the parts for various purposes, mostly potions ingredients?”

“I never had a chance to check on that sort of thing. What are we talking about?”

“An ounce of powdered Basilisk skin will bring something on the order of one thousand Galleons. You are looking at many, many pounds of powder. You may well have enough for an armourer to offer money for the skin.”

“I don't know how useful it will be. It's been rotting in the Chamber since the end of my second year.”

Dumbledore grinned. “There isn't a known disease that can survive basilisk poison. Any germs would touch the skin and die. I expect it to be the same as the day you killed it.”

“Good heavens,” Harry answered him. “That should be ... wow. That's a lot of money, if the whole thing is useful.”

“Even the eyes should be useful, even though destroyed. Powdered basilisk eye is used in the rare potion. The remnants should be good enough for brewers.”

“Wow,” he said softly. He grinned suddenly. “We're looking at ... ridiculous amounts of Galleons here from the sale, correct? More precisely, if we get someone to sell it properly, it'll bring in a lot?”

“Exactly. Too much at once will drive the value down.”

“Then we begin to sell it slowly, and split the money three ways. One third I keep, one third goes to the Weasley family, and one third to you or the school, whichever you prefer.”

“The Weasleys might not accept it, you are aware.”

“I think I can get them to accept it. Hmm, I don't know the man, but I see no problems with giving Professor Z some of the basilisk to play with. He can sell what he doesn't want to use. If he proves to be one of the good guys, then I can give him a share.” At Dumbledore's look, he shrugged. “I'm already wealthy. Giving people a share of the basilisk is worthwhile. It's not like I need the money.”

“I haven't the right to feel this way, but you make me proud, Harry.”

“That means a lot to me, sir. I just hope that you feel proud of me after I earn a detention with the new Defence teacher.” Dumbledore raised an eyebrow. “First time through, she used a blood quill for detentions. I would have carried the scar to the end of my days. Being a child, I couldn't bring charges. This time around, I'm legally an adult.”

“If you are walking into this situation knowing what may lie ahead, then I cannot fault you. I do not wish this to happen to you, I will admit.” They checked the time. “Ah, it appears that you must be going to the very same class.” The Headmaster quickly scribbled out a note. “In case you are late to the class.”

Harry walked into the Defence classroom slightly behind the other students. “Apologies, Professor,” he said, handing her the note. “The Headmaster needed to speak to me.”

She nodded and watched as he sat. “Well, good afternoon!” she said, when finally the whole class had sat down.

A few people mumbled “good afternoon” in reply.

“Tut, tut,” said Professor Umbridge. “*That* won't do, now, will it? I should like you, please, to reply 'Good afternoon, Professor Umbridge'. One more time, please. Good afternoon, class!”

“Good afternoon, Professor Umbridge,” they chanted back at her.

“There, now,” said Professor Umbridge sweetly. “That wasn't too difficult, was it? Wands away and quills out, please.”

Many of the class exchanged gloomy looks; the order 'wands away' had never yet been followed by a lesson they had found interesting. Harry shoved his wand back inside his bag and pulled out quill, ink and parchment, smirking as he did. This was happening exactly as it had the first time around. Professor Umbridge opened her handbag, extracted her own wand, which was an unusually short one, and tapped the blackboard sharply with it; words appeared on the board at once:

Defence Against the Dark Arts: A Return to Basic Principles

“Well now, your teaching in this subject has been rather disrupted and fragmented, hasn't it?” stated Professor Umbridge, turning to face the class with her hands clasped neatly in front of her. The constant changing of teachers, many of whom do not seem to have followed any Ministry-approved curriculum, has unfortunately resulted in your being far below the standard we would expect to see in your OWL year.

“You will be pleased to know, however, that these problems are now to be rectified. We will be following a carefully structured, theory-centred, Ministry-approved course of defensive magic this year. Copy down the following, please.”

She rapped the blackboard again; the first message vanished and was replaced by the 'Course Aims'.

- *Understanding the principles underlying defensive magic.*
- *Learning to recognise situations in which defensive magic can legally be used.*
- *Placing the use of defensive magic in a context for practical use.*

For a couple of minutes the room was full of the sound of scratching quills on parchment. When everyone had copied down Professor Umbridge's three course aims she asked, “Has everybody got a copy of *Defensive Magical Theory* by Wilbert Slinkhard?”

There was a dull murmur of assent throughout the class.

“I think we'll try that again,” said Professor Umbridge. “When I ask you a question, I should like you to reply, 'Yes, Professor Umbridge', or 'No, Professor Umbridge'. So: has everyone got a copy of *Defensive Magical Theory* by Wilbert Slinkhard?”

“Yes, Professor Umbridge,” rang through the room.

“Good,” said Umbridge. “I should like you to turn to page five and read 'Chapter One, Basics for Beginners'. There will be no need to talk.”

Harry instead began to write on his parchment, making no effort to open the book. It took her only a moment, but not even Hermione's hand in the air drew her attention away from Harry's voiceless defiance. “Is there a problem, Mr Potter?”

“No, Professor Umbridge,” he replied sweetly.

“Then why are you not reading your book?”

“Because I've already read it, and it's a load of meaningless twaddle,” he replied in the same tone as he had before.

“I suppose that you know more about defence than the author?”

“As a matter of fact, yes,” he replied.

“Such as -” she said in a saccharin voice that demanded that he follow up with proof.

“Such as the fact that the main answer to most of his situations seems to be to wait for the Aurors to show up and solve the problem for you.”

“And you have a problem with the Aurors?” she asked.

“No, but if you're taking this class hoping to learn real defence in hopes of someday actually *becoming* an Auror, which this class *is* supposed to help toward, following that book will scuttle any chances of being in law enforcement.”

“There's a freeze on hiring right now, Mr Potter,” he replied, trying to sound as sweet and saccharin as before, but the effect was marred by the fact that she was speaking through her gritted sharp teeth.

“Will there always be a freeze on? Will no one be hired as the old Aurors retire or die off under Voldemort's return?”

“You Know Who has not returned, Mr Potter, and that will be ten points from Gryffindor for lying in class.”

“So Cedric Diggory, Fleur Delacour and Viktor Krum were all lying?”

“Mr Diggory only thinks he saw You Know Who in that situation. As for the other two, the half-breed and the foreigner are simply attempting to foment trouble.”

“Which the Ministry will need Aurors to fight if you're right,” Harry said with a nasty smile. “But you're wrong. Voldemort is back.”

“You lie, Mr Potter. For that you lose another ten points and earn a detention with me tonight.”

“What time?” he asked impudently.

“Seven PM, in my office.”

“I'll be there,” he said brightly.

She glared at him for a long moment before saying, once again through gritted teeth, “Come up here, Mr Potter.”

He approached her and watched her scribble the same note he'd remembered from the first time through. “Take this to your head of House and leave this class immediately.”

He sketched a salute and left at a quick march, stopping only to pick up his book bag. Once out of the room, he chuckled and carefully Disillusioned his Recording Quill and the parchment linked to his notebook. Casting a handy spell he'd found a few years up the line, he lifted them and floated them through the closing door. He closed his eyes and carefully wafted them into Umbridge's office, where he set them on top of a cabinet that was fairly dusty. He cast the spell to record immediately, and the quill popped up and waited on the parchment. That done, he headed down to Professor McGonagall's office.

Knocking on the door, he smiled at the harried woman and handed her the parchment from Umbridge. “She's likely telling you that I'm a disruptive influence and all that fun stuff,” he said with a smile.

She unrolled it and read it. “Disrupting class, insulting her teaching method, generally abusive, and lying.” She looked up. “Is this true?”

“Depending on how you look at it? Yes, yes, yes, and no. Disrupting the class by saying that the author knows nothing about defence? Yes. Insulting her teaching method, which is to have us read until we have to take the O.W.L.s, where our deep reading of the subject will permit us to pass the tests? Yes. Generally abusive? A little tricky there, but politely calling the freeze on hiring Aurors stupid could be seen as abusive, so yes. Lying? No. Voldemort *is* back.”

“You need to be careful -” she began to say.

“Pardon me for interrupting, Professor, but you need to know something. You can talk to Professor Dumbledore in greater detail, but I actually entered that class knowing which buttons to

push with the Toad Woman. If she does what I expect will be done in my detention tonight, then she will not be teaching the full year, and the Ministry will likely back off on trying to take control of the school.”

“All from one detention?” the Deputy Headmistress asked incredulously.

“When she uses a Blood Quill on a student who also happens to be an adult that can level charges against her?” Harry asked with a light smile. “May I have a biscuit?”

“How do you know that she has a Blood Quill?” she asked in horror as she blankly pushed the tin toward him.

“It's part of the reason I need to have you talk to the Headmaster. Use the password 'Vanquish'. He'll understand, because it's not a word I'd use in everyday conversation. It is uniquely connected to the situation.” He cast a quick security spell. “In short, this is my second time through my fifth year. The mind is roughly of a thirty-something man, who has come back. Little mind woogieing so that I'm not actually perving, but mentally am fifteen again, but that's a conversation for another time. The Headmaster has seen enough to know that I'm telling the truth.” He ate the biscuit quietly while she parsed the information he'd thrust on her.

“I told you that because you were about to tell me to lay low and avoid drawing attention to myself. The Head of Gryffindor was going to tell me to stop being Gryffindor for a year, and yet you would continually draw attention to yourself throughout the year. It struck me as hypocritical the first time around. I spent some time angry at you until I finally grasped that you were dealing with it from the adult/child perspective. But that was some time that I spent angry that I didn't need to.” He smiled. “I don't want to spend time angry at my favourite teacher.”

She blushed for the first time Harry had ever seen in either time line. “I thank you, Mr Potter. I will be checking up on this with the Headmaster, make no mistake. You speak more adult than I would expect for you at fifteen, which is another thing in your story's favour. If I find that you are lying to me, however -”

“That's why I mentioned that you should tell him the password 'Vanquish'. I'm pretty sure that he'll understand.” He dropped the security charms. “He's got better security up there, so it should be safer to talk there.”

Dinner was amusing, because people were looking at him with curiosity. They'd heard about the happenings in the Defence class, and were intrigued by the fact that he'd seemed *happy* about it! Several of the younger Gryffindors and one or two of the older ones were giving him the evil eye, but he ignored them.

“Tonight's detention should be fun,” he said. “By the way, I've got the quill recording already, so if you want to go to the journal when I head to detention, you can watch it as it happens. She's too petty not to use everything at her disposal to try to break me, so I expect that she'll zap me with it pretty quick.”

“Just be careful,” Hermione said, her voice throbbing with emotion.

“I will, love. I will.” he hugged her and then kissed her forehead gently. “I must away!” he said melodramatically as he shouldered his bag and headed off to his detention.

He knocked on the door and was once again 'treated' to the sound of Umbridge's sugary “Come in!” He opened the door and sat down at the table she had set up, in front of the parchment that was already there. “Good evening, Mr Potter,” she said in a voice that made it quite obvious that she was looking forward to what was to come. Unfortunately for her, so was Harry.

“Now, you are going to be doing some lines for me, Mr Potter. No, not with your quill,” she added, as Harry bent down to open his bag. “You're going to be using a rather special one of mine. Here you are.” She handed him the long, thin black quill with an unusually sharp point that he remembered so well. “I want you to write, *I must not tell lies*,” she told him softly.

“How many times?” Harry asked, with a creditable imitation of politeness.

“Oh, as long as it takes for the message to *sink in*,” said Umbridge sweetly. “Off you go.”

She moved over to her desk, sat down and bent over a stack of parchment that looked like essays for marking. Harry raised the sharp black quill and then pretended to notice something. “Ma'am? You not given me any ink to write with.”

“Oh, you won't need ink,” said Professor Umbridge, with the merest suggestion of a laugh in her voice.

Harry placed the point of the quill on the paper and wrote: *I must not tell lies* .

He let out a gasp of pain. Even being prepared for it, the damned thing hurt. The words had appeared on the parchment in what appeared to be shining red ink, as before. At the same time, the words had appeared on the back of Harry's right hand, cut into his skin as though traced there by a scalpel, as they had the first time, and healed again, as they had the first time.

Harry looked round at Umbridge. She was watching him, her wide, toadlike mouth stretched in a smile.

“Yes?”

“So I'm writing my detention lines using a Blood Quill?” he asked. “Aren't these things illegal to use anywhere except in a contract? Anywhere but there, aren't they considered a Dark item?”

“Honestly, Mr Potter, even if the Ministry would listen to a child bringing charges against the Minister's second in command, what possible proof do you have of the use of the quill? A slight redness on your hand?” She got up from her desk and walked over to Harry. “Make no mistake about this, Potter. You will cease this attempt to discredit the Ministry by lying about the return of You Know Who. You will remain in detention, doing lines with my Blood Quill until you become tired of it and finally break. And you *will* break, Mr Potter, even if I have to resort to more painful

methods.”

“So you're telling me that I can expect to be literally tortured, and that because I'm a student, I can't do a thing about it?”

“Exactly. Until you and the Headmaster cease your efforts to undermine the trust that the people have for their government, you will be made an example of.”

He set the Blood Quill down and pulled his wand.

“You will not threaten me!” she squealed.

“Who's threatening you, Professor? I'm just getting rid of this stupid quill! *Incendio* !” With that, the Blood Quill erupted into flames, and Harry could swear that there was a quiet screaming coming from it as it burned to ashes.

“How dare you destroy my Blood Quill!” she yelled, which sounded like further squealing to Harry. “I'll have you expelled for attempting to attack a teacher!” She took his wand from him and stuck it in her ample cleavage.

“Oh ick!” he said. “Now I'm going to have to clean that thing when I get it back!”

“You won't be getting it back, Mr Potter! The last spell on it was *Incendio* , and in the case of a student versus a teacher, I think we know who will win.”

“Even if the teacher has to lie to get the expulsion to happen?”

“What proof are you going to have, Potter? Your word versus mine. And I'm a teacher and a Ministry employee. They can't touch me.”

“I suppose,” he said. “Well, shall we begin the trek to the Headmaster's office, where all the evidence can be seen?”

“Yes, Mr Potter. Enjoy your last time in these halls of Hogwarts. You'll be leaving them tonight.”

Harry dutifully walked to the Headmaster's office ahead of Professor Umbridge, smiling softly as he moved. The gargoyle looked at Harry for a long moment before it almost seemed to wink and slip aside. He stepped onto the stairway and rode it to the top, coming to the Headmaster's door. Before he could knock, it opened. “Hello Headmaster,” he said with a smile, which widened when he saw Ron and Hermione in the room.

“Headmaster, I have a matter of discipline to bring before you. I think it would be best if the other students were not here,” Dolores Umbridge said in a sweet voice.

“Ah, but if this is in regards to Mr Potter's detention, then they have evidence to bring before us,” replied the Headmaster, his eyes twinkling madly.

“What possible information could they have regarding what happened in my office?” she asked, wary for the very first time, and far too late.

“They have a transcript of what happened. We have been here since shortly into your detention, watching the words scroll across the page of this marvellous journal.”

“What journal?” she asked.

Harry grinned. “The one that's tied to the Evidence Quill and Parchment set sitting Disillusioned in your office, which has been there all day. The parchment absorbs the ink from the ever full quill and transmits it to the secure journal. Everything that happened in your office since I left your class today is in that journal.”

Dumbledore opened it and started reading. “So I'm writing my detention lines using a Blood Quill? Aren't these things illegal to use anywhere except in a contract? Anywhere but there, aren't they considered a Dark item?”

“Honestly, Mr Potter, even if the Ministry would listen to a child bringing charges against the Minister's second in command, what possible proof do you have of the use of the quill? A slight redness on your hand? Make no mistake about this, Potter. You will cease this attempt to discredit the Ministry by lying about the return of You Know Who. You will remain in detention, doing lines with my Blood Quill until you become tired of it and finally break. And you *will* break, Mr Potter, even if I have to resort to more painful methods.”

“So you're telling me that I can expect to be literally tortured, and that because I'm a student, I can't do a thing about it?”

“Exactly. Until you and the Headmaster cease your efforts to undermine the trust that the people have for their government, you will be made an example of.”

He looked up from it. “Interesting reading, I must say.”

“You made another mistake, Madam Umbridge,” Harry said, his voice going cold. “You thought you were going against someone who is merely a child. Check the records. I am legally an adult. I can and will bring charges against you for the use of a Blood Quill. I will destroy you and everyone that supports your actions.”

“You don't have that kind of power, Potter! You're talking about bringing down the Ministry!”

“So the Minister is fully aware of your actions here?” he asked carefully.

“He supports me fully!” she said.

Harry reached out his hand and wandlessly Summoned his holly and phoenix feather wand. “Yech. It's covered in Umbridge sweat.” He wiped it carefully on her pink sweater. “I'd get the Minister here now, because he's going to want to know the can of worms that you've opened up here.”

“I agree,” Dumbledore said. He walked to the Floo and called for Cornelius Fudge. When the man appeared, he said, “You may wish to get here and bring some Aurors. There appears to be a situation regarding the Ministry approved Defence teacher, and it could get out of hand quickly.”

“I’ll be right there!” Fudge exclaimed, somehow making four words sound excessively pompous.

True to his words, fifteen minutes later he was being ushered into the Headmaster's office by Minerva McGonagall. “Dolores! What's happened?”

“She appears to have gotten out of control somewhat with her punishments,” Dumbledore responded.

“They lie! They've bewitched a journal to print lies about me, and are trying to use it as evidence to discredit me!”

“It's a certified Evidence set,” Harry responded simply. “If you can get Madam Bones here to collect the quill and parchment, we can have it tested.”

“I’ll send one of my Aurors,” Fudge said. “Where is it?”

“We'll send someone trustworthy, Minister,” Harry said bluntly. “I don't trust Mr Dawlish there not to 'accidentally' destroy the quill and parchment. He's been in your pocket for a while. Perhaps Auror Tonks? No, she's a Black, so that wouldn't be kosher either, given the alliance between the Blacks and the Potters. No, it had best be Madam Bones. She's as incorruptible as they come.”

“See here, Potter!” Fudge said. “You can't go insulting the Aurors like that!”

“I'm sorry to paint the entire Corps with the same brush, but the ones that are in your pocket, like Dawlish there, are giving the honest ones a bad name. Just like Umbridge is giving the Ministry a bad name, and you are as well for supporting her.”

Dumbledore pulled his head out of the fire. “Amelia will be here shortly,” he said. “I took the time while Mr Potter was explaining things to call her. We shall now have to wait for her.” He reached down and picked up his small candy dish. “Sherbet lemon, anyone?”

Harry smiled and took one, puckering as the tartness hit him. Dumbledore looked as if Christmas had come early this year. “These are good, but I can only deal with them in moderation.”

Amelia Bones strode into the office, obviously annoyed at having been dragged to the school. “What exactly is going on here?” she demanded.

“We have an evidence situation,” the Headmaster explained. “Harry planted the quill and parchment part of an Evidence set in Madam Umbridge's office earlier today, prior to a detention of his. This journal contains the happenings in that office, but there is a question of the veracity of the information. Young Harry trusts only you to retrieve the quill and parchment.”

“You're incorruptible, from what I know,” Harry answered to her questioning look. “I trust you.”

She nodded. “Where is the quill and parchment, then?” he told her and she quickly left the room, after grabbing Kingsley Shacklebolt to escort her. A few minutes later she came back in carrying the parchment and quill and set them next to the open journal.

She cast several spells then. “You paid good money for this set, Mr Potter,” she said. “This is the type we use for the most important cases in the Ministry. Any attempt to force these to give false information would lead to destruction of the set. As the spell you all saw me cast prove, and the fact that it is writing the information I'm giving as I speak, this set is still working. I certify that whatever is in that journal is accurate.”

Harry grinned. “So, Madam Umbridge. Now that the most trusted Ministry official alive has given her seal of approval to the information contained within that journal, do you still wish to contend that the contents are a lie?”

Umbridge sagged into a chair. “No. If Bones certifies that it's accurate, then it's accurate.”

Albus spoke up. “So you are officially stating for the record that you illegally used a Blood Quill on Mr Potter, informed him that he was unable to stop you, and threatened far worse to him, including expulsion when he destroyed your quill?”

“Yes,” she said softly; quiet enough that the sound of the scratching of the quill could be heard over her words.

“Dolores? How could you?” Fudge asked, horrified. “Do you realise what you've done? You've tarred my administration with your attempts to ... what were you doing?”

“Trying to get Potter to retract the story about You Know Who,” she replied. “If I could get him to do that, you'd look even better in the people's eyes. I did it for you!”

“And by doing so, you've doomed his administration, Dolores,” Amelia said. “There is no way that we can deal with this without damaging him. He was the one who supported your decisions regarding Hogwarts, and now by massively overstepping your bounds, he looks bad.” Harry could see her face saying that she agreed with that assessment – she obviously wanted him out of office.

Cornelius Fudge slumped. “We'll begin the process tomorrow of figuring out who'll take office next. We need to be careful, or else the wrong sort might get in.”

“We'll worry about that later, Cornelius. For now, let's get her to the Ministry, where we can begin to process her.” Amelia Bones looked to Harry. “May we take that into evidence? I promise that I personally will stay in charge of it until it can be returned to you.”

“Yes ma'am, you may.” With that, the group breezed from the office, leaving Harry, Hermione and Ron alone with the Headmaster. “Damn, that worked better than I expected!” Harry exclaimed.

A Time To Reflect Changes and Annoyances

Disclaimer: This space intentionally left blank. These characters belongs to JK Rowling, except maybe for the man with no vowels in his name. (Yes, I know he actually has four of them in his name...)

Note: UdderPD may well recognise a nickname for Lavender Brown in this chapter...

The next several days went quickly, with Dolores Umbridge's ouster from the school and imminent trial being the talk of the school and the Daily Prophet, which had suddenly decided that since Harry was the one who had done this to her, they might wish to remain on his good side.

He was quick to point out that she had actually done it to herself, at least to the other students. Some of them who had been uncertain about him, due to the Daily Prophet's work, now wanted to be seen with him. He politely ignored them, for the most part.

He did apologise to Susan, however. "I'm going to suggest that your aunt take over the role of Minister for Magic. You might want to get her here at some point, because I think *she* has the right to know what's happening. *All* of it." He looked pensive and a little sad.

"What aren't you telling me?" she asked slightly warily.

"In the original time stream, your aunt will be murdered by Voldemort next summer. The only description in the paper will be that her death was 'nasty'. Personally, I want the little bastard gone before he can do that, but I figure the more chances we have to change things, the better off we are."

"I understand. I'll suggest it to her, and you should probably get the Headmaster to do the same."

He discovered that Saturday was going to be a very busy day for him. First, he was going to be meeting with Professor Brzheznov – the name got easier to pronounce for him the more he practiced it – to explore the Chamber of Secrets. He was inviting the Headmaster and those that he deemed necessary to come, and any Weasleys that chose to come as well. He was especially hoping for Ron and Ginny, both of whom agreed.

They met in Myrtle's bathroom where she acted surprised at the number of visitors. Dumbledore greeted her with a smile and gentle care, and she softly faded into her favourite toilet for the first time anyone could remember, rather than the usual exuberant splash.

Harry walked to the sink in question and hissed “*Open*” at it. As before, the sink moved away to expose a hole that seemed smaller this time around, and he chuckled at that. He stared at the hole for a second and then hissed “*Stairs down.*” There was the sound of stone softly grinding on stone, and stairs appeared and began to move downward. “It's quite a distance down,” he said, “and I really couldn't see Salazar Slytherin sliding down a slimy tunnel on his back. And the exercise from walking back up would have been ridiculous, so I figured that there were moving stairs.”

“Excellent thinking, Mr Potter!” Dumbledore said. “Ten points to Gryffindor!” The group, which consisted of Brzheznov, Dumbledore, Harry, Ron, Ginny, Molly and Arthur, stepped onto the stairs and rode them down to the bottom, stepping carefully on the small bones at the bottom. Ginny started to shiver, and Arthur pulled her closer.

Dumbledore cleared the rockfall, shoring up the tunnel in the process, and Harry walked further forward, waiting at the large door into the Chamber itself. “I'll be opening this in a second. Ginny, if this disturbs you, remember one thing – you're here. You survived. You won.” She nodded shakily, and he opened the Chamber. It was still as he remembered leaving it all those years ago, and he himself shuddered at the memory. To his surprise, Fawkes appeared in a burst of flame and landed on his shoulder and began singing softly.

Feeling his mood improve, he looked around. He realised that the Headmaster had been quite correct about the toxicity of the basilisk – were it not for the odd angle that it lay at, he would not have been the slightest bit surprised to see it sit up and sniff around for them.

Professor Brzheznov stared at it for a long moment before turning to face Harry. “You killed this at twelve years old?” Harry nodded, confused. “This thing is sixty to seventy feet long, Mr Potter. If you ever get angry at me, please make my death a quick one. I don't stand a chance against the man who can defeat one of these at age twelve.”

“Well, I had a lot of help,” Harry said with a shrug. “Fawkes played a big part by getting me the Sorting Hat, which is where I pulled Gryffindor's sword from, plus he blinded it. I just stabbed it through the roof of it's mouth. Ouch!” The last came when Fawkes chose to express his opinion by whacking Harry on the back of the head with a wing.

“I believe that Fawkes thinks that you had a somewhat bigger hand in the death of the basilisk than you choose to admit,” Arthur said with a chuckle. Even Ginny was giggling.

“I was twelve!” he protested. “It's not like I called on the ancient Potter magics and invoked the sword skills of Arthur Pendragon or something. I got myself bit putting the sword through the roof of that thing's mouth. Fawkes is the only reason I'm alive today.” He pulled Ginny into a hug. “At least she's alive. That made getting bitten worth it.”

She swatted him on the arm with a laugh. “Why do you say that sort of a thing to me when you're

promised to Hermione and Daphne?” She turned and began to playfully beat him on the chest, making everyone laugh.

He finally stopped her by hugging her. “In that vein, I'm looking at the possible splitting of the basilisk and the monies earned by selling it slowly in the following manner: To Professor Dumbledore, to use in whatever way that he chooses ...” He paused to watch the Headmaster flash four fingers at him, one at a time. “As he has just convinced me, one quarter of the profits go to him. One quarter will remain mine. The other half will be split as one quarter to the finest example of what a wizarding family should be, also known as Molly and Arthur Weasley. The remaining quarter will be split in half between Ron and Ginny.”

“Harry, we couldn't!” Arthur protested.

“Why not? You raised incredible children. Ron, knowing only that the Monster of Slytherin was down here, came down to help save his sister. If that's not a Gryffindor proving that he loves his sister, then nothing is. Ginny fought off a very powerful mind for almost an entire year.” He grinned to the girl who was now pressed tightly against him, shivering slightly. “Besides, isn't that the ultimate revenge, Ginny – to become hideously wealthy specifically because of Tom?” He looked at her parents. “And these two were raised with the values that made them worthy of their rewards. They had to learn them from you. So the money rightfully belongs to you.”

He turned to the Potions professor. “As for you? Right now, you get a few pounds of materials to work with, or sell as you wish. Once I know you better, you may well get a goodly portion of my quarter.”

“I will take an oath if you wish, but I believe that I can get you top dollar selling this basilisk. All at once would cause a glut that would lower its worth, but I have contacts all around the world. I believe that I can sell it without causing a crash.” Before Harry could say anything, he had pulled his wand and sworn an oath to get the best price possible without swindling anyone.

“You didn't need to do that,” Harry said with some very mild annoyance.

“You've been on the receiving end of some things that can shake a man's trust. I felt that making the oath would take one of those things off your mind.”

“I appreciate that, but you still didn't have to do that. So, how do we go about tearing this thing down for use amongst the brewers and armourers of the world?”

“We will need to return, by necessity, he said, but that's on your schedule,” Brzheznov said.

“Well, I should be able to work my schedule around when you can get those you'll need to help you. Beyond that, should we start, or come down here later on?”

“How does next weekend work for you?” the professor asked. Harry simply nodded his agreement.

Before the weekend was complete, the Headmaster had secured a new professor for Defence Against the Dark Arts, and had hired someone living for History of Magic, but did not tell Harry, who walked into his History of Magic class on Monday to find Sirius Black at the head of the class. People looked startled, but sat down dutifully, and more awake than they could ever remember being in a History of Magic class, if only because of the unexpected guest.

The time for class began, and Sirius spoke. "Hi. I'm your new professor for this class, Sirius Black. Yeah, that Sirius Black. Over the weekend, the Headmaster finally convinced Professor Binns that he was in fact dead, so the fellow crossed over into the next great adventure, as they say. That's my understanding, at least. I could be wrong. From this point on, I will be teaching the class. We will cover the goblin wars occasionally, but we will also cover modern events." There were a few gasps. "Yes, that means that you'll actually need to stay awake in my class. There may be an occasion or two where I will need to cancel class for a day, but that just means that you'll see me in the Defence classroom."

"They rehired Professor Lupin?" Harry blurted out happily.

"Yes, Mr Potter, they did. You approve of this move?" Sirius asked with a grin.

"Begging your pardon for the outburst sir, but 'Heck yeah!' Between you two, we'll actually *learn* something!"

"I'm pleased by your vote of confidence," was the amused reply. "Now, let's get into some recent history, compared to what Professor Binns taught. Back in the early eighteen hundreds, a man rose to power in the wizarding world. His name was ..."

They walked from class, Hermione smiling at Ron, who was doing the one thing no one had ever seen him do before. He was raving about a class. "Who knew that history could be so interesting? He makes it come alive!"

"Maybe he can do the same for your grades, Weaselby," a familiar male drawl said.

"Hey, you hired a new script writer!" Harry said jovially, interrupting Ron's potential explosion. "That's the first new material I've ever heard you use! How much did they cost you?"

"What are you on about, Potter?" Malfoy asked in annoyance.

"Good heavens. You mean that was original material? I didn't know you had it in you, Malfoy. You've not shown a tendency toward thinking for yourself before!" He breezed past the stunned blonde. "Well, time for Potions!" he said, walking into the room in time to see Professor Brzheznov wiping a smile off his face. Harry winked at him quickly.

Defence led to a surprise, but it was for the teacher. When Remus Lupin walked into the classroom, Harry beat the others by only a fraction of a second as he stood and began to applaud.

“I appreciate the sentiment,” Remus finally was able to say. “I just hope that I live up to your standards. I can tell you that I will not be teaching this class next year, however.” He paused for the classes “Aww,” to echo around. “I will still be teaching here, however. Your History of Magic professor and I will be switching positions for next year's classes.”

Everybody looked a little confused, but then Harry started to laugh. “What a way to deal with the curse on the position!” he finally gasped out. “This teacher already knows that he won't be teaching the class next year, so it doesn't have to kick in!”

“There's an actual curse on the position?” Parvati asked in shock.

“Apparently so,” Remus said. “Apparently Voldemort ...” He paused for the usual shudder from the students, “... applied for the position when he was still only Tom Riddle. He'd already gone quite Dark, so the Headmaster refused to hire him. Riddle apparently cursed the position. Easy to do if you are of a certain power level. Several people are of sufficient power – Riddle, obviously; the Headmaster; several students within the student body at this point in time; and several within the Ministry. Doing the curse is easy. It's breaking it that becomes problematic. You see, the wording becomes important, and if you don't know the exact wording, it becomes significantly more difficult to break a curse. Now, that leads into what I was planing on teaching you today. You see ...”

Harry walked into dinner with the others with a slight frown. “Maybe it's superstition or something, but I'm waiting for the other shoe to drop. Too much good has happened too early in the year. When is all Hell going to break loose on my head?”

“You're just paranoid,” Hermione said. “This looks like it's going to be a good year for you at last.”

“First year was pretty good,” he said with a smile. “I met a really pretty girl that I helped save from a troll.”

“Flatterer,” she said with a very slight blush.

They set to the business of eating, and were quickly enjoying themselves. As they were finishing up the last of the pudding course, Professor McGonagall came over to Harry. “When you are done, the Headmaster needs to see you in his office. Some news that may or may not be bad.”

He sighed. “Here it comes. We're going to find out that I'm really Snape's love child by Bellatrix Lestrange or something,” he grumbled as he stood. More than just Ron looked a little nauseous at the thought. “I guess I'll see you guys in the tower in a while.”

“He's what?” Harry asked, trying very hard not to take his annoyance out on the Headmaster.

“He has realised that to keep his job, he needs to discredit Amelia Bones, yourself, and me,” the

Headmaster said. “Miss Granger and Mr Weasley – Ronald, that is – are likely to be caught in the back-splash, if you will, since they are friends of yours and were here for Madam Umbridge's humiliation.”

“So he's trying to make it look as if she's taking bribes or something?”

“Precisely. He has stated that it appears that there is evidence of her taking bribes from known Dark Families, such as the Blacks. Sirius is looked at as a victim, so they are attempting to say that the other members of the family bribed her to throw Sirius in prison without a trial.”

“We need to get the goblins involved with this,” Harry said. “Yesterday, if possible.” He blinked. “Actually, it is possible. I forget that sometimes. No, I meant that as a sign of how quickly, sir.” He scowled. “He's going to be using money from the 'pure as the driven snow' Malfoys to pay for this, I'm sure.”

“Undoubtedly,” was Dumbledore's response. “I am sorry to bring this to your attention, but I did not wish you blind-sided by this.”

“I appreciate that, sir. I suppose that I should go back to the tower and let Ron and Hermione know that they're about to get their names dragged through the mud.” Dumbledore nodded sadly, and Harry returned to Gryffindor Tower.

“Unbelievable!” Hermione exploded when he had told them. “I hope Madam Bones has the ability to prove that she hasn't been taking bribes.”

“It's hard to prove a negative, you should know that. All he needs to do is throw enough smoke around until he can get something passed through the Wizengamot.” He shrugged. “Well, both he and Umbridge will find it difficult enough when the House of Potter officially declares Blood Feud on them and their Houses.”

Lavender Brown's head shot up as she heard that. “Are you serious? You'd declare war on the Houses of Fudge and Umbridge?”

“Why not? They fly in the face of all honourable rules of interaction between the Ancient Families by trying what they're doing. Amelia Bones is an honourable woman, who was called here to verify the truthfulness of a report. Fudge seems to care more for how much money can come from the Malfoy coffers than anything resembling honesty. He's covering for Umbridge and himself, since if word of what she said here gets out, he loses a lot of support, because he supported her one hundred percent.”

She walked away, shaking her head. “That'll be all over the school by tomorrow!” Hermione whispered.

“I know. Why do you think I was so open with her about it? She's a wonderful girl, but she's gotten the unflattering nickname of '*Sonorus* Hogwarticus' because of her inability to *not* pass along a

juicy story. I expect that it will have reached the ears of Fudge himself by the end of the week.”

Word reached Harry on Wednesday that he needed to meet with the Headmaster in his office. He arrived to discover Cornelius Fudge waiting there, looking shockingly like Vernon Dursley in colour, with both a smug Dolores Umbridge and coolly amused Lucius Malfoy, who leaned on his ever-present cane with two gloved hands.

“Ah, we're back!” Harry said brightly. “Who are you trying to destroy now, Fudge, in your attempt to keep taking ... donations ... from the blond haired one over there?”

“I've heard about your threat to declare Blood Feud between the House of Potter and both of the Houses of Fudge and Umbridge,” Fudge growled. “I want you to stop this nonsense now.”

“What nonsense? Trying to get you to admit that your pet toad there stepped over the line and had no problems torturing students?”

“Where's your proof, Potter?” Umbridge replied smarmily. “Your notebook is journal is nowhere to be seen.”

“Ah, so you managed to force it out of Amelia Bones hands and the evidence was 'accidentally' lost. Can I assume the Lucius over there did the honours for you, since I doubt you have the power for even a simple flame spell?”

“I would watch my tongue amongst my betters, child,” Malfoy growled silkily.

“You're right.” He turned to the Headmaster. “Is my tone offending you, sir?”

“Not at all, Harry,” Albus said in a friendly tone.

“Pleased to hear that.” He turned back to Lucius. “Well, since the only one I consider my better has no problems with my tone, I'm not worried about you. What's the real reason you're involved, Lucius? Voldemort needs Fudge in office for something?”

Lucius raised his cane threateningly, but before he could say anything, Harry said, “Try anything, Lucky, and you'll be walking home painfully, and it'll take St Mungos to extract that cane from your arse. I'm aware of the fact that your wand is in the top of the cane as well, so no being sneaky there.”

“You know something?” Harry asked conversationally. “Most people don't wear gloves this early in the season, and the last few times I saw you, you never wore them. Is it possible that the reason you've picked up that affectation is because one of your hands is now silver?”

Lucius's eyes widened momentarily – in fear, it appeared to Harry – before he hid the look and said, “A minor skin condition erupted, and I do not wish to run the risk of infection.”

“Good answer,” Harry replied. “At least I know now who was in the graveyard in May. There's some silver glinting from behind the glove, mind you.” He grinned to himself as he watched Lucius's eyes flicker quickly to his right hand before narrowing at Harry subterfuge.

“So, let's get down to business. What are your plans to force me to give up the Blood Feud? Especially since I can bring forth another journal with the same information as the one that you destroyed. Remember Madam Bones commenting that I bought a top of the line version of the Evidence Quill and journal set? The most expensive ones write to multiple journals.”

All three eyes widened in fear at that. “I demand that you give me those other journals now!” Fudge blustered at Harry.

Harry just looked at him for a moment before turning to Dumbledore. “So, how about those Cannons?”

The Headmaster's eyes twinkled as he replied, “I fear that unless they improve their coaching, they will continue to perform at the bottom of the league, as is their usual placement.”

“Did you hear me Potter?” Fudge yelled. “Give me those journals!” He reached out and grabbed Harry's arm and spun him around. Prepared for this, Harry's arm shot out and caught Fudge in the side of the head, knocking him to the ground.

“Oh, I'm sorry!” Harry said with false concern. “I've been attacked enough that I've learned to fight back first, before giving the assailant a chance to attack further. Please accept my apologies.”

“Now, in answer to your oh-so-polite 'request' that I hand over the extra journals, I'm afraid that I shall have to tell you no. They are evidence in a pending court case, apparently. One that could have repercussions far beyond those that the people involved might consider. We have a man who appears to be a recovered Death Eater, having admitted under oath that he's quite weak willed and performed all his prior murders and rapes under the auspices of the Imperius Curse.”

“How dare you refer to a respected man that way!” Umbridge said in a huff that Harry fought very hard to not laugh at, since it sounded suspiciously like a croak.

“I'm fifteen and can throw off the Imperius,” he answered her. “Do you mean to tell me that the paragon of Pureblood society can't throw off the same spell? I stand by the decision to call him weak-willed, unless he chooses to admit being a Death Eater willingly.” He turned to Malfoy. “Can't have it both ways, Lucy.”

“So, do I call Blood Feud, or do you actually allow this to work out the way that it should, Minister Fudge? Don't think that I won't declare Feud on you, since you are aiding and abetting Dolores Umbridge's attempts against the last scion of the Potter family. The only way that you can successfully prevent me from declaring Feud would remove several loopholes that the Purebloods such as Lucky there enjoy. Believe me – I checked. Any attempt to word it such that it only refers to me will make the attempt rather obvious, which will lead to questions as to why a single Family

is being singled out.”

“Decide,” he said sharply. “You have until the first Saturday of October. If I have not heard that the situation has returned to the track that it should be pursuing by the end of the day Saturday, October fifth, I will declare Blood Feud upon both the Umbridge and Fudge families on the sixth of October.” His smile to them had a predatory look to it. “Part of me hopes that you choose to underestimate me,” he said. “I’ll have great fun dismantling your Families legally if you choose to. And I’ll be able to, once we’re in Feud.”

“I will not be ordered around!” Umbridge said in what she likely considered to be a dangerous tone.

“Then do you wish Blood Feud now?” Harry asked in reply. “If so, I am more than willing to oblige. At that point, of course, any family that helps you is considered to have allied themselves to you and will be included in the Feud.” He looked significantly at Malfoy and Fudge, both of whom were actually looking a bit nervous.

Her response was to look to them first before snarling and saying, “We’ll talk.”

“Good. Now, since the Blood Feud information has reached you, and you know everything I intend to tell you, you might as well take off now. I need to speak to the Headmaster on a school related subject.”

Umbridge started to draw herself to her full height, which put Harry in mind of a frog preparing to snag a particularly juicy fly, but Fudge put a hand on her arm and shook his head. They turned and left the office, but not without glaring at Harry. Lucius turned to follow them, but paused and said, “You’ll come to a very sticky end, Potter. Just like your parents.”

Harry grinned. “Love you too, Lucy! Tell Voldemary hi for me! Buh-bye!”

As the door closed, Dumbledore started to chuckle. “Voldemary?”

“Well, he used his mother’s bones. I expect that the body is actually male, but it’s a wonderful bit of annoyance to the creature. And when I feel a twinge up here, it’ll mean that Lucky Lucy is getting a *Crucio* or two for reporting the insult.”

“You are playing a dangerous game, I fear.”

“I have to. I lied through my teeth about those journals, but I don’t think that Fudge has had a chance to get the original away from Madam Bones – he was playing his own game with me, trying to scare me into dropping everything. He didn’t expect this nice little Muggle raised wizard to understand the nuances of Blood Feud.”

“How did you learn of it?”

“In the first time line, I got Arthur Weasley to explain it to me before I went after Umbridge, who basically got away with what I’ve prevented here this time through. It had to happen this time

around because I couldn't convince Sirius and Remus to apply for the jobs. It took the torture of me to drive home that things were still happening as they did the first time through to them. I used it to utterly annihilate Dolores Umbridge in the first time line. Mind you, I use that word with greater precision than most would.” Dumbledore merely blinked. “She'd been the Ministry official sent to your funeral to be the other bookend to Rufus Scrimgeour. They did nothing to her after her torture of students.”

“I understand. As for your taunting of Lucius Malfoy, you need to be careful.”

“I wasn't joking about him either, sir. Did you notice him look at his right hand when I mentioned that some silver was showing? Riddle has a body again because Lucius sacrificed his hand. If Draco had been there, he likely have sacrificed him as the 'flesh of the servant, willingly given', but Draco's fight would have caused problems with the ritual, no doubt.”

He stood and paced the Headmaster's office. “I will face Voldemort again, and he will die the final time. By taunting him through Lucius, I can hopefully get him into a frenzy where he will make that fatal mistake that I need. The scrying stone isn't working more at the moment than to tell us that he's in Scotland.”

Albus Dumbledore smiled. “Given your plans, I would imagine that you get more distracted by its resting place than what the stone is showing you.”

“Why sir! Are you suggesting that I could possibly be distracted by the fact that the stone rests securely between the absolutely magnificent and perfect breasts of one of my fiancées?” he replied with a grin. “You're likely quite right.”

“I should release you to your friends once more. They are likely quite worried about you by now.” He scribbled a note and handed it to Harry.

“I appreciate this, sir, but why are you doing that? I'm a prefect. I'm allowed out after curfew.”

Albus Dumbledore looked at Harry for a moment before he began to laugh. “Would you believe that I had forgotten that, despite the badge upon your robes? Keep it as a 'Get out of Jail Free' card, if you will, in case you ever need it.”

The feeling wasn't all that tense around the student body, since they never really paid much attention to the goings on at the Ministry unless it somehow impacted them. The threat of Blood Feud started by a student was a fifteen minute wonder that lasted all of a day or two in people's minds at the school before the pressures of classwork drove it from their thoughts. Harry hadn't caused bloody retribution to happen right in front of any of them, so it was unimportant.

Harry was a little confused by Ginny during the next week or so, because she kept seeming as if she was both avoiding him and trying to be near him all the time. He finally asked Hermione to find out what was going on.

She came back about an hour later, smiling. “We appear to have a problem, Harry,” she said. “I’ll need to talk to Daphne about it as well.”

“Good heavens,” he said. “Don’t tell me that she wants to sign up on that non-existent harem sign-up list!”

Hermione’s smile turned somewhat mischievous. “Who said it was non-existent?” When his eyes widened and he turned slightly pale, she chuckled. “She does want to sign up, though. I explained the problem, and she thought about it. She’s thinking about changing the way that she acts, but I made her think about whether or not she was changing for herself, or in hopes of catching you. She doesn’t see you as the Boy Who Lived anymore, at least.” She blushed. “She said she was happy to have finally met Harry Potter last year, and ... well, she joined the tired fingers club after learning what you really are like, Harry. She fell hard for Harry, not the BWL.”

“You know how it works, love. I love you and Daphne. I loved the Ginny from the other time line, but she was too much like Molly. I could probably fall in love with her here, but I won’t let that happen if it means that I would lose either you or Daph.”

“If it happens, it’ll be because Daphne and I agree.” She blushed furiously. “She is a tasty little morsel though, isn’t she?”

“I would never make that statement for fear that she thought it was a short joke.” His eyes twinkled. “Besides, other than her lips, I never had the chance to taste her.”

“If things work out in her favour, that’ll be remedied,” she quipped.

“But not tonight, it won’t,” he replied with finality, pulling her onto his lap.

“Goodness, is that because of Ginny or me?” she asked impishly.

“You have perfect breasts, which are currently protecting the only piece of jewellery that I have ever been jealous of, mainly because of where it’s ensconced. They were at my eye level. You haven’t worn a bra in almost a year due to that evil spell that you or Daphne or someone discovered, and the conversation with Ginny appears to have excited you slightly, based upon the fact that you are pointing at me without benefit of hands.”

“You didn’t answer my question,” she said with a smile.

He blushed. “Some of it *is* Ginny. I remember kissing her and getting a good grip on her bum occasionally – at least once going so far as it being under the cloth of her skirt. Nothing further, mind you. We never had the chance.”

“So you’ve not heard the cute little squeal she makes when she’s orgasming?” Hermione asked impudently. At his startled look, she said, “We’ve shared a bedroom at the Burrow, and we’ve explored a bit. I think *all* girls do at some point. In my case, I realised that while boys certainly made my engine hum on all cylinders, certain girls do the same to me. Daphne and Ginny are two

of them, and I will admit that I wouldn't exactly complain if I had a chance to explore Parvati's sensitivity levels. I don't know how I feel about Fleur. Part of me ... well, let's just say that if I was equipped like you, everyone in school would know how I react to her, because my robes would be messy. But then there's that aura that she puts out that tends to push women away. Where will things go with people? Who knows? I'm not going to force anything, and I'm not going to try to add people just so that *I* have extra female lovers. You have to be interested in them too.”

“Well, if we ever have to worry about it in the future, you can solve it then. Until then, I just want some serious snogging in a more immediate time frame.”

She was more than happy to comply.

The prankster in Harry insisted on a new permission slip for Hogsmeade, so he requested one from Professor McGonagall. When he filled it out in front of her and then signed it, she smiled at him in an amused manner and said, “Get out of here, you scamp! You don't need a permission slip, as an adult. Just try to let one of us know that you will be out of Hogwarts bounds at the time, if it is possible.” He nodded and thanked her, then left, whistling happily.

Fudge washed his hands of Umbridge on the first of October, making certain that Harry was aware that he was no longer protecting her, and requesting, in his circuitous manner, not to declare Blood Feud on the Fudge family. Harry responded that as long as no aid was given her, there would be no worries about Feud. Umbridge herself waited until the middle of the day on October fifth to make Harry aware that she was giving in to his demands.

He had been in Hogsmeade that day, enjoying the day and the time with his beautiful girlfriends. Hermione and Daphne were doing a lot of whispering about something, but he was used to that by this point. It tended to end with him having a very large smile on his face, for whatever reason.

Somewhere along the line, most of the group that had met after the first task the year before ended up together in The Three Broomsticks, and they fell to talking, mostly about revisions. “I think we need to knuckle down and really work on the O.W.L.s,” Padma said.

“Trust me, you'll need it,” Cho said with a shudder. Harry had to admit that it was certainly a nice thing to watch, whether or not she was his girlfriend. She grinned at him when she noticed his eyes.

“I'm a guy,” he said with a shrug. “You're pretty, and have a nice figure. Of course I'm gonna look.” He paused. “If I touch, however, I can think of at least four people who will begin to break body parts off me.” When she cocked her head in amusement, he said, “Cedric, Hermione, Daphne and you.”

“You've ridden dragons, and you're scared of those four?” Hannah asked with a smile.

“Does the word 'Duh' mean anything to you?” Harry replied with an answering grin.

“He's such a smart man,” Daphne said in an over the top tone of adoration.

“Y'know, this is nice,” Ron said. “Think we can have a reunion of sorts at the next Hogsmeade weekend? You know – get everyone who'd been together at that meeting after the first task and just hang out together for a while. Make it a real party or something. I mean, because of that, we all ended up with some pretty good friends.” He added his own grin to the mix. “Not only did I end up being able to call an international Quidditch star a friend, but I ended up with a wonderful girlfriend.” He hugged Susan with one arm, and she snuggled into him.

“I like the idea,” she said. “I think they'd all be able to manage it, except maybe Viktor.”

“No, he doesn't have a game that weekend,” Luna said. “He'd likely be able to come.”

“Let's do it, then,” Harry said. “I'd love it, myself. It gives me a chance to see Cedric, Fleur and Viktor again, and just be laid back and have some fun. Let me see if I can book one of her rooms for the day, then.”

He stood and walked toward Madam Rosmerta, running into Draco Malfoy as he neared her. “Watch it, scarhead!” the blond boy growled as he walked past and exited the building. Harry just shook his head and continued to Rosmerta, returning to his friends after booking the room. They talked of study sessions that Harry would run, since he had a good idea of the O.W.L.s and N.E.W.T.s.

Sunday led to a meeting with Amelia Bones, who returned his quill and journal to him. “I *thought* they were bluffing,” he grumbled.

“I am glad for whatever you did, Harry. I had an uphill fight to get anything done against Dolores until October first, when all the doors opened. If she's lucky, she'll get off with a loss of her Ministry job and pension. She actually stands a good chance of prison time, given that the Blood Quill is illegal to use unless you're signing a contract. And the fact that she had it and doesn't do a lot of contract work makes it likely that she's used it before for more nefarious purposes. We're doing a very deep investigation into pretty much everything she's ever done at the Ministry, and even before. We've got people coming out of the woodwork to tell us of endless petty things she's done, that by themselves wouldn't amount to anything, but together lead to a likelihood of severe penalties.”

“As long as I don't have to annihilate her this time around.”

“Something tells me that you're not just using that word for effect.” He nodded. “Sometimes you scare me. I think I'm glad, though, that you came back. I personally would like to live long enough to see Susan get married and have children.”

“If I've anything to say about it, you will.”

“I believe you, Harry,” she said with a smile.

“Do be aware that when Fudge goes down, I expect to support you for Minister. I don't like Scrimgeour. He didn't want to prosecute the war any more than Fudge did, but he wanted to *look* like he was. He kept trying to get me to be the spokes-thing for the Ministry.”

“Spokes-thing?” she asked in amusement, but his only response was a grin and a shrug.

The school year began to fall into a pattern of classes and studies. Harry wouldn't accept any more than were in the group that he had, which caused some hard feelings when it was noted that his group was doing significantly better on grades than the other students. He had other reasons for not enlarging the group, of course, but he told others that he had simply reached the limit of what he felt he could handle at this time, especially since he was studying himself. Most calmed down, but the grumbling continued quietly.

The first Quidditch game of the year was Gryffindor – Slytherin, as always. Harry had grown to suspect over the years that the real reasoning behind that scheduling was to prevent airborne murder from happening. Getting the game most likely to turn nasty out of the way quickly meant that many of the feuds that would erupt during the year between the two Houses would not be dealt with in the air.

Having a different teacher in charge of Slytherin House had changed things in more ways than he could have imagined. There were no longer bizarre and blatantly unfair detentions given, and when it was noted that Slytherin had booked every single practice time that the Gryffindors could have used, she promptly gave half of them back so that the Gryffindor team would be able to practice. There had even been word of a rather round chewing out that Sinistra had given the team – if she caught any one of the team cheating – whether or not Madam Hooch caught it – the offending player would be off the team for the rest of the year, no appeals. Daphne had reported that Malfoy had taken it badly, and had even threatened to haul out his worst weapon – Lucius.

Sinistra had laughed in his face.

The game had been radically different than the previous year. Ron's confidence was much greater than the previous year, and Harry had spent part of the summer practising with him. He was still a bit nervous, but he was at least an order of magnitude better than he'd been in the previous time stream. Harry had also warned him about the 'Weasley is our King' debacle from the previous time through, so he decided to start the other version early, and taught them that one:

Weasley is our King, Weasley is our King,

He will not let the Quaffle in, Weasley is our King...

Weasley can save anything, He never leaves a single ring,

That's why Gryffindors all sing: Weasley is our King.

Ron had felt a little silly the first time people sang it at a practise, but it did help his confidence.

His worst problem was someone likely to be kicked off the team soon – Cormac McLaggen. He was an armchair player who had somehow managed to make it onto the team. He was able to critique every player's abilities except his own, since he was quite certain that he was a perfect player. Angelina was about ready to castrate him, using his own broom as the scalpel.

Despite McLaggen, Gryffindor was able to pull off a quite point heavy game, with Harry ending the game with a 450 to 40 score. Luckily, with neither Snape or Umbridge on staff to back him up, Malfoy also never came to harass Harry and Ron.

December floated in on a winter storm – blew in would be a far more apt description – and the prefects were made busy trying to get the school decorated and also get Peeves under control. He had taken to teaching the suits of armour raunchy versions of various Christmas carols, and they were both stopping Peeves and erasing the recent suit memories to give them more correct versions. Despite Peeves best efforts, the castle was shaping up to be as beautiful as it ever was during the season.

One of the Muggleborns in Gryffindor came up with the idea of making wreaths from sparkly gold and red metallic garlands, and the tower was done up in wreaths to make Godric himself proud. Soon after, Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff areas were also festooned with similar garlands in their own House colours. A single green and silver one was adorning Daphne's room, and no one dared do anything to it, after the embarrassing hexes that attempted pranksters wore for three days.

The morning of the fourteenth, when the scheduled reunion was to take place, Hermione came downstairs with tears in her eyes. She held out her hand and showed him the Ravenclaw stone and broken chain.

He gently brushed her tears away. "I'll have this repaired for you before I get to the reunion," he said with a smile. "Give it back its home between those perfect breasts of yours."

She smiled. "They're not perfect, Harry. They're too big for my frame. Now Daphne is the one with perfect breasts. Well, Ginny's are pretty damned spectacular as well, to be honest."

"Daphne thinks hers are nice, but rhapsodises about a certain bushy-haired girl's magnificent mammaries. Can we all agree that *I* happen to find both your breasts *and* Daphne's breasts to be the very pinnacle of feminine perfection? And that if you ladies happen to find anyone that I agree with, they will likely go on that list?" He grinned widely at the statement.

"You, sir, are a gentleman. And a gentle man. I will bow to your insistence that I have a pleasing figure."

"Hell yeah!" Seamus said as he walked by them, heading for the exit.

"If you're ever willing, Hermione, I'd love to have you as a model someday, in whatever mode of dress you prefer," Dean said. "And I won't deny that the thought of seeing you nude as I sketch you is a particularly pleasant one."

“Trust me, my friend,” Harry said with a grin, “pleasant is an understatement.”

“No one likes a braggart, Harry,” Dean answered him, laughing as he exited the tower himself. Hermione was blushing furiously and punching Harry's arm the way that Ginny had been beating on his chest – with no force whatsoever.

As they headed down to breakfast, Harry said, “I think I want to learn some of the jewellery charms and such. For one thing, I think I could do a booming business repairing people's rings and such, since the standard Reparo is just too blunt force a spell for jewellery work.” He looked in her eyes. “Besides, knowing that I made your engagement ring and wedding ring with my own two hands would certainly make me happy.” She looked startled, but the smile on her face told Harry everything.

A Time To Reflect **The Circle Closes**

Disclaimer: Wolverines do not make good pets. Ferrets are ill-suited for flying. The characters contained within are the property of JK Rowling, with the rare exception.

Note: Yes, I did borrow his name. I thought that the name of the place was a good choice as well, because all of his stories are. If you know who I'm talking about, you'll likely agree. Also, I got the Voldemary name from a reviewer, and decided that it was something this Harry would say.

And if you've ever read Rorschach's Blot's "Lord of Caer Azkaban", then you'll recognise the tip of the hat to him in here.

The group headed down to Hogsmeade together, agreeing to meet in the Three Broomsticks later for their reunion. People split off into small groups and headed to various stores around the town. Harry watched in amusement as Luna broke into a dead run and suddenly leapt into the air and into the arms of Viktor Krum, wrapping her legs around his waist as they began to kiss. He smiled as it became so terribly obvious just how much in love they were. *They must be breathing through their noses. No one has lung capacity like that.*

He entered the local jewellers shop – Joy's Gems – and showed them the chain, and asked to speak with the owner, who exited a few moments later, brushing his hands on his apron. "I'm the owner, Tim Joy. How may I help you?" he asked.

"Well, I've got an odd request for you, sir. The chain repair should be easy, although I'm thinking that this time I should ask for an unbreakability charm on the chain," he said with a smile. "What I do want to know is if I might learn jewellery making from you. I am promised to two young ladies, and I wish to make their rings myself. I might well discover my calling in life. I'd take an oath, if necessary, not to make any effort to break into your business here in town. I'd likely be doing repairs at the school at the most."

Mr Joy smiled at him. "If you could manage to get down here once a week, I could start the process of seeing if you have the ability and drive, and training you if you do."

"I'm legally considered an adult, since I'm the last Potter. I can get down here more than once a week if it would be helpful."

“Excellent! If you've got the drive for it, then I'll likely start with teaching you the most common repair spells, and you can start repairing your classmates' rings and necklaces.”

“What would be your percentage of the monies I take in doing that?” Harry asked.

“We'll talk about that later, Mr Potter,” was the grinned answer. “I'd imagine that your lady love will want that chain back, complete with the stone.” He took the pieces of the chain and began what seemed like a ballet of wand work as he worked on the chain. Harry marvelled as he watched the links carefully rebuild themselves and connect to the chain before sealing once again as a whole chain. Mr Joy then murmured something that made the chain glow brighter for a moment, and then handed it to Harry. “Once you put the pendant back on the chain, it will be unbreakable. I look forward to seeing you for the first time as a student of mine. I saw the glow of interest in your eyes while I worked. I expect you'll make quite an artist, Mr Potter.”

“Thank you,” Harry replied in surprise.

“Now go and give that back to your lady,” Mr Joy said with a smile.

Harry headed to the Three Broomsticks, looking forward to putting the Ravenclaw stone around Hermione's neck once more. As he approached the door to the place, he paused. Something was wrong. He disillusioned himself and looked in through a window. Everyone inside was unconscious.

He ran to the back of the establishment and looked through the window to find it empty, with bottles of butterbeer tipped over, spilling onto the table and floor. He was inside in a moment, and saw some small bloodstains, but nothing that made him worry immediately for someone's life.

He ran out to the main room and threw some Floo powder into the fireplace, calling for the Aurors. He then called Professor Dumbledore and stepped outside the Three Broomsticks to wait for the Aurors.

He had been standing outside for about ten minutes when Draco Malfoy and his omnipresent goons chose to walk past, and Malfoy decided to stop. “What's wrong, Potty? Your so-called friends stand you up for your reunion?”

The Aurors and Dumbledore both arrived in time to see Harry reach out suddenly with his left hand and yank Malfoy toward him while his right fist shot forward. The crack echoed through the town, and Draco Malfoy fell to the ground clutching his face. “You bashtard!” he slurred. “I'll see you in Azkaban for this!”

“You'll be dead first,” Harry growled. “How would you know that they aren't there unless you had something to do with their disappearance?” He quickly dropped Crabbe and Goyle with Stunners.

“The Dark Lord will heal with you!” Draco yelled.

Harry kicked Draco hard in the left shin, dropping the boy to his knees, but Harry brought his fist

up as Draco dropped, breaking the other side of Draco's face as the boy lifted and fell on his back. "I'm going to kill you, Draco. There are Aurors standing over there watching us, and they've seen me hit you twice. They've also heard your claim that the Dark Lord will deal with me."

Draco's eyes went wide through the tears of pain that he felt, and he turned his head to look at the Aurors. Anything he tried to say at this point was unintelligible, since Harry had not only broken the bone on either side of Draco's nose, giving the blond boy's face a collapsed look, but he had also removed several teeth. Draco was spraying blood from his mouth as he tried to talk.

"We've got a pub full of unconscious people in there, and evidence of a struggle in the back room. I was supposed to be meeting with some friends, but Dick-boy over there decided to tell Voldemort, apparently, based on his taunting. Or he told Daddy, who told Voldie. Same thing, really."

Several Aurors stepped into the place and began to *Ennervate* the customers, asking them what happened. All told the same story – several Death Eaters entered the place simultaneously and simply Stunned everyone.

"That makes no sense," Kingsley Shacklebolt said. "They come into a room and kill, not stun."

"Voldie may have wanted everyone in and out," Harry said. "Killing takes too long, and leads to too much of a chance that someone might fight back or get a message out. In and stun; get your team to Portkey out the fifteen people, and be gone in less than a minute, I'll bet."

"You may be right, but we have no way of finding them now, dammit," Shacklebolt said. "We don't even know what he wants them for, although I'll bet that he's thinking hostages right now."

"Tom doesn't do hostages," Harry said. "He kills. He's got a use for those fifteen; otherwise we'd have found fifteen corpses." His voice was hard and merciless.

Albus Dumbledore watched the young man before him and began to worry. The loss of these people had broken him in the first run through, from what he could see in Harry's memories, and this Harry that had just literally broken young Malfoy's face was not a Harry he wished to see.

When Harry commented on the corpses, Albus stepped forward. "Perhaps we could move this conversation to the castle? It would certainly be more secure than anything currently available in Hogsmeade." Harry looked at him for a long moment and then nodded sharply.

The walk to the castle was tense, mostly because it was impossible to get Harry to speak. The way that Harry walked, Albus would not have been surprised to find the ground shaking with every step the young man took, but he found himself quite glad that it wasn't.

They met in the same room that Harry had met everyone after the first task a year earlier, but with a much smaller crew this time. Dumbledore watched as Harry sat at the head of the table, and sat next to him as the small detachment of Aurors sat down as well. Harry warded the room once

more, even stronger than a year before, and looked at the Auror team.

“Not to be insulting,” a young woman with shocking pink hair said, “but why is a student at the table, and why is he apparently in charge?”

“Auror Tonks,” Harry replied softly, but with no emotion in his voice, “I am uniquely suited to be in charge of this meeting.” He looked around. “Save the Headmaster and Auror Shackbolt, I am actually the oldest at this table.” Several eyebrows rose in extreme disbelief.

“He is actually quite correct,” Albus said. “I have seen the proof of his statement.”

“Time traveller?” Tonks asked.

“Yes. Coming back destroyed the original time stream, according to the one who sent me back, and she's uniquely suited to know. I changed things the moment I arrived.” He smiled very slightly. “For example, I did not say 'Oh fuck!' in the beginning of the first task the first time through. I also Summoned my broom and outflew the little lady that I rode this time.”

“My hope was to utterly destroy Voldemort at the end of the third task, since I knew that it was a Portkey that would take me to the cemetery in Little Hangleton. Unfortunately, things had changed enough already that Lucius Malfoy became involved much earlier than he had last time.” He looked to Shackbolt. “The bled-out Auror was a spell component in the ancient ritual that brought Riddle back to a body. So was his mother's bone and Lucius Malfoy's right hand.”

One of the other Aurors scoffed. “You're a fifteen year old boy, who hasn't left the school except during the summers. How would you know this? We've seen no proof of your passage back through time.”

“What would help?” Harry asked back in a biting tone. “Memories from a time line that doesn't exist any longer? Maybe the memory of the murder of Albus Dumbledore?” At the group's startled reaction, he said, “Yeah. In the other time stream, I watched, unable to move, as Draco Malfoy tried to, but proved to be as ineffectual there as he is with everything else, and then the job was finished by Severus Snape.”

“So, what can I do to prove it to you? I didn't exactly start paying attention to the stock market until I was in my late twenties, so we're talking about having to wait about ten years to tell on that. A lot of other things have changed too. After all, the first time around, I imitated a mushroom quite a bit because my keepers thought it was in my best interest. This led to someone dying over a damned prophecy that anyone with a brain can figure out.”

“Mushroom?” Kingsley Shackbolt asked, making Tonks giggle madly.

“I was kept in the dark and fed a lot of shit,” Harry replied. “And they wondered why I spent the year angry.” He shook his head. “This is getting us nowhere. Your boss knows and apparently believes, the Headmaster knows and believes, as do two of the instructors here at school.” He paused. “Three. I told Professor McGonagall as well.”

“I trust Mr Potter implicitly in this matter,” Albus finally said. “I also apologise for the actions -”

“We've been here before sir. That was a different you. The situation is done, as far as I'm concerned,” Harry said.

“So where do we go from here, sexy?” Tonks asked with a laugh.

“When we get 'em back, talk to Hermione and Daphne,” he sighed. “We need to find out where they are being held, and then get there before he can do whatever he's going to. I have a suspicion, and if I'm right, I am going to stop it even if I have to blow up half of London to do it.”

“Are you insane?!” Shackbolt shouted, leaping to his feet.

“Probably. Would I even know if I was? But if I'm right about this, then you'll be happy about losing London. In the original time-line, he performed a ritual with twelve of those fifteen people, planning to siphon off their lives and use the remaining span himself. It failed because I got there, but they still died. I ended up with their lifespans. I do not want them. I will flatten London if I need to in order to prevent him from succeeding. The biggest problem is finding him.”

“We can use the spy that I have in their ranks,” Albus said softly, waiting for the explosion he was sure was coming.

Harry stared at the man for a long time before saying, “Snape. It has to be. Do you really have that much of a death wish, sir?”

“No, but I do not fear the next great adventure.”

“I can't fault you for this, sir, because it's one of your greatest strengths. I just hope that it's not your greatest mistake as well.”

“As do I, my boy,” Dumbledore responded. “As do I.” He was about to say more when Fawkes appeared in the room and dropped a note. “Ah, speaking of Severus, it seems that Fawkes has delivered a missive from him. He wishes to meet with me regarding the kidnapping of those from Hogsmeade.”

Harry closed his eyes and thought for a long moment. “I'd recommend that he report his findings here. Makes it less likely that he'll try to kill you with Aurors here. It also makes me a little happier, because I'd imagine that he'd not be ready for the ritual after he's had them for less than an hour.”

“Agreed,” Dumbledore said. He wrote a response quickly and handed it to Fawkes, who flamed away from the room. “Severus will likely be here shortly. He did seem to believe that time was of the essence.”

Time was apparently of so much essence that Fawkes reappeared only a minute later carrying the

tall dark man. “Headmaster, I have -” he began, and then noticed that Harry was in the room. “Sir, I would ... 'request' that Potter not be here for my debriefing. There are things that are simply not for his ears.”

“Severus, I believe -” Dumbledore began.

“No, Headmaster,” Harry said, standing. “This is just the mark of a petty man doing what he sees as getting revenge on me for kicking *him* out of a meeting he wanted to be part of a year ago. He won't tell you anything of importance while I'm in the room, so I'll head out and see what else I can do.”

“Finally, the Gryffindor Golden boy learns a lesson,” Snape drawled. “Go back to Hogsmeade and have your butterbeer and leave your betters to solve this.”

“So why are *you* here then?” Harry fired back at him.

“Insolent -”

“- brat!” Harry finished for him in a mocking tone. “Your insults are no better than ever, Snivellus. Know this, however, Death Eater – I don't care if you actually are working for the side of Light as you seem to have him convinced. The deaths of my parents can be traced directly back to you. In this life or the next, there will be a price for you to pay for that.”

“How do you mean that their deaths can be traced to him?” Shacklebolt asked.

“There's a little prophecy that Snape heard the beginning of and went running to tell his lord and master at the time. He heard '*The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches... born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies ...*' which led to his people attacking both my parents and the Longbottoms. They were Aurors, weren't they?”

“Yes, but the Headmaster assured the Wizengamot -” Shacklebolt said with narrowed eyes.

“Remorse,” Albus said. “When it struck him what he had wrought -”

Harry heard none of the rest as he left the room and walked down the hall. He had no destination in mind – he just needed to be away from Dumbledore and his excuses for Snape. Dumbledore truly believed them, and Harry wouldn't have the man any other way, but there was no reason for him to sit around and listen to the excuse while the greasy bastard smirked, knowing that the greatest wizard alive vouched for him.

He found himself in front of the Room of Requirement once more. *What is it about this place that I always come here whenever I'm aimlessly meandering?* He shrugged and opened the door.

He was surprised to find that this time, he was *not* in a replica of the Granger home. *Glad of that. Then I'd have to figure out why I ran away this last summer. That made no sense at all. Was it the hormones of an almost fifteen year old overriding the intellect of a man in his thirties? For God's sake, Dan Granger was right! It's his house and his rules!*

What he did find was the ritual room from the first time stream. The various tables, set up in a circular pattern with space at the centre for the caster of the spell that would absorb the life forces.

“Is he in the same place as last time, though?” Harry asked the room in general. “I can't just go running off to there under the assumption that he is, since we're years ahead of schedule. Hell, I can't even guarantee that he's trying the same damned ritual!”

“You have the means to find out within your grasp,” a female voice said. He turned to find a woman dressed in an ancient style, wearing a deep blue dress with bronze coloured accents.

“I know you've been created by the Room, so you're really the castle, but might I ask who you are?” he asked her politely.

“You might call me the representation of one of your ladies' icons. You know my colours.” The woman smiled in a manner very reminiscent of both Hermione and Daphne when they knew something that they wanted the questioner to discover for themselves.

“Lady Ravenclaw?” he asked a moment later as he realised that there was only one person whose colours matched that dress.

“Precisely. And with some thought, young man, you now have all the information you need to find where your loves and friends are, and what is being done to them.” She faded gently from sight.

“I have all the information I need?” he asked irritably. “How the hell does knowing that the castle created Rowena Ravenclaw for me tell me how to find them? I'm not exactly able to think my way into finding them – they're probably *not* where they were last time!” He jammed his hands into his pockets, grumbling.

- and suddenly realised what the castle was trying to tell him as he pulled the chain out of his pocket, followed immediately by the scrying gem. He slid the gem onto the chain and grinned. The room morphed to become an intimate setting, one perfect for meditation. A small fire burned in a copper bowl in the centre of a small table, but other than that, the room was free of distractions. He took the gem into his hands and sat down in the comfortable chair and fell softly into an Occlumentic trance.

He looked at the sapphire for a long time, willing something to show up, practically begging the gem to show him where they all were. Nothing. *C'mon*, he thought. *I'm trying to get you back home between those pretty breasts of hers. Help me out here!*

He saw a sudden flash of ... something ... deep within the gem. It was no colour or anything that he could recognise, given how short a time it showed, but there was a flicker of change, and that was enough. *Concentrate on one of them*, he thought. With this in mind, he began to meditate on Hermione, since it was thinking about her – in a way – that had led him to the realisation of how to use the gem.

He thought about her from the first time through, the way that she'd looked when she first walked

through the door of the compartment – all bushy hair and attitude. The look on her face when Ron made his insensitive comment that led to her needing saving from a troll. The look on her face when she lied through her teeth to save the boys who had just saved her.

... the terrifying look to her as she lay in the hospital wing after that damned basilisk petrified her. He shuddered slightly and the gem flickered once more, more solid in its imagery this time. He saw a flash of pink that just might have been her skin, but it was gone quickly.

Emotional load. His thoughts changed to images of her that carried a strong emotional component. The wing again. The look on her face when she reported that she had given the Firebolt to McGonagall to check over, for fear that Sirius Black might be trying to kill him with it. The underlying fear that he might hate her forever, but the deep and abiding friendship that he had realised that it required to do that, because she cared for ... no, she *loved* him enough to let him hate her.

The gem flickered more solidly this time, and remained a pinkish hue. He returned to his thoughts.

The way that she looked coming down the stairs at the Yule Ball the first time around.

The way that she looked the second time around, knowing that she was going with a man who loved her, rather than someone who liked her because she wasn't a fan-girl.

The way she had looked as she dropped her robe this time around, hoping that he found her pretty.

The way she had looked as he proved beyond any doubt that he found her far more than merely pretty.

The image of her on the slab in the first time stream, after Tom's ritual worked, but went into the wrong man.

“No!” he said, glaring at the gem. “I will not let that happen this time around! If it means my life, I will not let the women I love be killed this time!”

The gem literally jumped on the table and then projected a picture above it. The same layout of tables, with three more this time, although no one was on them yet. People moved in the background – Rookwood, both Lucius and Narcissa Malfoy, the Lestranges (damn them to hell), and some that Harry didn't recognise. One that he did – Simon Grandmarch, the guy with Unspeakable contacts. *Of course he does – Rookwood was an Unspeakable*, he growled to himself.

So where the hell are they? The image slid backward away from the group, up and out of the room until he was looking down on a large manor house. *I was right. He's not where he was the first time around. He's at Malfoy manor this time.*

He pocketed the sapphire and exited the room with a smile and headed back to the room where Dumbledore and the Aurors had been. He knocked once on the door and then entered. “So, anything worth knowing come out of the conversation?” he asked brightly.

“Nothing you need to be involved with, child,” answered Snape in his characteristic sneer.

“Ah, so I should mount the rescue mission myself while we wait for you to get around to telling everyone where they are?”

“And how would you know where they are being held?” Snape had gone from mere sneering to outright derision.

Harry reached into his pocket and pulled out the Ravenclaw gem. “I'd imagine that the professor recognises this. I figured out how to use it – at least as far as they're concerned – and recognised the place from my first time through the time stream.”

“Are you actually going to listen to the ravings of an obviously insane child?” the Potions Master asked incredulously. “First time through the time stream? What did you do, Potter? Get a Time Turner that de-aged you at the same time?”

“No,” was Harry's only response. “So, has he told you yet that they're at Malfoy Manor?”

Snape's look was one that Harry knew he'd never find the words for. There was no one single way to describe the look, which blended surprise, disgust, annoyance, and even being very slightly impressed, although that last would never be admitted to.

“He just had,” Kingsley Shacklebolt said. “The ritual is apparently scheduled for some time this upcoming week. Apparently You Know Who wants to siphon off their life forces -”

Harry stood. “Not this time,” he said coldly. “I will be damned if that's going to happen again. Nobody is using those lifespans but the people that they belong to. Now how do we get to Malfoy Manor without setting off alarms?”

“You don't,” drawled Snape. “Unless you happen to be keyed into the wards surrounding the manor. None of you are.”

“Then find a way to get us in,” Harry growled. “Or maybe you can convince Simon Grandmarch to let us in?”

Snape started at that comment. “How did you know that he's a Death Eater?”

“Previous time line, and the fact that when I was scrying the place, he was in the room at the time, along with Mr and Mrs Malfoy and Augustus Rookwood. Since I've never met him this time around, that may well prove my story, eh?” he said, looking to the Auror that had questioned him earlier.

“The only one who can get you past the wards safely is Draco. He was made the secret keeper for the *Fidelius* Charm,” Snape said. “Good luck getting him to tell you.”

Harry looked to Dumbledore. “Is he still in the castle?” The Headmaster nodded. “Good. I can get him to tell the rest of you easily enough, then.”

“How do you know it?” Tonks asked.

“Simple. He told me the first time around, when I was cleaning things out. Tried to get me arrested for it, but then I pointed out that I knew a bit more about him than he wanted, and had proof of what I knew. It appears that the secret being told to me stayed with me.”

“How do you intend to get him to tell you?” Shackbolt asked warily.

“Well, first I Stun Madam Pomfrey, since I think her Healer's Oath is just that – an Oath – and then I have another long talk with Draco Malfoy. He's seen I'm willing to break his face – literally – so if I threaten to kill him with Aurors and the Headmaster in the room, then I think he'll be willing to talk. More than anything else, he wants to stay alive. So if I threaten that ability to remain alive ...”

“You have no actual intention of killing him, do you?” Dumbledore asked with some worry.

“I have no intention of going into that room and killing him in cold blood, sir. If he attempts to kill me and there is no other way to stop him, then I will do what is necessary, but since he's supposed to be in a hospital bed, there's not much he can threaten me with. But I do need him to believe that I will kill him, and given what I did to him in Hogsmeade, I don't think he'll have much trouble believing that. You'll need everyone you want on the team in the room, unless I can get him to write it down.”

Snape spoke up, a interesting look on his face. “Let me talk to him. I believe that i can get him to talk with minimal effort. The Aurors should be in hearing range of the bed, but I believe that I can get him to write it out as well.” He looked to Harry. “Despite your best attempts otherwise, I truly do wish You Know Who to be eradicated.”

“Given what I know from the first time line, I have no reason to believe that. I watched you cast the Killing Curse on Albus Dumbledore.” Harry raised his eyebrows as he watched Snape go white at that pronouncement. “Add that to your absolutely wonderful treatment of me over my years here at school, and I can think even you can figure out why I had absolutely no problem thinking of you as an unrepentant Death Eater.”

“Yes ... yes, I can understand that ...” the man replied absently, obviously still in shock at the news he had been given. He shook his head finally. “You have my Oath that if it comes to a choice between my life or Albus's, I will choose that Albus will live.”

“No, my son!” Albus exclaimed. “You have such a long life ahead of you!”

“Headmaster, if I permit you to die when it is possible for me to prevent it, then my life will not be worth much for very long. My Oath does not prevent you from dying – it prevents me from sitting back and letting it happen, or from having a direct hand in it.” He turned to Harry. “You may not wish to believe it, but I wish Albus dead as much as you wish Misses Granger and Greengrass dead, and will do as much to prevent his death as you would theirs. Up to and including dying in his place, if need be. I can only assume that I had been placed in an untenable

position at some point, foolishly making an oath that led to his death.”

Harry looked at Snape for a long moment. “I'll probably never trust you completely, but your reaction to the news that you killed him wasn't that of a man contemplating doing it – it was the look of a man who ... well, I assume that I'd have the same look if someone came from the future and told me that I was going to murder Hermione and Daphne and the rest in cold blood. You can't conceive of doing it, it's such an abhorrent thought. I'll trust you on this, and try to alter my perceptions about you. But I've had about twenty years to think of you as murdering scum, and as I've said, your treatment of me and my fellow Gryffindors didn't help me think of you as a nice guy either. The best you can hope for is that I won't sneer back at you when we meet on the streets.”

“I can ask no more than that. Now, shall we go to Madam Pomfrey and see if we can convince her to let us talk to young Mr Malfoy?”

They entered the hospital wing and called Madam Pomfrey over. She was just exiting from behind a curtain. She was looking at Harry with an angry look in her eyes. “He's recovering, no thanks to your incessant beating upon him. Repairing the bone was easy, but now he needs to deal with the concussion.”

“We need to speak to the young man,” Albus said. “He has information that we desperately need.”

“On one condition,” she replied. “He leaves right now and returns to Hogsmeade,” she said, pointing at Harry. “I don't want him anywhere near the hospital wing unless he's injured after the beating he gave young Malfoy.”

“Is it your Healer's Oath that's making you act this way?” Harry asked. “Or do you not give a damn about extenuating circumstances?”

“There are no extenuating circumstances you could come up with that would forgive almost killing a fellow student!”

“Not even trying to save the lives of fifteen other people?” he asked as he turned to leave. “Nice to know that you care more about the ones you can see than the ones in *real* danger.” He exited the room. “Contact me when you've got what you need,” he said to the Headmaster.

Madam Pomfrey was incensed. “If I could give detentions -”

“I would overturn it,” Albus replied. “While normally I would agree with you, in this case, Mr Malfoy may well have given Voldemort the very thing he has been searching for all these years. Immortality. He plans to siphon off the life force of the fifteen that he kidnapped from Hogsmeade, and Mr Malfoy was part of the kidnapping, from what we can tell.”

“Oh good heavens,” she gasped. “And I -”

“Precisely. Even an apology to him is not likely to make him trust you again,” Albus said.

“Gryffindor,” Snape growled at her. “You must have been a Gryffindor.” He stalked over to the bed that Pomfrey had been tending, and verified that it was Draco's. Sitting down next to the bed, he waited for the boy to recognise him.

“Godfather,” he slurred slightly. “Have you come to help me?”

“That depends upon your definition of the word 'help',” was the simple reply. At Draco's confused look, he continued. “Potter is -” Severus paused, looking ill at what he was about to say. “He is our best hope to keep a madman from immortality.”

“You dare call our lord a madman?” Draco asked loudly.

“Which one of us has faced the Cruciatus from him for no apparent reason? Which of us has worked with him for years?” He moved in close. “Which of us knows that the stated head of the pure-blood movement is himself a half-blood named Tom Marvolo Riddle?” Before Draco could complain, he had shown him the fact that 'I am Lord Voldemort' could come from those letters. “He is a half-blood, Draco, and when he is through with the Muggleborns and the Muggle lovers, he will turn on the pure-bloods. And this ritual he will do will make him powerful beyond belief.”

He snarled. “I detest the fact that I must support that spoiled little brat in his quest for further fame and fortune, but I must if I wish to make the world safe for real Slytherins. The Dark Lord has lost his mind somewhere along the way, and now seems to care more for pain and suffering than for making the world safe for those who know how to wield power properly.”

“But Father -”

“I respect the man that your father once was, but he has sacrificed his right hand to bring back a man who treats him worse than you once treated that psychotic house elf Dobby.” He locked eyes with Draco. “Is not the personal motto of the Malfoy family that 'a Malfoy bows to no one'? You father not only bows but kisses the robes of a creature that no longer even qualifies as a man. And he will be killed as worthless when the Dark Lord's quest for immortality is completed.” He sighed. “There is a way to prevent this, but it will mean doing something Gryffindor for a very Slytherin reason.”

“Act Gryffindor? Are you mad, Godfather?” Draco asked incredulously.

“And by acting that way, you prove your right to be Gryffindor better than anything else,” Snape sighed. “A Slytherin does what is necessary, Draco. Would you rather be in Azkaban when this is done, or would you rather have a chance to gain power the way that a true Slytherin does? You have listened too much to the propaganda that others have espoused about the noble House of Slytherin. Learn the truth for yourself and you may yet prosper.”

Draco looked at him for a long moment before saying, “You truly believe that Scarhead can beat the Dark Lord.” It was not a question.

The ill look passed across Severus Snape's face again. "You know how much the concept pains me, but I have to say 'Yes'. I honestly believe that my best way to survive past this confrontation is to support the Golden Boy of Gryffindor."

"I refuse to be his friend," Draco said sharply.

"Did I ask you to be?" Snape asked equally as sharply. The way that Draco shrank told him that the rebuke had struck home as he wished.

Now to play with this little fool, he thought. Lowering his voice he said, "However, you know the way that these Gryffindors think. You might find it a way to get ahead in the world if you can find some way to befriend him. If he is going to be the saviour of the wizarding world, use that fame to ride to where *you* wish to be."

He stood and continued in a more normal voice. "What we need is the secret. We know that you are the secret keeper for Malfoy Manor's location. I saw the parchment that you wrote, and I think that I've graded enough of your papers to know that scrawl anywhere. Write it down for me and we can show it to Potter and whomever else will deal with the Dark Lord. You will be remembered as the one who helped us win the day. Imagine that, Draco – being hailed as a hero of the Light side."

Draco's eyes unfocused, and Snape laughed to himself. *The fool can be played like a violin. And I am a maestro.*

"I like that idea," Draco laughed. "Let the fools laud me." He looked at Severus. "Have you parchment and quill?" As he was handed them, he said, "It will be rough, but I think I can make nice to the Scarhead. And despite his belief at the moment, he'll never know that I'm the reason that those fifteen were kidnapped." He quickly scratched out the secret and handed it to Severus.

"Thank you, Draco. I promise you that you will be getting all the accolades that you deserve." With that he stood and left the curtained area, and motioned everyone outside. Once outside, he silenced the doorway to the hospital wing and said, "The little moron forgot that he was in a large room. He assumed that because I spoke in a manner he considers to be normal that we were alone. You heard?"

"It is a shame," Dumbledore said. "He will be punished, having been overheard by multiple Aurors and myself admitting to the kidnapping."

Harry walked back up and looked at the group. "Did you get what you were after?" Albus handed him the parchment. "Excellent! So, how soon should we plan the assault?"

"We can have a team ready within an hour," Shackbolt said.

"Should we get the Order involved?" Harry asked.

"I believe so. Perhaps Arthur might be a good choice to involve in this."

Harry snorted. "For multiple reasons, I agree completely."

An hour later, the team was ready. Shackbolt, Tonks, Remus, Moody, Arthur, Bill and Charlie Weasley, as well as a handful of Aurors were preparing. Harry walked up to the group with another redhead in tow.

“Percy!” Bill cried. “What are you doing here?”

“Breaking cover,” he said. “Under orders.” He pulled a badge from his pocket and pinned it on his robes. “Unspeakable Percival Weasley reporting for duty,” he said to Shackbolt. At everyone's stunned looks he said, “I started out working for MOPS, the Ministry Office of Professional Standards. They placed me with Crouch Senior to check out some irregularities.” He looked to Harry. “I appreciate what you were doing, Harry, but I had a job to do, and that required that I be a complete arse to everyone.”

“And a marvellous job you did, too!” Harry laughed before pulling the tall redhead into a hug. “I know I'm not a Weasley -”

“Says who?” Percy asked with more heat than Harry would have expected, which actually brought a suspicious moisture to Harry's eyes, and his back straightened.

“Let's do this,” Harry said. “We have people to rescue and a Dork Lard to humiliate before we destroy him.” He paused. “Or we could just destroy him and leave the humiliation for his memory.”

“I vote for the second choice,” Tonks said.

“So say we all,” Shackbolt said. “I've programmed a series of Portkeys to take us there. They'll all go off at the same time. We've got about five minutes.”

“We need to hit them hard and fast, and make sure that Portkey and Apparation wards go up simultaneously.”

“Easy enough,” Tonks said. “Knowing the parameters of the house once we had the secret keeper's secret, we set up two extra Portkeys specifically to Apparate directly into the manor by themselves, where they will set off their ward spells instantaneously. They are programmed to go off exactly one second behind us, and the wards will last for one hour.”

“Not to be insulting,” one of the Aurors asked, “but why is Mr Weasley here? I know that he heads the Misuse of Muggle Artefacts department, but is he really suited for fighting Death Eaters?”

Harry snorted. “You're talking about the Ghost, my friend,” he said.

Eyes widened. “The most feared man in England, as far as Dark Forces were concerned?” the original questioner asked.

“Guilty as charged,” Arthur said with a blush. “I was an angrier and younger man then.” He

thought about his two children in Voldemort's grasp and his gaze hardened. "But I remember how to break bones the way I used to."

The Portkeys kicked in, and they shot toward Malfoy Manor.

They landed with a thump in the main ballroom of the manor, where the tables were set up. To Harry's horror, the captives had been moved up to the tables and were all unconscious, apparently. The Death Eaters were surrounding the tables and had only a moment to realise that they were being invaded. A second that most of the incoming fighters didn't give them.

In a matter of seconds, half of the Death Eaters in the room were down, and the random *Ennervate* wasn't working on them. Usually because someone like Harry, and the Weasleys had cast such things as Blasting Curses at them. Crabbe and Goyle were bleeding to death before anyone knew to stop the attack.

Harry grinned as he saw Grandmarch and fired off a spell. Simon Grandmarch fell as if Hagrid had stepped up behind him and hit him with a tree.

"What did you do?" Tonks asked. "I hope you didn't kill him. We need him for questioning later."

"Unless someone steps on him, he'll be out cold until I wake him. And stepping on him would just hurt him or kill him if they stepped wrong. My own brand of *Stupefy*."

The Aurors and Order upended tables and the like – Harry took great pleasure in using family heirlooms to block spells – and in short order they were down to the very worst of the Death Eaters.

Dolohov fired off his favourite spell toward Tonks, and Harry grinned, throwing up a reflective shield. His aim was true, and Bellatrix Lestrange shrieked, "Watch where you're firing that thing, Dolohov!"

"Yeah, better luck hitting her next time!" Harry yelled.

"Oh, is ickle baby Harry here to fight for his friends and lovers?" She aimed at the tables and started to say something, but no one would ever know what it was, because Harry screamed "*LASER!*" as he pointed his wand in her direction. Her head disappeared in a puff of oily, smelly smoke, and the body simply fell forward.

All fighting stopped for a moment as everyone looked at the death of the second most difficult dueller in the world. "Bloody hell!" Rookwood breathed. "I've only ever seen the Dark Lord hit her before unless she was playing with you."

"That was my wife!" Rudolphus bellowed.

"'Was' being the operative word, dipshit," Harry said just before firing his special *Stupefy*.

“Oh, I don't think so,” said a high sibilant voice that Harry knew all too well. “This simply will not do at all.”

He raised his hands and began to say something, and Harry dove for cover just in time. A blast of energy enveloped the room, and he knew that he was now the only one conscious, save Voldemort.

“Now, which of them should I kill first?” Voldemort asked.

“I suggest Rookwood!” Harry yelled. “Or maybe Dolohov. He's a real pain in the arse.”

“Come out from hiding, little boy, and face your maker. I'll even let you choose who dies first if you'll just come out.”

Harry was currently behind a sofa and knew that Riddle was likely to figure that out shortly. He looked at the sofa and thought, *Ah, the hell with it*, and Banished it at Riddle at as high a speed as he could manage, rolling behind a wall as Voldemort blew the thing to smithereens. He sensed something was wrong, though, and kept rolling, proving that listening to his inner voice was a good idea as Lucius Malfoy embedded his silver hand in the wall right where Harry had been a second earlier. Lucius was also minus a hand a moment later as Harry brought his wand down and casting *Reducto* at the man's arm, removing it above the elbow.

“Oh, you're a good one, Potter, but what are you going to do as I slowly kill all your little friends? They're in here, and you're out there. *Avada Kedavra!* ”

Harry heard the rushing noise and the impact as it struck someone or something, and moaned to himself. Who had just died?

“*Avada Kedavra!* I can always find more people for this ritual, but you can't find more friends like this. *Avada Kedavra! Avada Kedavra! Avada Kedavra!* ” The dark lord began to cackle with glee as he fired the Killing Curse.

Harry stood and walked around the corner as Voldemort raised his wand again. “I'm here, you half-blooded little wanker,” he growled. “You'd best make the next spell a good one, because it'll be your last.”

“I'll be back, no matter what you think, Potter. I have ensured my longevity.”

“Kinda hard when you've no more Horcruxes, Tom. And you can't make any more.” With tears in his eyes, he fired his own *Avada Kedavra* at Tom Riddle, who jerked at the words coming from the boy's mouth and just barely yelled “*Lumos!* ” in time to activate the *Priori Incantatem*.

The cage arrived as it had the last time, golden threads building a sphere around them. His wand was hot, but he was damned if the globe of energy that locked the wands together would reach him.

“No one else dies, Riddle! NO ONE, DO YOU HEAR ME? NO ONE BUT YOU AND ME!” With that, Harry pushed as hard as he could, putting every scrap of energy he had into the spell he'd

fired Riddle's way. The globe, which had hovered between the two, shot into Voldemort's wand, which bucked in the creature's hand, but kept the connection. Harry ignored the ghosts of the prior spells until he saw Bertha Jorkins float from the wand and knew who was next.

Lily Potter's ghost came from the tip of Voldemort's wand, and slid over to him. "Oh, my baby boy, you're doing so well!" she said softly.

This was followed by James Potter sliding from Riddle's wand and gliding to his son. "We're proud of you, son. You've got him, and soon it'll all be over."

"You're right, Dad," he replied. "Riddle dies today, even if it kills me too."

"Voldemort was the Head Boy at Hogwarts in the 40's?" Lily asked softly.

"Yep," Harry replied with a grimace. "And he ends his reign today." With that, Harry did something that was supposed to be impossible. He screamed out another spell which went rocketing down the connection between the two wands and entered Riddle's. The yew and phoenix feather wand literally exploded in the Dark Lord's hand, taking pieces of the hand with it as it went away.

"We're proud of you, son," James whispered as he and Lily began to fade. "We don't want to see you for a very long time, however."

"You vile little boy!" Voldemort cried out as he cradled his wounded hand. "Look what you've done to me!"

"That's nothing," Harry said as he launched himself at the thing that had once been human. "You kill without thought or care," he yelled as his momentum carried the two of them to the floor, where Harry proceeded to pound forcefully on Voldemort's face and chest. "You kill because you enjoy it! Well no more, you bastard! No more!" He continued to beat upon the thing beneath him, losing himself – and in a way his mind – as he flailed at the man.

Finally someone drew him from the body beneath him. "It's over, son. He's dead," he heard, and placed the voice as Arthur Weasley's. Harry fell into the arms of the man who was like a father to him and began to sob as the emotion continued to fight for a way out. He couldn't fight Voldemort any longer, and he wasn't going to strike this man, so he simply cried, something he hadn't let himself do since these people had died the first time around.

He eventually came back to himself and looked around at the place. "I'd imagine that Draco and his mother will have some problems cleaning this place up," he said sadly. The tables were once again empty, and he could see craters around the room from spell damage.

"So who died?" he asked in a numb tone.

"Well, Bellatrix and Lucius are the most obvious ones, not to mention the remains of Voldemort,

who you literally beat to death, Harry,” Arthur said. “We've healed your hands, mind you.”

“No, I mean from our side. I see that you've released the ones that Riddle didn't get around to killing,” Harry replied, trying very hard not to let himself cry again. “Which ones did I fail again?”

Percy walked up and clapped him on the shoulder. “You'll be happy to know, Harry, that of the fifteen people on those tables, every single one of them survived the experience. “They're in St Mungo's right now being treated for the potions that had been poured down their throats to prepare them for this ritual that you prevented from happening.”

Harry simply couldn't parse the statement. “But I heard Riddle casting the Killing Curse! He did it five times!”

Arthur turned him around and pointed at the wall near the tables. “One, two, three, four and five,” he said simply, pointing to spots where chunks of wall were missing. “He fired at the walls, hoping you wouldn't realise what he was doing. He apparently had no intention of wasting any of the life force on those tables.”

“Ron? Ginny? Hermione? Daphne? Cedric? They're *all* alive?” he asked, hope filling his chest for the first time since the battle began.

“You succeeded beyond any of our dreams, Harry,” Shacklebolt interjected. “We expected to lose some of us on this trip, but we didn't. Every single one of us escaped alive, although Auror Tonks broke her arm tripping over the body of Vincent Crabbe Senior.”

Harry couldn't help but snicker. “That's Tonks for you,” he said. “Can we go to St Mungo's, please? I need to see them.”

He waited impatiently for the Healers to say that he could visit them. Tonks joined him soon after he arrived, since it had been a very simply break. “So now you sit here nervously waiting to see them, huh?” she asked.

“They tell me that they're all alive, but ... I just ... I came back in time to keep them from dying, y'know? I need to *see* that I was successful. I need to know beyond any shadow of any doubt that it was worth it. Even if decide that what I did to Riddle was so disgusting that they want nothing to do with me ever again, as long as they're alive, it will be worth it.”

A pair of arms came around his waist and someone nibbled on his ear. “I don't think that's a real worry, Harry,” Daphne said softly.

“Habwah?” he asked as he turned, trying to get the blood flow back toward his brain after that greeting. He quickly grabbed her tightly and held her for a long moment. “I thought you were dead,” was all he could say.

“Well, I'm not,” she said. “None of us are. I expect that you'll see the rest of us out here shortly. The worst any of us has is some lingering dizziness.”

“Amazing how all four of the ones who have lingering dizziness are female,” Cedric said as he joined them, “and all are romantically linked to you.”

“Is mark of intelligence,” Viktor said. “Girls wish to have future husband know dey are still living and still love him.”

“Why Viktor,” Luna said, “that was remarkably profound. I'm proud of you.”

“I am just dumb sports player. I borrow girlfriend's brain for intelligence.” He grinned widely, showing almost every tooth he had.

Hermione stepped into the room next and into a deep hug from Harry. “Harry? Breathing ... is ... good ...” she finally gasped.

“Oh Gods, I'm so sorry,” he said, “I didn't mean to -”

“It's okay. I heard what happened, and what you thought. How did you find us?”

“It was two-fold. Apparently Snape really was one of the good guys. Also, there was this.” He reached into his pocket and pulled out the Ravenclaw stone and undid the chain. “I concentrated on you guys, and found you. I recognised it as Malfoy Manor. Now to give this stone its proper home once more.” He clasped the chain around her next and let her slide the stone beneath her shirt. “I love you, you do know that?”

“Yes I do,” she said. “I understand that Riddle isn't a problem anymore? A certain man beat him to death?”

“I'm not happy about that,” he said. “I let my emotions get the best of me.”

“Perhaps,” the Headmaster said as he entered the room, “but it was also interesting seeing the look on young Malfoy's face when he was told that you had killed Voldemort with your bare hands. Do not be surprised if he decides that being friendly with you is in his best interests.”

“If only to keep from a similar scenario,” Daphne quipped.

“Again,” Harry murmured. At her bright smile of surprise, he said, “Yeah, he bragged about you guys being missing – made it kinda obvious that he was the cause. So I broke his face. Literally. Made myself *persona non grata* with Madam Pomfrey.”

“She feels quite badly about her outburst,” Dumbledore said.

“I'd imagine. Like most of the wizarding world, she made her decision about my actions with too little information about what led to them. I'll end up forgiving her, but not immediately. Perhaps she'll think twice next time.” He shook his head. “Are we all out of the woods now?” he asked,

looking around.

At the affirmative, Dumbledore took a length of sash and held it out for everyone to grasp. A moment later, they all stood in Hogsmeade. Tonks laughed. “Hey Harry, what was that bit about talking to Hermione and Daphne about?”

“Are you asking her to join?” Daphne asked with an amused look. “Setting our sights high, aren't we?”

“Join what?” Tonks asked.

“You must have said something that led him to think you wanted to join our little harem,” Hermione said with a laugh.

“Harem?” Tonks asked, her eyebrows rising skyward.

“I think she'd do better with a certain Defence teacher myself,” Harry said quickly. “Besides, I've got two already with a possible two extra joining at some point. One is a blessing, two is riches beyond compare, and four would be greedy.” He looked to Fleur and Ginny. “Greed has its good points, though,” he said with a grin. “But five? Nice to think about, but one is too many, really, for the smart man.”

He looked again at the women in his life. “And if it means I have them in my life, then I choose not to be smart.” He thought for a second. “That has to be one of the lamest attempts at a compliment that I have ever delivered,” he finished, drawing a laugh from everyone.

Epilogue:

With Voldemort well and truly dead, life went on in a much more peaceful manner. The wizarding world decided that Harry was to be lauded for the destruction of the Dark Lord You Know Who and gave him an Order of Merlin, First Class, with Starburst Cluster for Heroism. “Starburst for Heroic Stupidity is more like it,” he was heard to say quite often.

Cedric Diggory went on to a successful career in Quidditch as a Seeker for the Tornados, with no louder fan at his games than the woman who became his wife, Cho Chang, who went on to her own career in Quidditch as Seeker for the Harpies. The games that the two played against each other during the season were often the most heavily watched games in the league, because their competition was nothing less than aerial seduction, no matter who caught the Snitch. Their children, Harry and Amos, born nine months after her last game for the Harpies, did seem to back up this thought. Other children followed.

After ending her career as a Seeker, Cho went on to become a spell researcher, and was eventually the co-developer of a cure for lycanthropy, which made her fabulously wealthy, along with her fellow researchers. Between that and a modelling career – Cho was aware that she was beautiful and figured that she could use it while it lasted – the Diggory family was never worried about

money.

Luna Lovegood left school and eventually took over the running of The Quibbler from her father, who she hired on as a permanent consultant, an expert on the unusual beasts that continued to grace the pages of the magazine. People were often rather surprised when they would publish proof of the existence of several of them – such as the time that they found the Crumpled-Horned Snorkack living in Russia, on the Scandanavian border. She followed the Weasley creed, apparently, and gave Viktor enough children to field their own Quidditch team.

Viktor remained in Quidditch for several more years, becoming rather wealthy on his own purely from the sport. His wife's flights of fancy helped him afterwards as well, and he joined her and Cho Chang as part of the team that cured lycanthropy. He became most famous, however, for becoming an owner of the broom company that finally knocked the Firebolt from the top spot.

Fred and George Weasley found themselves funded by the end of their final year by Harry, who asked only that they enjoy themselves. They responded by making him one third owner of the business, which rapidly grew to the point that they put Gambol and Japes in jeopardy. Zonko's saw the handwriting on the wall and sold out to the twins, who became some of the most successful business people ever to leave Hogwarts in more than a century.

Padma and Parvati Patil didn't keep that last name for very long after they had finished with their Hogwarts educations. In fact, the Patil name lasted exactly one month and three days from their exit, when they exchanged it for one far more well known in the wizarding world by now – Weasley. They quickly took the Weasley Wizard Wheeze name from merely famous to astoundingly famous. They both had an eye for design, so while Fred and George tried to make the wheezes work, Padma and Parvati would make them look good afterwards. The mischievous streak they both had didn't hurt business either, nor did their ability to look good doing just about anything. Most of the sales to the young Hogwarts crowd could be placed quite honestly on the fact that they were the two best looking shop clerks in Diagon Alley.

Susan Bones and Ron Weasley married almost immediately out of Hogwarts, beating even the twins. Nine months to the day, Susan proved that there was magic in the Weasley genes as she gave birth to the first of what was to become the other family large enough to field their own Quidditch team. (Later years would actually have Weasley-Diggory Quidditch matches, once the children were old enough.) To everyone's surprise, it wasn't Susan who settled down, but Ron. He spent a short (but surprisingly lucrative) career as Keeper for the Chudley Cannons before settling down as a house husband, while his wife went on to be the true bread-winner of the family. She created the first real competition that Madame Malkin's ever had, which was quite successful since it was geared toward the younger crowd of witches and wizards.

Draco Malfoy, simply put, ended up in Azkaban for fifteen years – one year for each person kidnapped in Hogsmeade that fateful day. His role as a hero was quite quickly ignored, simply because no one could believe it, especially with him being the only one saying it. His attempts to make nice with Harry were seen as exactly what they were – simpering attempts to ride the coat-tails of a more famous person.

Severus Snape finally received the recognition that he felt that he deserved when he received the Order of Merlin, First Class for his efforts in the war against Voldemort. He calmed considerably and was even able to speak pleasantly to Harry when they ran into each other on the streets, occasionally even giving him a real smile. They would never be the best of friends, however, and both were happier that way.

Hannah Abbott married Neville Longbottom and the two of them went on to become masters of their fields; her in Potions and him in the field of Herbology. Several old Hogwarts students quietly laughed – although never in public – when Hannah's name eclipsed Severus Snape's as a Potion Master.

Nymphadora Tonks went on to marry Remus Lupin, even before he was cured of his lycanthropy. In the years that followed, she climbed the ranks of the Aurors, eventually becoming head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement after Kingsley Shacklebolt retired from the job. She bore two children for Remus – a son and a daughter. They were, of course, named James and Lily.

With the death of Voldemort, the curse on the Defence position died. Sirius and Remus continued to switch teaching positions every year though, since they said that it helped keep their teaching fresh and engaging. The fact that History of Magic soon became one of the student body's favourite classes tended to back up this feeling.

The remaining five ladies - Su Li, Ginny Weasley, Fleur Delacour, Hermione Granger and Daphne Greengrass – all gravitated toward Harry. He'd not ever really got to know Su Li in this time line, and not well enough in the previous one either, so he corrected that – and had been stunned to discover that she was as wonderful a woman as Hermione and Daphne. He'd never admitted it to anyone, but it became rather obvious to everyone – he was attracted to brilliant women. “I'm a dunce about relationships and the like,” Ron told him once, “and *I* can see the kind of woman you're attracted to. I'm just glad that you don't appeal to all the ladies, or else there'd be no one for the rest of us blokes!” This had led to the standard male wrestling match that ended when they were both laughing too hard to do anything more than lay on the floor and gasp for breath.

The ladies banded together and formed a research company. The problem with the Ministry and the Unspeakables was that it was a bureaucracy, which mean that innovation was usually accidental, and often quashed immediately. With Su, Daphne, Hermione, Ginny, Fleur, Viktor, Luna and Cho working together, the wizarding world quickly found themselves in the midst of a revolution. Cell phones quickly made an appearance in the wizarding scene, followed by any number of other electronic devices. The lycanthropy cure came about simply because someone commented on the fact of it being a curse and Harry asked somewhat naively, “Don't all curses have counter-curses?”

His next child was born due to the celebration from his putting them on a new track to study.

As for Harry? He settled down with the five most important women in his life, once they had convinced him that they all wanted him and were willing to share. There were tight moments, and moments for tears, and moments for joy. As should be in everyone's life, the moments of joy outweighed the moments for tears, although the two were known to blend, such as when a child

was born. He left the spell creation and world rebuilding to his family and friends, while he settled down and became a broom manufacturer and designer, working with Viktor to revolutionise that field.

A safe (and quite true) ending for this tale would be: *And they all lived happily ever after.*