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Книги

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Гарри Поттер

Гарри Поттер и месть дракона

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Продолжение «Тайного друга Гарри» вернули, потому что люди хотели его вернуть.

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1. Chapter 1

A/N: Of course I couldn't re-post Harry's Secret Friend without re-posting the sequel. I truly believe I've grown as a writer since these two, but I can stand to get better.

MINISTER OF MAGIC STEPS DOWN

This morning, Cornelius Fudge announced his resignation as Minister of Magic, effective immediately. This comes as little surprise, as the British wizarding public has been crying out for Fudge's impeachment. This came as the result of the Ministry's denials that He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named has indeed returned. It was hard to deny the fact when the Dark Lord was seen

torturing Harry Potter in the Ministry of Magic this past month.

It has also been widely rumored the Cornelius Fudge's regime was corrupt, taking bribes in order to get policies and laws passed, though no evidence has been offered up, this past year has certainly shown that Fudge was power crazed. Even going so far as forcing ridiculous educational decrees to pass at Hogwarts, and forbidding students to learn magic in some cases.

An emergency election will be held later this month to put in a New Minister of Magic, during this time, Amelia Bones, Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement has been named interim Minister. (For more on Amelia Bones' career, turn to pg. 9)

SENIOR UNDERSECRETARY DOLORES UMBRIDGE'S TRIAL BEGINS

NEXT WEEK

The Wizengamot is at last set to begin the trial against Dolores Jane Umbridge, Senior Undersecretary to the Minister of Magic, and former High Inquisitor at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Madam Umbridge has been accused of illegal use of a Blood Quill, an illegal dark artifact, and the use of the Cruciatus curse on none other than Harry Potter.

Umbridge is also being charged with illegal administration of Veritaserum on students. These charges came to light at the end of this past school year when parents of students, who had been punished by Umbridge for false accusations of rule breaking, had discovered the means of punishment.

Umbridge was named as Defense Against the Dark Arts Teacher by the Ministry of Magic last August, and High Inquisitor of the school in October. It was her duty to inspect and weed out teachers believed to be incapable of proper teaching methods. It was later revealed this was no more than a charade by Cornelius Fudge to weed out people he feared would overthrow his rule.

"Umbridge was absolutely horrid. It was like she had a personal vendetta

against Harry Potter." Said Pomona Sprout, Herbology teacher at Hogwarts.

The professor went on to describe how Umbridge had gone so far as to confiscate brooms, inspect private mail, and take away points for trivial reasons.

Among those testifying against the former Professor will be several teachers from Hogwarts, and Harry Potter, who is believed to have suffered the most at the hands of the Undersecretary.

LUCIUS MALFOY SENTENCED TO LIFE IN AZKABAN

Lucius Malfoy, well known philanthropist, was sentenced yesterday for his role in the attack on the Department of Mysteries this past month. It has been discovered throughout the trial that Malfoy has been a supporter of You-Know-Who and had been able to avoid prison at the end of the last war by paying off officials. It was also discovered through questioning under truth serum that Malfoy has been using his golden influence to get policies introduced that would benefit himself and other pureblood families.

It has been speculated that Malfoy's endeavors had all been preparation for the return of the Dark Lord. Many in the Ministry deny these rumors, of course, but it is well known that Malfoy has been very friendly with Former Minister of Magic, Cornelius Fudge. Amelia Bones, acting Minister of Magic, has began a thorough investigation to weed out any who may have taken gold from Malfoy in exchange for secrets or favors.

As a result of Malfoy's prison sentence, all the family's assets were seized by the Ministry, and vaults in Gringott's were closed. Many dark artifacts, banned items, and other questionable contraband was discovered with in Malfoy manor. Malfoy's wife, Narcissa, has been unavailable for comment.

Draco Malfoy sat in the darkest corner of his room, the latest edition of the Daily Prophet in a shredded pile near his feet. He and his mother had left England soon after his father's trial began. Narcissa had known that

they would lose everything and had tried to empty the family vaults of gold before the Ministry could seize it, but she had been too late.

So here he was, the son of one of the richest, most influential families in the wizarding world, in a dank, broken down shack in France. He wanted to be back in his home, with his servants and his bed, and his things. But now he was destitute, all because his father had been arrested doing the noble work of the most powerful wizard ever known.

"He was weak." Draco said to himself. The thought of his father rotting away in prison gave him a little smile. Draco had been feeling superior to his father for a while now. He felt his father had nothing more to offer in way of lessons. He'd seen how the world worked. Gold was power, and his family had loads of it. But Draco himself liked the power fear gave. He'd begun feeling it this past year when he'd tightened his control in Slytherin House. Those who chose to go against him had felt his power. He'd tortured younger students who chose to forsake their housemates and associate with lesser beings. He'd obliviate them afterwards, so they would not remember the torture, but would know pain when they awoke. It was only a small taste of power, but it was enough. He had truly enjoyed how his housemates began to cower together and look to him for protection, unaware that he'd been the cause of their pain. Draco felt such pleasure when he thought of the things he'd done. He also had to thank Umbridge, without whom he never would have discovered the Room of Requirement. It had become the perfect hiding spot in which to commit his vicious assaults.

But none of this eased his mind now. Draco stared into the night through the window, his pale gray eyes searching the vast, empty field. He felt a rage unlike any he'd ever known. His misery over the loss of his home and money were dwarfed by his anger at the sole reason for it all. Harry

Potter.

Draco had spent the better part of his holiday so far imagining ways in which to make the Gryffindor Golden Boy suffer. Dreams in which Potter was crawling, begging for Draco to release him from the pain, but Draco would never show mercy. Never would he cease his ministrations of suffering on the boy who had insulted and shamed him for so long. This year, Draco thought, Harry Potter would know what it meant to cross a Malfoy.

A knock at his door brought him back to reality. His mother, a magnificent specimen of womanhood, entered the dreary room. She was very beautiful, with a petite frame, and dark, haughty eyes. Her luminous blonde hair was only now showing the tiniest bit of gray. She carried herself proudly, and commanded attention when she entered a room. But she always seemed sad to Draco. He could never remember a moment in which she had ever smiled, truly smiled.

"He is asking for you." She said softly. Her voice was trembling, frightened. Draco never understood why. It should have been awestruck, or at least respectful, but then again, his mother, as radiant as she was, was as weak as Draco's father had been.

Draco stood, smoothing the front of his cloak. He followed his mother out and down a set of stairs to an open room, lit by a dying fire. There was a single chair, in which a cloaked figure sat. Draco approached and knelt reverently in front of the figure.

"Young Draco," A high cold voice spoke. "You have grown into a fine man, and I sense a great deal of power in you. Yes, kept hidden from your enemies. A wise choice. But now you wish to reveal your true potential to avenge yourself, am I correct?"

Draco nodded, never taking his eyes from the hood of the speaker. He felt

no fear, or trepidation, as his father had said he would. All Draco felt was rage and the burning desire to hurt those who had wronged him.

"You desire to hurt, to cause suffering unimaginable to your foes. I can see you have had a taste of it this year. Yes, you liked it, didn't you? You shall have more, young Malfoy. This I promise" The shrouded figure cackled. "You shall be my disciple. My harbinger of death. Are you willing, young Malfoy, to become my instrument?"

"Yes." Draco snarled evilly. Neither the shrouded figure or Draco heard Narcissa cover her gasp. She stood in the shadows, watching, listening to the Dark Lord entice her son into a life that she knew he wasn't ready for.

"Present me with your right arm." the cloaked figure whispered.

"Forgive me, my Lord, but do you not mark your followers on their left?"

Draco asked, tilting his head slightly.

"My followers, yes." the figure said, reaching a thin hand from within the dark robes. The hand was pale, ghostlike, except the patches of scorched red flesh.

"But my weapons, my most trusted disciples, are hidden from the rest, in case they need to be used to make an example of someone in my circle.

Just as you have kept your true potential hidden from your enemies, so I keep my most valued weapons secret from mine. You shall be unknown to my followers, and my enemies. You, Draco, shall be my most secret of weapons. My most lethal of instruments. Your mark shall only be revealed in my presence. Now, present your right arm."

Draco smiled at the shrouded figure, and rolled up his right sleeve. The dark figure touched the skin on Draco's arm with a long, bone like finger.

Draco heard nothing, but felt something wet slipping over his arm. He watched in the dim firelight, and saw nothing, but could smell flesh

burning. He grimaced as his skin itched and seared with pain, and then it

was over. On his arm was the Dark Mark, the sign of service to Lord Voldemort.

"I shall speak to you when I desire your services. You shall take orders from none but myself. If anyone comes to you with orders from me, you shall not heed them." The figure stood.

"Bow, Draco. Bow before your new lord."

Draco bent low, unable to keep the satisfied smile from his face.

"I shall have work for you soon. Until then, you will remain here, with your mother. You will return to Hogwarts, as normal. It is there that you shall begin your true purpose." The figure vanished in a haze of smoke.

Draco looked at his newly marked arm, chuckling low as the mark faded completely from sight.

"What have you done?" Narcissa asked, coming from the shadows. "Are you so like your father that you follow his example so blindly?"

"You know nothing of my desires, mother. We have been embarrassed and shamed, and those who have wronged us will pay. Father was weak, afraid. You heard our master, I am to be his greatest weapon."

"You will die. You are not ready for this, and I don't think you truly understand what it means to serve. You are meant to die to teach your father a lesson. You are nothing more than fodder."

"Have you so little faith in me?" Draco finally turned to his mother.

"At this moment... Yes." Narcissa frowned. "I see your father's vanity and his idiocy in you. You will fail, Draco. You will fail and you will die."

"You will see, as will Potter. I am more powerful and dangerous than anyone can imagine. Good night, mother." Draco said quickly, returning to his room, leaving Narcissa to stare sadly into the fire. Narcissa watched her only child pass her and go back to his room. She had to believe that her son could be saved, but to whom did she go to? Someone

Draco trusted, looked up to. The answer came in a flash. Quickly, Narcissa wrote a letter and beckoned to the family owl. She sent the bird on its way, watching it fly away, praying that she could still undo this mess.

The loud crack of a wizard Apparating was swallowed up by the raging, howling winds. Severus Snape looked about him in curious wonder. He had known where he was going, but seeing it now made him feel apprehensive. Staring down the sheer cliff face into the churning, crashing waves below. He could smell the salt in the air, and feel the finest of mists on his face.

Snape looked about for the reason he'd journeyed so far from his home. He was a vile, self loathing person who preferred to be left in solitude with only the soft bubbling of brewing potions to keep him company. In all his existence, Snape had only ever had one friend, and he was the reason she had died. She had been the only good thing in his entire miserable life that made him feel he was worth something, and he, Severus Snape, had as good as destroyed that.

Snape shook off his dark thoughts. He hefted the bag he had brought with him, and once again began looking for the source of his journey. He held his wand aloft, lighting the tip to search for the trail he'd been told to take.

Once he'd found the tiny, almost invisible path, he followed it down the face of the cliff, treading carefully, as he was sure one misstep could land him in the turbulent waters below, and he wasn't fond of the idea of being crushed upon the jagged rocks.

At last, Snape came to the mouth of a deep, dark cave in the face of the cliff. He chanced another look at the note he'd been sent and went inside. The cave was unremarkable, as caves went. Snape picked his way

carefully over the slippery floor, using his wand to light the safest path, until finally he reached a wide hole in the ground. Snape could see black water below him, reflecting his wand light off its eerily calm surface.

Once again Snape looked at his note. He raised his wand higher and found the roughly cut steps on the opposite side of the hole. He proceeded down again, thinking again that he would destroy the one responsible if this turned out to be some sort of prank.

When he reached the bottom of the steps, he found himself on a little inlet, facing a dark tunnel, flooded with icy water. He peered into the darkness, frowning at what he had to do next, and searching for any signs that he had been duped. But then he saw the faintest glow at the other end of the tunnel. Another wand was lit, and waving him towards it.

Snape heaved a weary sigh and jumped into the frigid water. It was a long, arduous swim, the icy water making his muscles nearly unresponsive. He clawed and kicked himself forward, his breath becoming shallower with each movement as the water threatened to freeze him solid.

And then, finally, his feet touched the bottom, and the water began to shallow out. Snape stepped out of the freezing water and fell upon the rocky surface of the tunnel. He was trying to suck in enough breath to cast a Warming charm, when someone else did it for him. Snape looked up and glared at the twinkling blue eyes of Albus Dumbledore.

"You made very good time, my friend." The Headmaster smiled.

"Your instructions were quite explicit, even if your explanation was less detailed." Snape frowned.

"I did not want the reasons for this expedition to be discovered."

Dumbledore said, turning back to the wall he'd been examining.

"What is this about?" Snape demanded standing up and watching the

wizard.

"You remember our conversation of a month ago?"

"Yes, I recall, but I don't see how..." Snape stopped suddenly and his eyes grew wide. "You found one?"

"Yes. Shortly after that conversation. In an old shack outside Little Hangelton. I believe that a second one lies behind this wall. Unless I am mistaken, I shall need your help in retrieving it."

"What do you need from me?"

"At this moment, nothing. Interesting."

"What is it?"

"This entrance requires an offering...of blood. Very crude"

"The Dark Lord was never one for niceties in his spell work." Snape cracked. Dumbledore turned to stare at the Potions master over his glasses.

"I do believe that is the first attempt at humor I've ever heard from you. Not bad for your first try." Dumbledore chuckled lightly. Snape merely frowned.

Dumbledore took a small silver knife and slipped the blade across his palm, and spattered blood onto the wall, which crumbled into fine dust, allowing the two men to pass into the chamber within. Once inside, the dust reformed into a solid wall of rock.

They were inside a tremendous cavern, with a large lake. In the center of the lake sat a tiny island, with a silver pedestal, glowing brightly.

"I think that there shall be something preventing us from going together." Dumbledore said, pointing to a rickety looking boat, chained to a boulder near them.

"Indeed." Snape said, sniffing at the air around him. There was an odor of something foul. "There will be anti-Apparation wards, as well."

"Yes. I shall ask you to take the craft, I will use other means."

Dumbledore smiled, and vanished. Snape looked to the island, where the Headmaster waved. Snape's lip curled wryly.

"I hope one day to have half his damn talent." Snape sneered as he entered the boat. It began moving of its own volition, and Snape held his lit wand high about him. As the little boat began its journey, Snape peered into the inky water, and saw something that made his stomach turn. Ghostly white bodies floated in and out of view under the dark water.

"Inferi." He said coldly. When the boat reached the little island, Snape stepped out and joined the Headmaster, who was peering into the silver basin set atop the gleaming pedestal. It was filled with a translucent blue liquid, which covered an old-looking locket.

"Is that it?" Snape asked oddly distressed.

"I do believe it is. I have tried to get rid of the liquid, but it refuses to go away. It is my opinion that it must be drunk."

"I take it you plan on consuming it, then?" Snape said.

"I do indeed. I would ask that you make sure that no matter what, I finish it all."

"No." Snape said quickly.

"Pardon?"

"No. I will not allow you to drink that. I will do it."

"Severus, now is not the time for debates. I will..."

"No, you won't." Snape snapped. "Have you told Potter everything yet?"

Does he even know you're here now? What about his training? You have much you still need to accomplish, Albus. If this kills you, what is to become of your responsibilities?"

"Severus, I appreciate your concerns but I do not believe that this potion

is meant to kill, but more to incapacitate. It is why you are here."

"No." Snape said crossing his arms. "I will be the one to drink it, or no one shall. As you said, you need me. Who else can you trust on this?"

"There are others." Dumbledore began.

"Who, Albus? Would you ask Potter to force you to drink this, potentially killing you? Could you ask that of the boy? No, you ask me. Why?

Because I have given death to others? Because I am already tainted by my deeds? I will not give in to this, Dumbledore. I will take the potion."

Dumbledore shook his head sadly. "Severus, I can not ask you to do this."

"You're not asking me. I'm telling you, I shall drink it, and then you will get me out of here. This is how it's to be."

"Very well." Dumbledore conceded. His eyes dimmed a bit as he watched the Potions master step closer to the basin, conjuring a large stone goblet.

Snape dipped the goblet in, filling it as much as he could and looked to Dumbledore, who could only watch in anticipation.

Severus raised the goblet to his lips, and took the first sip, feeling the seemingly water like fluid flow down his throat thickly. He tilted the goblet farther, swallowing every last drop. He waited for a moment, waiting for the poison to kill him, but nothing happened. Severus looked at Dumbledore, and then his vision went black.

Severus saw things he'd locked away in the deepest recesses of his mind.

Things that haunted his worst nightmares, and scared his very soul.

Things he had done. Atrocities he had committed. Every vile, despicable deed he had ever carried out came to the forefront of his mind, and was amplified. The agony the memories caused was unbearable. The faces of those he'd killed in his service to Voldemort. The lives he'd destroyed.

And her face. Her beautiful face always watching, always judging, always choosing another to receive her love.

For the first time in his life, Severus Snape begged for death.

2. Chapter 2

Ron Weasley had been having a very bad summer. He had not heard from any of his friends, not that this surprised him. Ron had alienated them during the past several months, and even worse, he had accused his best friend of attempted murder. All because he had been jealous. Jealous that other people were taking Harry's time, and he felt he was losing his best friend.

He had been short sighted, narrow minded, and just plain stubborn. Yet at the time they needed him the most, Ron had stepped up and gone to the Department of Mysteries, and nearly lost his life, jumping in front of a spell meant for Hermione. That hadn't changed a thing in Ron's head, he was still the world's biggest prat.

Ron absent mindedly rubbed his chest. Under his thin t-shirt, was a long purple scar that would forever be a memento of that day. Even after a month of potions, painkillers and rest, the scar still ached sometimes. Ron actually welcomed the twinge, it allowed him to remember what he had nearly lost and what he was willing to give for those he'd shunned. He had been willing to make the ultimate sacrifice for his friends. They had forgiven him, but he hadn't forgiven himself.

He had spent his summer in self-imposed solitude, broken only by the company of his family, and the strangest girl he'd ever known, Luna Lovegood. The peculiar young blonde had visited every few days and spent time just chatting with Ron. She had the oddest outlook on life, and talked about things Ron had never heard of, yet she was very convincing in her explanations of such creatures. She was extremely weird, but Ron hadn't really minded her company at all.

Luna never pushed, never tried to make him talk about his feelings. She

was just pleasant company. At the moment, Luna was here at the Burrow, visiting with Ginny. This suited Ron fine, as he wanted to be alone.

Ron was in another one of his self loathing moods. His depression had been consuming him all summer. He wanted to write to Harry and Hermione, to see them, and explain himself. He wanted for things to go back to the way they were, but Harry had shown him during the year that the one constant in life was that it's always changing. And Ron, who had been so set in his beliefs, was learning that if he didn't open his mind and allow himself to experience life, he would end up like the Professor Snape, alone and hated.

"Hello, Ronald." Came the sweet, almost ethereal voice of Luna Lovegood. Ron looked up to the pretty blonde girl. She was dressed simply in a tank top and shorts, her hair in a loose ponytail. She stood with her hands clasped behind her back, a faint smile on her pretty face.

"Hey, Luna."

"It's a lovely day. Would you care to take a walk with me?" She asked politely.

"Uh...I guess." Ron shrugged, standing up. Luna waited for him to rise and show his readiness. They walked together in relative silence towards the pond near the Burrow. Ron kept his eyes on the ground, hands shoved deep into his pockets. He starting thinking to the summer two years ago when Harry and Hermione and himself all went swimming in the pond. It had been so fun and carefree.

"I have been talking with Ginny, and she thinks that I need to have a talk with you." Luna said when they reached the edge of the pond. Luna turned to face him fully, and Ron looked up into her protuberant blue eyes.

"What about?" He said slowly.

"Us." Luna said simply. "Your sister told me that unless I just come right out and say it, you'll never notice me. She says your very thick. I disagree. I think you're of nice proportions."

Ron's expression changed to one of utter surprise. He watched Luna, unsure of what to say. He waited in trepidation for the young woman to continue, swallowing thickly.

"You see, I've been trying to get your attentions for a little while, but I seem to lack the experience in which to turn your head. I have these strange feelings when you're around. At first I thought I was infected by Wrackspurts, but now I think it's something different. I asked Ginny about it, and she said that I fancy you. I believe her. I believe I fancy you, Ronald"

Ron felt like someone had punched him the gut. He could only stare at the girl for a long time, before his brain began screaming at him to say something. That's when the pretty young blonde stepped forward, closing the gap between them and kissed Ron fully. Ron's mind shut down. Her lips were soft, gently moving against his own lips. After a few seconds, Ron pushed the Luna away gently.

"Uh, Luna, I...Look It's not that...I mean you're very...I'm just....Oh, hell." Ron sighed, running his hands through his hair.

"I think I know what you're trying to say." Luna smiled again, brushing some errant strands of hair behind her ear, her face a little pink. Ron had never known this girl to be embarrassed about anything. He suddenly felt he knew what it was taking to speak to him about her feelings, and to kiss him.

Ron sat down on a near by boulder, letting out a deep sigh. "I'm sorry, Luna. Right now, I just can't do this. I don't want to hurt your feelings. You're really nice, and I think you're very pretty, but I'm no good to

anyone. At least not right now."

"Is this about your mistakes this year? About betraying Harry?" The curious blonde asked, sitting close to Ron on the small boulder.

"Everyone is entitled to make mistakes. You're no different. Have you learned from them?"

"I think so." The redheaded boy shrugged. "But it doesn't change anything. You're a nice person, and I've really not minded you around this summer. I feel like I know you a bit better and that you're not as bizarre as you want people to believe. You've been fun to have around. But the truth is, I just don't think I'm the guy for you."

"Ronald, your self-imposed isolation isn't fixing your problems. You're not learning from your mistakes if you isolate yourself and don't try to move forward."

"I know, but I don't have a clue about how to fix things."

"You've already taken steps. The trick is not to fall back into your old habits. It's one thing to decide to change, it's another to follow through. Well, I should go. I'll see you soon." Luna smiled dreamily at Ron, and kissed him on the cheek. "We'll talk about us another time, when you're less depressed."

Ron watched her go, thinking hard about what she had said. She was right, of course. He wanted to change, to be better. The problem was that he had no idea how to change, how to move on. And to add to it all, Luna had said that she fancied him. She had kissed him. Ron touched his lips, still tasting Luna's lips. The faintest touch of peppermint.

"As if I didn't have enough on my mind, now I've got her in there as well."

Ron sighed.

Albus Dumbledore was tired. More tired than he'd ever been in his very long life. He had watched a man, one of the most hated men he'd ever

know do the most noble of acts last night. Severus Snape had been willing to sacrifice himself in the quest to destroy the Dark lord. Fortunately, Snape hadn't been too seriously hurt, but the damage to the man's psyche was still undetermined.

Dumbledore could only imagine what that retched poison he'd drunk in the cave made him seem. For the hardened professor to be begging for death like that. And he, Dumbledore had to keep forcing that horrid concoction down Snape's throat. It had broken the old man's heart.

When it was done, Dumbledore levitated Snape out of that cave, and brought him back to the hospital wing here at Hogwarts. He had been in the capable hands of Madam Pomfrey all night and was improving.

Dumbledore had stayed by his side for most of the night, watching for any signs of change. Snape had been crying in his sleep, and Dumbledore knew he was still experiencing his visions.

Dumbledore wanted to know what it was that Snape was seeing. What could be so horrible that would make him whimper like a child begging for the release that death would grant.

Dumbledore rubbed his face and stared at the seemingly benign necklace on his desk. His familiar, Fawkes had been singing ever since he'd brought the locket into the office. The thing had been radiating dark energy in pulses.

He had two of them now, and he was positive that a third resided somewhere in this castle, but was unsure what it was and exactly where. There was a place he was nearly sure it might be, but he couldn't access it alone.

But he had two of them a ring he had found in the shack just outside of Little Hangleton. And now this locket. He planned to destroy them, but he wanted to have all of them. He would never put them together, and so

he had plans to hide them where only he would know, and when the time was right, and he had them all, he would destroy them all.

Dumbledore feared that destroying them now might let Voldemort know what was happening. Dumbledore had no idea if the Dark Lord knew of the destruction of the first artifact, and was afraid to chance letting him know of the others. He might move them, hide them again. Dumbledore didn't dare take that chance.

And worse yet was the matter of the boy. He was one. He was a horcrux. How would they destroy it without hurting the boy? Dumbledore had been researching non stop for a year. As soon as he had been sure what connected the child to the Dark Lord, he'd consulted books, mages, and every manner of expert he could find. And he had nothing.

In just a few days time, he would have to face the boy and his godfather and confess everything he knew. He had sworn to it. Dumbledore felt increasingly weary. This war would be his last, this he was sure. He had been setting his affairs in order, preparing for the worst, but hoping that he would at least see the end before he left this world.

Voldemort had been surprisingly inactive since his discovery.

Dumbledore was sure that the Dark Lord would begin a new reign of terror over the people, but Dumbledore's spies had informed him that something was wrong. Voldemort was weakened after possessing the boy, and he appeared to have suffered burns. Death Eaters had kidnapped a few Healers, but that had been the extent of their activity.

Dumbledore still smiled lightly when he thought of the hard lesson the boy had taught the arrogant wizard. Had it not been for the girl, Dumbledore was nearly sure the boy would have given up.

"A power he knows not." Dumbledore said to himself. Perhaps he had been right after all. The boy's heart would be his greatest weapon, and

his friends and loved ones would provide him the strength. Yet there was still the horcrux. How to destroy it?

Dumbledore lifted the locket, feeling powerful surges of hatred and rage coming from the wretched item." The ancient wizard conjured a box and placed the locket inside. It was time to hide this one and then he must visit Snape. They had much to discuss before meeting with the boy.

"Daphne, Your friend has arrived." Astoria Greengrass said to her sister.

Daphne jumped off her bed and raced down the stair to the entryway where Hermione Granger stood, looking a little uncertain.

"Hermione!" Daphne smiled, embracing her friend warmly. "I'm so glad you came. We're going to have so much fun."

"Thank you for having me." Hermione smiled back. "This is really a lovely house."

"It's the summer cottage. Dad's still terrified that Death Eaters are going to come looking for us, and no one knows where this is, except you, of course. How was your trip?"

"The knight bus was scary, but the walk here was quite pleasant. Not as far as I thought."

"Sorry about not meeting you, but..."

"Your father?" Hermione asked, already knowing the answer.

"Come on, He wants to meet you." Daphne said leading her Gryffindor friend into the study, where her father was looking over some business contracts.

"Dad? This is Hermione Granger." Daphne said proudly. "Hermione, My father Cyrus Greengrass."

"Ah!" Cyrus said standing from his desk, and offering his hand. "You are the Muggleborn who is also the most brilliant witch in a century? An extreme pleasure."

"I don't know about that sir." Hermione blushed, looking to Daphne, who was determinedly inspecting her bare feet.

"Nonsense." Cyrus waved away Hermione's discomfort. "The way I understand it is that you helped many students learn defense this year."

"Actually that was Harry, Sir." Hermione corrected. "Ah yes, the boy."

Cyrus nodded, something about his expression, and the way Daphne tried to cover her snickering made Hermione realize that her best friend had left an impression on the man.

"Well, I'll leave you to enjoy yourself. Please consider yourself at home here." Cyrus bowed, and went back to his work. Daphne took Hermione's arm and lead her up to the bedroom.

"Ok, What happened?" Hermione said when Daphne closed the bedroom door.

Daphne began laughing, her black hair falling into her face. She began smacking her bed, and Hermione sat down, waiting for Daphne to calm down.

"After we said goodbye to you Harry, Astoria, and I crossed the barrier. Harry was behind us. He was pushing a trolley with all our trunks and stuff., anyway, when we got through, my parents were waiting, and Dad began ranting about Harry not being with us again, and how disrespectful he was for dragging me along with him to the Ministry, but not there to meet my parents properly.

"Now I tried to tell him that Harry was right there, but He wouldn't let me speak, even Astoria tried, but Dad was on a roll. Now this is when it became funny." Daphne said, still laughing.

"Dad starts saying that Harry's probably to busy signing autographs to be bothered with meeting the parents of his girlfriend. That's when Harry said, and I quote, 'I've never signed an autograph in my life!' Dad got real

quiet, turned to look at Harry who just looked back.

"Harry didn't look angry, or anything, he just had this real polite smile, and held out his hand and introduced himself. Dad couldn't say anything, he kept moving his mouth like a fish. Mom took his hand and introduce herself and dad, apologizing for dad's idiocy. Harry shrugged it off like it was no big deal. I have never seen dad so embarrassed.

"Astoria loved it. She still brings it up just to put dad in a twist." Daphne finished. Hermione had her hands over her, tears streaming from her eyes.

"I don't believe it." She chuckled.

"Dad wants Harry to visit now. He feels he was robbed his chance to be the protective, overbearing father. I don't think he'll intimidate Harry the way he wanted to now no matter what he does. So tell me, how are things with you and Zach?"

"Over." Hermione sighed heavily. She had begun seeing Zacharias Smith shortly before the term had ended.

"What happened?" Daphne asked. She slipped forward on her bed to be supportive of her friend. Hermione just shrugged her shoulders and took in a breathe.

"We just both realized we weren't truly attracted to each other. We'll be good friends, but as a couple we just don't click. Maybe I'm meant to be alone."

"I refuse to believe that." Daphne said quickly. "Not everyone gets it right the first time."

"Ron, Anthony, and now Zach. Maybe I'm just going to be an old spinster."

"NO!" Daphne refused to let her new friend despair. "We'll find you the right guy."

"I'm too demanding on what I want. Even if Anthony hadn't turned out to be worm, it would have ended. I just expect too much from the boys I'm interested in."

"No one is perfect Hermione, even you."

"I know, but I want someone perfect for me."

"Hermione, you've dated two guys. Only two. I don't know what you expect to happen, but Love doesn't follow a schedule, or anything like that. It happens when it wants to, when it's supposed to."

Hermione sank in the cushy chair she was seated in. "I know. But I look at you and Harry, and Tracey and Neville, and I see how happy you are and I wish I could be that happy. I was happy with Anthony."

"You were content with Anthony." Daphne corrected. "I never said anything because I thought I was wrong. I never saw the two of you together long enough to really see, but you never gushed over him. We had to press you for everything. When you're truly in love, you can't stop talking about the boy. He's your whole world."

Hermione watched as Daphne got a far away look in her eyes. She sighed, wishing again she could feel what Daphne felt.

"Have you heard from him?" She asked the raven haired witch. Daphne nodded and jumped up from her bed. She went to her wardrobe and pulled a fine looking jacket from it.

"He sent this from Italy. He's been sending things all month."

"He sent me a really interesting book on Greek mythology and magical history. I've read it twice." Hermione beamed. "I bet you're excited for him to come home."

"I am." Daphne grinned, brushing her black hair out of her face. "I've missed him terribly. He's in for the snog of his life."

"Are you worried about the trial?"

"No, he'll be fine. That toad only has herself to blame. She all but guaranteed he'd speak the truth. I hope she send her away for life."

"I just hope it's over quickly. Harry shouldn't have this interrupting his summer."

"I can't wait to see his house. He seems really excited about it. Has he told you anything about it?" Daphne asked.

"Only that it used to be a lighthouse and that Remus had a lot of work done on it. I'm more excited to see what he has planned for us. He keeps talking about the amusement park."

"What is it like? The amusement park, I mean." Daphne asked. There was a hint of worry in her voice that made Hermione smile. Being from a pureblood family meant that Daphne would more than likely have had little contact with the muggle world. Hermione began explaining about amusement parks, getting a chuckle as she describe certain rides and the idea of some of the games.

The girls chatted into the evening until dinner was announced. Hermione met Aurora Greengrass, Daphne's mother and had a very pleasant and interesting conversation with Daphne's family. She learned a lot about the Greengrass family history, and their place in the Wizarding world. Hermione also learned why the Greengrass family was trying to remain neutral and how Daphne choosing to side with Harry had landed the family in a precarious situation.

"Understand, Hermione." Aurora said, "It's not that we support the Dark Lord or much of the anti Muggleborn propaganda. We believe that not matter your blood status a person should be judged on their talent and what they do in our society. Unfortunately, the wizarding world is run by very old pureblood families, who can see change on the horizon. They fear it, good or bad, they do not wish to lose their influence."

"Hasn't anyone tried explaining any of this to them?" Hermione wondered.

"Every few years it comes up." Cyrus shrugged. "Fear is one of the most powerful weapons one can use, and in this case it's the fear of the unknown. Think of it like this. Purebloods have governed our society for thousands of years. But there are now more Muggleborn and half bloods in existence than ever before. Times are changing and the Purebloods are desperate to keep the society that offers them more rights and privileges than the rest. It's how people like Umbridge gain power."

"So they rally around wizards like Voldemort." Hermione concluded.

"Exactly. He promises them a world where they rule over all 'lesser' beings and reign supreme. But then amazing people like you come along, proving that just because your blood is pure, doesn't mean you are superior. From what I understand, you've surpassed nearly everyone in knowledge and ability." Cyrus smiled.

Hermione blushed at the compliment. Cyrus went on.

"It's the same with your friend Potter. He is a half blood, and wields more raw power than many can imagine. If he learns how to properly use this power, he shall become a truly formidable wizard."

"So it's too bad he spends so much time signing autographs, right dad?"

Astoria said bluntly, and the table erupted in laughter, except Cyrus who eyed his youngest daughter sternly. He turned to his wife.

"I know you're encouraging this." he said. His wife looked quite innocent.

"Whatever do you mean?" She smiled.

The evening came to a close, and Daphne and Hermione retired.

Hermione was very pleased to be in her own room. The Greengrass summer home was surrounded by rolling hills of lush grasses. She stared out the window watching the moon, and thinking of the conversations

she'd had this evening. They had been truly enlightening. Hermione wondered how she might be able to affect change. The one thing she knew for sure was that nothing could change so long as Voldemort were allowed to exist. Hermione reaffirmed her vow to help Harry end his reign of terror.

Daphne also watched the moon, but her mind was not on politics or the Dark Lord. They were far away in some other country where a certain green eyed boy might be, gallivanting about with his godfather. Harry would be home in just a few days and she would be joining him at his house for a few weeks.

Harry had invited her and many of their other friends to spend time at his new house when he came home. Daphne hoped they would be able to spend time alone, as she wanted to have the messy haired boy to herself. Daphne wished that everything was normal, so she could just be a normal girl with a normal boyfriend. Harry was so much more. He was hunted by the most powerful and dangerous Dark Wizard, yet she had no idea why.

She had gone with Harry and learned that there was a prophecy regarding her boyfriend and the Dark Lord. She had not heard the contents, and Harry had never said if he heard what it was. Daphne knew the Dark Lord was intent on getting his ghostly white hands on the orb, and just when it seemed that it would happen, Daphne's best friend had disintegrated the troublesome little orb.

Harry had left almost as soon as term ended and been off all over Europe. He had written several letters, but in each he had reminded her not to send him a response, promising she would be the first he would see when he returned. She had enjoyed the letters, short as they often were. He always promised to tell her everything when he returned, hinting that he

had some exciting stories to share.

Daphne sighed and crawled into her bed. Harry was returning the day before his birthday, and he wanted to celebrate his and Neville Longbottom's birthday's together. Daphne didn't care. All she wanted was to be back in the arms of the boy who had stolen her heart, and made her truly feel complete.

"Just a few more days," she told herself. "He'll be home in a few more days."

"This is terrible." Nymphadora Tonks said to herself. She was hiding in the dark alley way across from Borgin and Burke's in Knockturn alley. There had been a tip that several high ranking Death Eaters would be coming to acquire some objects from the notoriously shady business. Kingsley Shacklebolt regarded the younger Auror momentarily. "And what would you do differently?" He asked in his rumbling baritone.

"We can't be sure the wards are going to work." she said in a hushed tone.

"We don't even know if the information is reliable."

"Tonks. Rufus believes the information. Quiet now, someone is coming."

Down the alley, several people approached, all in hooded robes. The one in the lead knocked at the door to the shop and waited. A short, greasy looking man came and opened the door. The five people entered the shop and Kingsley felt himself tense. He just needed to see one of their faces to move in.

Tonks was watching as well. She was cursing mentally as none of the figures had removed their robes, but they all seemed agitated. There was an argument going on. The greasy shop owner had raised his hands in surrender, while two of the bigger robed figures stalked forward. The greasy man was sweating, and shaking his head fiercely.

Suddenly, the two big robe figures stopped and backed away. The

smallest figure stepped forward. It happened so fast, Tonks wasn't sure what she had witnessed. The greasy Shop owner's eyes bugged out, and he began clutching at his face. He clawed and his mouth opened. A bluish flame shot from the man's throat, and his eyes burned away as more of the ghostly blue flame ate away the man's eyes.

"MOVE IN!" Kingsley shouted. In moments seven Aurors surrounded the shop and entered, firing stunning spells. The two biggest robed figures ducked behind the counter. Two of the others also sought cover, but the smallest robed figure, the one who had incinerated the poor smoldering body at his feet turned and began casting incredibly vicious spells.

Kingsley nearly caught a strange purple spell, but leapt out of the way in time. He fired several spells, which were absorbed by the figure's shield. The figure struck down the youngest Auror, a graduate named Weston. Kingsley dodge several spells from the other figures. As he tried to reach Weston's body.

Tonks had moved to the rear of the store as she'd been ordered. She nearly lost her life when the door opened and two of the robed figures burst through, firing spells. Her partner, Barnes took a stunner to the chest, leaving Tonks alone.

Tonks cast spell after spell keeping the two figures trapped in the store. Then one of them did something that made her heart jump for joy. He began transforming. His robe fluttered to the ground and a tiny glint of silver caught the moonlight. Tonks almost couldn't cast from her laughter. She hit the scurrying rat with a stunner, then wrapping it in magical rope. She would not let the little bastard get away.

"Tonks!" Fletcher called, racing around a corner, and stunning the second figure that Tonks had forgotten about.

"Thank you Fletcher." Tonks said picking up the stunned rat. She shoved

it into Fletcher's hands. "Get this rat back to headquarters and whatever you do, make sure it doesn't get away. This is the most important thing. This rat can not escape. Go!"

Fletcher, confused by his order, nodded and ran off. Tonks heard the crack of apparition and entered the store. She treaded silently, still hearing spells being cast. She hoped that she would surprise whoever was in the store, but she was the one who got surprised.

As she came from the storeroom, here heart nearly stopped working. Of the four Aurors that had stormed the front, only Kingsley remained, and he was being viciously tortured.

Tonks began to move when she felt her muscles tense and freeze up. She cursed herself. She was in a modified body bind. She could only watch helplessly as the person kept at his work.

The smallest robed figure was carving into the bigger man, who was locked in a body bind. Around him were the bodies, or parts of the bodies of the other Aurors. A voice was speaking. Tonks could tell it was magically modified, it had a strange resonance to it, muffled and scratchy.

"We've had enough of your interference." the figure said, cutting a long strip of flesh from Kingsley's exposed torso. The little figure was peeling it slowing, clearly enjoying the pain in the eyes of his victim. Several strips of torn flesh lay about the floor. The little figure wasn't even using a knife. He was simply running his fingers along the big man's skin, and the skin peeled away. There were long patches along Kingsley's body where the dark robed figure had ripped away skin, leaving bleeding muscle exposed.

"My lord wishes to send a message. Surrender now, and all hostilities will cease. Continue to defy him, and your suffering will be unimaginable. I

spare you tonight. You will carry the message to Dumbledore. Next we meet, I shall enjoy making you scream." The figure stood and turned to look at Tonks.

"He will die in a matter of hours, but his suffering will be intense. The healers will be unable to help him. You can watch him suffer, or kill him yourself. I leave you the choice. Good night."

The small figure left the store, followed by the two bigger figures, one who was limping quite painfully, if his grunts were to be any indication.

Tonks tried to move to catch the hooded figure, but stopped when Kingsley suddenly cried out in agonized anguish. She turned and went to the dark skinned man, cradling his head. Tears streamed down her face as she watched the man writhe in agony.

"Don't worry, Kingsley." She choked. "I've got you. I'll get you help." She cancelled the anti-apparition wards and with a crack was gone.

Kingsley Shacklebolt died three hours later. The Healers of St. Mungo's could not isolate what had been done to the man, but had confessed that whatever it was prevented them from closing his wounds, or diagnosing what curses he'd endured.

Tonks gave her tearful report to Alastor Moody and Rufus Scrimgeour an hour before Shacklebolt died. Tonks had demanded to be with him, and held his hand as the man let out his final gut wrenching scream of pain before his eyes rolled up into the back of his skull and he was finally silenced.

Tonks couldn't cry. She couldn't feel anything. Moody found her staring blankly at the still bleeding body several moments after his final wail.

3. Chapter 3

Water. It was the only thing he wanted. He needed a cool drink of water,

and, mercifully, there was a pitcher full of the glorious liquid next to him on the bedside table. He sat up easily, and reached for the pitcher.

"Allow me, Severus." Madam Pomfrey said, pouring a tall glass full, and handing it to him. Severus Snape swallowed half the glass in one long drink. His thirst began to abate, and he took several smaller drinks of the refreshing beverage.

"You've been asleep for a day. Don't try to speak, your throat is still very raw. I don't know what you were experimenting with, but thank goodness Professor Dumbledore found you." the matron prattled on, refilling the glass of water. "There doesn't seem to be any permanent damage, but I'll ask you to be careful in trying new potions."

The hospital matron bustled off, leaving a tired, and much confused, patient behind. Snape looked around, and relief flooded him. He was alive, and back at Hogwarts. Apparently, nothing else had happened.

Dumbledore had obviously lied to Madam Pomfrey regarding the manner in which he, Snape, had been poisoned. That was probably a good idea, as it would be better to avoid questions as to why they had been visiting a cave in the middle of nowhere, and Snape had consumed an unknown potion.

He tried to remember what had happened to him, but all he saw were flashes of horrible memories, and a pretty redheaded woman with green eyes smiling at him. The same green eyes he'd seen in his dreams since he'd been eleven years old. Lily Evens' eyes.

Severus rubbed his temples, trying to clear the cobwebs from his mind.

The last few months had been very taxing on him mentally. First, he'd had to tell the Potter boy his deepest secret. The reaction was not what Snape had expected. Potter had been angry, but Snape expected the boy to curse him, to use every hex he knew to cause suffering. But, the boy

had done nothing. Potter had simply avoided Snape for a while, and then he'd come for help, just before the exams had begun.

Snape had wanted to help the boy. Not because the Headmaster had ordered him to do so. Snape genuinely wanted to ease the boy's concerns, but had been unable. The Dark Lord had lured Potter to the Ministry.

From what Snape had gather from Dumbledore, and the Dark Lord, Potter had fought valiantly, and had caused Voldemort serious damage.

Snape had seen first hand what had been wrought from Voldemort's possession of the boy. The pale skin had been red and raw, and the Dark Lord now had an incessant cough.

Dumbledore had been most enthusiastic to hear that report. The old man had all but broken out in song.

There was more news that disturbed Snape. He'd received a letter from Narcissa Malfoy, requesting that he meet her regarding Draco. Snape knew that the Dark Lord had been most upset at Lucius' failure, and extremely angered over losing several other Death Eaters, only managing to rescue an incapacitated Bellatrix. She had suffered greatly at her master's hands.

Narcissa wanting to met with him concerning Draco must mean that Draco took the Dark Mark. Now, the woman would want him to try and discourage Draco from fulfilling whatever task the Dark Lord had set.

Snape groaned at the thought. Draco had become more arrogant than his father, and even more of a ponce, if it were possible. Snape had no interest in trying to protect the little ferret any longer. In fact, Snape was giving serious thought to allowing Draco to get expelled. Snape had had enough of trying to cover the ungrateful little bastard's atrocities.

Then, something occurred to Snape. Draco had stopped coming to him for help last year. He'd become more secretive, and elusive. And all this

happened right around the time that Zabini had turned up having been tortured and Obliviated.

Snape wanted to slap himself. Of course, the Malfoy brat was behind it.

Snape wanted to curse himself. How could he have been so idiotic? He would have to keep a very close eye on Malfoy this year.

Again, Snape's thoughts drifted to Potter. Thanks to himself and Dumbledore, Potter was closer to his ultimate victory over the Dark Lord. Snape knew that there was still a long way to go, and the boy had much to learn. Potter needed guidance, and proper dueling training. Snape had quite a few spells up his sleeve that could be useful to the boy, if he were willing to listen. If not, he could slip them to the Greengrass girl, and she could pass them on.

This actually made the head of Slytherin house smile. Of all the girls in the school, Potter had chosen one from his house. Gryffindors and Slytherins had been rivals for so long it didn't seem possible that the two could come together, but it had happened, and not once, Longbottom had even begun dating a Slytherin. Snape had been very hard on the Longbottom boy for so long. It had been his only other source of malicious joy, after taunting Potter, but just like Potter, Longbottom had changed so dramatically over this past year, it had been astonishing to watch. Snape was losing his one source of entertainment, fortunately there was still the Weasley boy.

Again, visions of his past sins flooded his mind, and Snape rubbed hard at his temples, trying to ease the pain. He took a few slow breathes. Snape hated who he was. He had hated himself for nearly as long as he'd been alive, and frankly he was sick of it. He began thinking that a change was in order. If anything, his experience in the cave had awoken something inside of him. No longer could he exist as he'd done for so long. He'd had

enough of being a spy, and of being feared. He'd never wanted that, but his self-hatred was projected on to the children he'd been charged with teaching. Lily would have been ashamed.

No, he couldn't live with that. It was no longer acceptable. He would change, and make her proud. And he would start with her son. He would teach Harry all he knew and prepare him for the battle that lie ahead, even if he had to go behind the old man's back. Harry Potter would not face Lord Voldemort without a fighting chance to survive.

"Alright! Enough about the squid." Sirius Black said, throwing his arms up in surrender. He closed the door to their hotel room and looked at his godson, who was eyeing him menacingly. "I've been trying to get you to experience new things this whole trip!"

"No, you've been trying to poison me this whole trip!" Harry said, a hint of a smile in his emerald green eyes. "You've been putting the most disgusting things in front of me, hoping I'd be dumb enough to try it. Snails in France, that boiled garbage in Istanbul, and now, tonight with the squid. We're in Hong Kong, you couldn't just get me some noodles without trying to poison me? Why not just put a plate of Dragon testicle down and be done with it?"

"So, you'd eat that?" Sirius grinned.

"Not funny." Harry said, unable to keep the smile from forming. It had been this way the entire month. Harry had never felt so carefree. He'd seen and experienced more in this month than his entire life, and the best part, he'd done with his godfather at his side.

"I swear if you put one more foul thing in front of me to eat, I'll have you fixed, Snuffles."

"Oh ho! So, you think because you've defeated the most powerful dark wizard ever known-" Sirius began.

"Five times now." Harry smirked.

"Whatever. So you think you can't be taken down a peg is that it?" Sirius' grin grew wider.

"Bring it, mutt." Harry said.

Sirius gave a mock war cry and tackled his godson to the floor. The two began wrestling around, which had become one of their favorite activities, and had ended many debates. Harry liked it. It was as if he was getting back some of the childhood he'd missed out on, and Sirius was getting back part of the life that was stolen from him.

It wasn't always this immature. The pair had wandered through great art museums, and visited ancient ruins. They'd had hundreds of heart felt conversation and really bonded. Harry felt he had a real father figure in Sirius, and Sirius felt he had done right by James and Lily, helping their son, who'd sacrificed so much, get a little taste of life.

"Again, I have conquered the mangy mutt!" Harry smiled, after pinning Sirius to the floor. Sirius, out of breath from laughing so hard, admitted defeat and promised he would exact his revenge. Most likely at their next meal.

"So, I bet you're excited to be going home, eh?" Sirius said, once Harry had helped him up.

"It's been fun, and I've loved every moment of our trip, and I want to do it again. But, I do miss my friends, yeah." Harry admitted.

"You've sent back enough gifts, they might prefer you stay away a little longer." Sirius chuckled.

"It would've been nice to get some letters from them, just to know how they were doing."

"Or, more specifically, a certain dark haired beauty?" Sirius smiled coyly.

"You were on the French Riviera, for Merlin's sake, Harry, and you were

looking right through all those gorgeous half naked women. I thought I was going to have seizures with all those women sunning themselves, rubbing coca butter on their skin..."

"BAD DOG!" Harry said smacking his godfather with a rolled up paper.

"You're really helping the argument to have you fixed."

"As a hormonal teenage male, you can not tell me you weren't at least looking." Sirius accused.

"Why do you think I wore such dark sunglasses?"

"AH HA!" Sirius said triumphantly. "Sneaky bugger. But just like you're father, you were watching and thinking how your beautiful girlfriend would look in one of those swimsuits. All you bloody Potters are so faithful. Bless you all."

"Maybe you should look into it. Find a woman who is good, honest, sense of humor." Harry said with compassion. "Who doesn't mind fleas..."

Sirius turned to stare at his godson. "Now you're going to get it, pup!"

Sirius launched himself at his godson, and again they were at it, each trying to wrestle the other to the floor. They were laughing hysterically and shouting meaningless threats, hoping to distract the other and win. The harder they laughed, the more their strength ebbed, until they were both on the floor holding their sides, tears streaming from their eyes.

"Sirius." A voice called.

"What is it now?" Sirius said, looking at his godson. "Another remark on my culinary choices?"

"Sirius."

"I didn't say that." Harry gasped, desperate for air.

"Sirius."

"Who said that?" Sirius said, wiping at his eyes.

"SIRIUS!"

"Remus!" both men said. Sirius went to his knapsack, where his new two way mirror rested. He had lost the first one during his travels last May. He and Remus had made a new set so that Sirius and Harry could get news from home, and check in and keep the Order abreast of their location in case something were to happen.

"Remus!" Sirius said, staring at his friend through the mirror.

"Sirius, Harry. Finally. I've been trying to reach you for hours. Something has happened. Something....amazing. Sirius, you've been cleared." Remus was smiling happily.

Sirius felt his legs give way beneath him. Harry quickly caught his godfather and settled him into a chair. Sirius looked ready to pass out. He looked strangely at Harry and back to Remus, who had been unable to stop smiling.

"It happened last night." Remus began. "Wormtail was caught in a raid on Borgin and Burkes, and Tonks caught him as he was trying to escape. They brought him in and gave him Veritaserum. He told them everything. The Daily Prophet had it this morning. Congratulations, old man. When you come back tomorrow you're free man!"

"I'm free? Truly?" Sirius said, tears slipping down his face. Harry clutched his shoulder tightly. Remus watched from his vantage point.

"No more hiding, no more running. The Ministry has already sent reparations in the amount of one hundred thousand galleons, and they will give you back your original wand just as soon as you come in for the full pardon."

"This isn't a trap? Some kind of trick?" Harry asked suspiciously.

"Dumbledore confirmed it. Amelia Bones wants to see you herself. But there's some bad news as well." Remus smile faded. "Kingsley was killed along with three other Aurors. Tonks witnessed it, and she's still a mess.

There's some new Death Eater, or Voldemort has gotten a new body after what you did to him, Harry. I don't know the details yet, but it wasn't pretty."

"I want to come home." Sirius said. He looked at Harry who nodded. He knew what it meant to his godfather, to go home as a free man, able to walk the streets as himself, and not hidden as a dog. To see Harry off to school, just like other parents. To leave his house and just enjoy the sun without having to leave the country. Harry couldn't fault him for wanting those things. It was all he wanted for Sirius, as well.

"Your portkey will arrive tomorrow morning. Just be ready. The house is ready for you, and we'll be glad to have you back. Both of you." Remus nodded proudly.

"Thank you, Remus. We'll see you tomorrow." Harry said. Remus' face disappeared, and Sirius slowly stood, walking to the window and looking out of the bay. He ran his hands through his long, dark hair and sighed. For twelve years of his life he'd been held as an innocent man, and for the last three years he'd been a fugitive on the run. Now, it was over. He was truly free and cleared. What would he do? He'd never thought about how his life would change once he'd been cleared.

He turned to look at Harry who was watching him with relief and joy on his face.

"I'm free." Sirius said simply. Harry launched himself at his godfather, and hugged him fiercely. Sirius wept with happiness. This was the greatest moment in his life, and he was sharing it with his godson, the most important person in his life. Sirius couldn't have asked for anything more in that moment.

Alastor Moody stomped around the prisoner. He was watching him closely with both his normal, and magical eyes.

"Tell me again, Pettigrew. I need to understand it."

The fat balding man was looking very tired, and very frightened. His magical hand had been removed, and he was whimpering ceaselessly. He had failed, and been caught by the Aurors. His master would be most displeased. If he managed to be freed, he would be tortured into madness. The alternative was that he would lose his soul.

"How many times must I tell you?" Pettigrew said, rubbing his forearm where his right hand used to be attached. "I don't know who he was. None of us knew. We had been ordered to meet him and take him to Borgin and Burkes. If Borgin didn't have what we had come for, we were to let the new one take care of it."

"What did your Lord tell you about this new recruit?" Moody sneered.

"Only that he should be called the Dragon. And he was to be in charge.

The Dark Lord said that he would know if we disobeyed."

"I see. And that's it? You don't know what you were to be receiving from Borgin?"

"The Dark Lord never trusted me to know any more. After he regained his body, I was no longer his confidant. I have never been part of his circle, though I have been the most loyal."

"Well, your loyalty is going to get you kissed by Dementors this night. I do hope your loyalty was worth it." Moody snarled and left the cell.

Pettigrew watched him leave, his words swimming in his head.

Realization hit him like a bludger, and Peter Pettigrew, known too many as Wormtail, began screaming. Screaming to be spared, to be shown mercy. He had been fooled, led astray. He swore he was not to blame for his crimes.

Moody could hear the screams echoing down the hall, and knew better than to believe the ranting. They were the desperate cries of an even

more desperate man. And Moody didn't care. He'd lost a powerful ally and a good friend this day. He meant to see justice done. The sad excuse for a man didn't deserve his pity or his remorse, or any other show of mercy. Alastor Moody just didn't have it in him.

After seeing Kingsley's mutilated body, and seeing Nymphadora shut down so completely, made the old Auror angry. He wanted nothing more than to find this "Dragon" and make him pay with his life. Moody swore to himself he would show as little mercy to this vile creature had shown Kingsley. None.

Blaise Zabini felt himself very lucky. He was walking hand in hand with an extremely stunning redheaded girl. A girl he had pined after for the better part of two years, and had finally plucked up the courage to ask her out. Well, that and he'd been goaded into asking her out by his two best friends.

It had taken a lot of work, and a lot of patience, but eventually, He had gotten Susan Bones to let down her walls, and she had fallen in love with a boy she had known to be somewhat of a playboy. She had been wrong. Blaise was the sweetest, most affectionate, and honest gentleman she could have ever chosen.

He had even been punished for his love for her. Someone, though they were sure they knew who, had tortured him with the Cruciatus curse and then obliterated his memory. It hadn't changed anything. In fact, it made Blaise care more deeply for Susan.

Susan had been suspicious when Blaise had first approached her, but he was always so nice to her. He never pushed, and was always interested in her feelings. He talked to her, not her ample chest as many boys did. She had been very stand offish with him, fearing he was up to something.

But, he finally convinced her that he was serious in his advances, and she

had allowed him into her heart. The first time he kissed her, she had felt something so genuine, and incredibly wonderful. She had known that Blaise was for her.

Susan had invited Blaise to come and stay with her family for a few weeks. Usually, Blaise would travel with his father, but this summer, his father had been unable to clear up his schedule for the holiday. Blaise was not upset by it, in fact he was happy. Being with Susan was more enjoyable to him than visiting someplace foreign.

The Bones family had been very welcoming. Susan's mother was a wonderful cook, and her father was a warm and friendly fellow. The two men often would get into discussions regarding Quidditch and matters of finance. Susan's father worked at Gringotts, and Blaise had been thinking that a career in banking might suit him. It helped in bonding with Susan's father.

But at the moment, the two teenaged lovers were enjoying another glorious sunset. Hand in hand, they walked towards Susan's house, as slowly as possible.

"Are you excited to visit Harry and the others?" Susan asked casually.

"I am. I'm anxious to see Daphne and Tracey. We've never seen each other during summer months, so it might be weird. But it'll be fun to. I like Neville and Hermione and Harry a lot, too. Weasley's still a prat, but I think he's got potential, if he can get his wand out of his arse."

Susan laughed at the imagery.

"What about you?" He asked.

"Honestly, I'm surprised he invited me. We're not close by any means, but I'm honored. We all spent time together this past year, but I don't know that I'm close with Harry."

"Well, I'm not close with him either, but he considers us friends, and I

like the guy. Who am I to say no to a guy who can beat Voldemort?"

"Do you think it's true, what they're saying in the Prophet now?" Susan looked up to her taller, dark skinned boyfriend. "About him being the Chosen One?"

"Look, after all the rubbish they printed about him last year, I highly doubt it. They're making him into a savior just because he keeps fighting the pillow biter."

"Blaise!" Susan said chagrined, swatting her boyfriend playfully. "Don't say that in front of my parents."

"What? You don't think they'd agree that Voldemort is some kind of nancy boy, always chasing after a young boy? It's not right." Blaise scrunched up his face, shuddering.

"That's not the issue." Susan said, trying not to laugh and failing.

"The point is, the Daily Prophet is trying to make amends to Potter, but they're just repeating their earlier mistakes, they're just going to the opposite extreme. Instead of being completely mental, he's the savior of our world. Could he be? Maybe. I don't know what was so important in that prophecy, no one else seems to know. If Harry knows, he's certainly not saying."

"Why does life have to be so cruel to that boy?"

"Life hasn't been that cruel. Sure he lost his parents, and he's had to rise above things that most of us would rather avoid, but look at what's been happening to him lately. He's found true love with Daphne, and in my humble opinion he could not have done better..."

"Careful, or I might begin to feel jealous." Susan smiled playfully.

"Over that hag?" Blaise asked with mock distress

"Stop it! You are absolutely wicked, you know that, don't you?"

"You have no one to feel jealous of, my love. But back to my point. He's

got Daphne. Over half the school would fight by his side if he asked, and that means he could affect real change in our world. He's going to get his revenge on Umbridge in court next week, and to top it all off, his godfather was cleared. Harry Potter's luck might actually be changing."

"I hope it keeps changing for the better. He's a good man, and there are so few of you." Susan smiled at her beau.

"We are a rare breed, aren't we?" He smiled self assuredly.

"And so humble." Susan rolled her eyes. Something caught her eye in the distance. "Is that smoke?"

Blaise looked toward Susan's house and saw thick clouds of black smoke billowing from the windows.

"MOM!" Susan began running towards the house. Blaise chased after her. He watched closely, looking for what had caused the smoke. His skin tingled warningly, but he wasn't about to let Susan get hurt.

The redheaded girl burst into the front door, her dark skinned boyfriend right behind her. There was smoke everywhere, and they could hear screaming from the upstairs. Blaise led the way, trying to see in the black haze, Susan close on his heels.

Coughing and sputtering, they tried to find their way to where the screaming was the loudest. Suddenly, Susan screamed as she felt arms around her. She kicked and struggled against her large captor, but he kept her arms pinned at her sides. The man laughed in her ear.

"This was feisty. Perhaps we should have a bit of fun with her." The gruff voice spoke loudly.

Blaise ducked low as a spell shot over his head. His wand was in his hand, and he hit Susan's captor with a Severing charm just above his ankles. The big man screamed, releasing Susan as he fell. She whipped out her own wand and rushed to her boyfriend, who was turning to fire

curses at another dark robed man.

"I've got to find my parents." Susan screamed. She flicked her wand, conjuring a major gust of wind which cleared away much of the smoke and caught the dark robed man by surprise and sent him flying down the hallway. Blaise and Susan were moving swiftly, and entered her father's study, where they found the Bones' bound on the floor.

Five Death Eaters stood watching as the two adults squirmed and screamed in terrible agony. Laughter was heard from behind the gruesome masks. In the center of the group, standing over the bound captives, was a slender, dark robed figure. The figure wasn't much shorter than Blaise, but easily taller than Susan. Its face was hidden beneath the mask of a Death Eater, but unlike the others, there was no runes, or any other markings. Also unlike the others, the eyes were glowing a dark red. The figure turned slowly, regarding them momentarily.

"I guess, I don't need you after all." It said to Susan's parents, who were writhing in pain. The figure flicked his wand, and Susan's parents stopped screaming. The figure turned to face the newcomers. Susan waved her wand, screaming out a Stunning spell, which the new figure simply swatted away.

Blaise tried several spells, which the robed figure batted away as if shooing an annoying fly. The other Death Eaters laughed as their leader tilted its head regarding, the two teenagers like they were curious objects.

"You are going to give a message to our Minister of Magic. She will not be able to ignore a message from her own family." the creature spoke, it's voice a gravely sort of snarl. Blaise felt his skin crawling with repulsion.

"Come closer. You simply must see this." The creature said softly.

Its arm moved in a blur and both Blaise and Susan were lifted off their feet and brought forward. Both teens tried to move, but found the arms and legs had been bound by invisible bonds. The robed figure came forward staring at each of them in turn. It reached a black hand up, caressing Susan's cheek lovingly.

"Like sweet cream," the monster purred. "Just like her mother's." The figure turned and bent over Susan's mother. With the same hand that had caressed Susan's cheek so gently, the apparition reached down and slid a long finger down Susan's mother's face. Susan began to cry as her mother, helpless to do anything, screamed as a small strip of her beautiful skin peeled off her face. The horrid beast took the freshly shaved flesh and shoved it into a pouch.

"A memento." It purred.

Suddenly there were loud cracks all around.

"Dragon, the Aurors are here." One of the Death Eaters said, apprehension in his voice.

"Good. I was getting tired. Tell Minister Bones that the war ends now. Lord Voldemort will show mercy if she surrenders." With a wave of his hand, Dragon banished both Susan and Blaise through the wall.

Susan felt her body smash through the wall, and crash into the banister railing, and finally land amidst debris on the first floor. She couldn't breathe, as all the air had been forced from her lungs. She tried to move, but her head was spinning so badly she had to remain motionless for a few moments.

The Dragon emerged from the study to admire his work. Smiling defiantly under his mask, he turned to those he had been charged with, motioning for them to go. Dragon gave on long look at the Death Eater that Blaise had cut down. He was trying to crawl towards Dragon,

begging to not be left behind. Dragon shook his head once, and pointed his wand at the pathetic cripple before him. With barely a whisper, the Killing curse ended the man's existence and the Dragon Apparated away. Susan rolled to her knees, just as Aurors were entering her home. One of them came to her, checking to see that she was alright. Susan felt she would have a serious headache, and a lot of bruising, but she would be okay. She began asking about her parents. Several of the Aurors raced up the stairs where Susan had said her parents were tied up.

"Fletcher! We got to get him out of here. I can't heal this."

"Merlin!" gasped a female Auror

"What did that to him?" asked another.

Susan's mind thought of her father, and she pushed forward to see what the Aurors were talking about. Susan fell to her knees when she saw it. Blood was seeping from several deep cuts, and there was a large piece of wood sticking out of his chest. His eyes were open, and searching. He saw her, and began reaching out for her.

Susan's eyes filled with tears as she rushed forward, taking his bloody hand in hers, and holding it to her cheek. He tried to speak, but only blood came from his lips. His eyes said everything. Susan saw that he was saying sorry, telling her that he loved her.

"Don't you dare give up." She sobbed angrily. She would not let him go out this way. "You hang on. You stay with me, Blaise, do you hear me? Stay with me. Don't you dare leave me."

The Aurors were moving all around her, shouting orders and moving things, probably her parents. She couldn't look away from his eyes, she fought when several Aurors began pulling her away so they could help him, but she wanted to be by his side. She was afraid that if he couldn't see her, he would die. She fought harder than she had ever fought, and

eventually she was Stunned.

The lead Auror, Fletcher, had hated to do it to the girl, and was sure Amelia Bones would dress him down later on, but if they were going to have any chance of saving the boy, the girl had to get out of their way. His team had found the parents alive upstairs. They had arrived in time, it seemed. They had also found two Death Eaters, one was dead, the other had been knocked unconscious.

"Sir, if we don't get him out of here, he doesn't stand a chance."

"Move him." Fletcher said.

"What the hell is going on?" Alastor Moody hollered as he came into the Bones' home.

"Sir, we're moving the boy and the parents to St. Mungo's, now." Fletcher said, saluting the senior Auror.

"And the girl?"

"We need to question her."

"Boy, you get her to the hospital now. She'll be unable to answer any questions until she knows those people will be alright."

"Sir, that's against procedure." Fletcher said, confusion on his face.

"You're a good Auror, Fletcher, but you know nothing of people. I'll take her myself. I want to hear from you in one hour." Alastor Moody glared. He revived Susan and knelt in front of her. She stared at him, worry and fear in her bright blue eyes.

"My parents. Blaise, are they..." She began tearfully.

"I don't know, lass. We're going to go find out now." Moody took the girl's hand and Apparated away. Fletcher had watched, mystified by the compassion the most dangerous Auror in history had shown the young victim. Indeed he did have a lot to learn.

4. Chapter 4

Hermione awoke to screaming. Her bedroom door was thrown open, and Daphne Greengrass leapt on her, bouncing on the bed happily.

"He's coming home today!" The black haired girl sang happily. "He's going to be in my arms again, because he's coming home today!"

Hermione didn't even have to guess who Daphne was singing about. She grimaced as Daphne jumped up to dance wildly on the bushy haired brunette's bed. Hermione tried to avoid being stepped on by the overly zealous girl, nearly tumbling out of the bed in the process.

"I get it, you're excited. But those of us who are not madly in love would like some more sleep!"

"Oh, come on, Hermione." Daphne giggled as she fell flat on her friend's bed. "Can you honestly say you're not the least bit excited to see Harry?"

"At this very moment..." Hermione began, but one look from her friend told her she would be fooling no one. "You couldn't have waited for the celebration for a few hours?" She groaned, covering her head.

"Nope!" Daphne said, smacking her friend on the bottom. "Now, get up! We've got lots to do. I have got to look fantastic for when he shows up!"

"Did you really need to smack my hind end?" Hermione complained indignantly.

"If I were a boy, you wouldn't be complaining." Daphne sang. "In fact, you might really like a good spanking." Daphne ducked quickly as Hermione threw several pillows at her.

"She's not as bad as Lavender," Hermione thought. "But, I hope I'm never so annoyingly chipper when I do find love."

The black haired beauty stuck her head in the bedroom again. "Up and at 'em, Granger!"

"I will strangle you. I swear it!" Hermione said grumpily.

Daphne's good mood seemed to be contagious, however. After a quick

shower, Hermione joined Daphne who had been looking through her wardrobe for the perfect outfit in which to welcome her boyfriend home. Hermione was able to distract the girl by dragging her down to breakfast where Mrs. Greengrass and Astoria were in similarly chipper moods to Daphne's. They kept giggling and making strange faces at one another. "Ok, what's with all the winks and grins?" Hermione finally asked.

"We're anxious to see how Mister Potter embarrasses my husband this time." Aurora chuckled. Astoria choked on her orange juice. "My youngest and I have a bet on how long it takes for Cyrus to put his foot in his mouth."

Hermione now joined in the laughter. Cyrus joined them, completely oblivious as to the reason for the laughter.

"I see everyone is in fine spirits this morning." He said, settling himself down. "Can I ask what is the reason for the merriment?"

"Nothing special, my love." Aurora smiled knowingly at her clueless husband. "Just womanly things."

"Ah, I see." he nodded. "The mysteries of the female mind."

"And, the ignorance of the male mind." Astoria said softly. Hermione nearly spit her eggs all over the table, and Daphne coughed loudly into her napkin.

"What's that, dear one?" Cyrus asked of his youngest, who neatly shrugged and gave a kind smile to her father.

"Here's the paper." Cyrus smiled as a brown owl swooped in to deliver the news. Mr. Greengrass paid the owl and immediately unfolded the paper. His light smile faded almost instantly. "Oh, dear."

"What is it?" Aurora asked of her husband.

"There was another attack. It was on the Bones family."

Hermione and Daphne looked up. Cyrus began reading the article.

ATTACK ON BONES FAMILY COMES WITH A WARNING

Aurors were called to the home of John Bones, Brother of interim Minister of Magic, Amelia Bones, just after nine p.m. last evening to find the home in near ruins. The only witness able to speak on the attack was youngest daughter, Susan Bones.

Susan, 16, suffered only minor injuries during the incident. She had been with her boyfriend when the attack began, they had been away from the house at the time, and are not sure how the Death Eaters got through the wards set around the property. Susan, and her boyfriend, Blaise Zabini, 16, entered the house in search of Susan's parents, finding them bound and enduring the Cruciatus curse.

Susan told Aurors that lead Death Eater, whose identity is still unknown, subjected her parents to the Torture curse, before she and Zabini tried to fight. Aurors report that whoever this Death Eater was, he was extremely powerful, and it is rumored that it may have been You-Know-Who himself.

Both John and his wife Annabelle, as well as Zabini, suffered major injuries, and while both of young Susan's parents have been stabilized, Zabini's condition remains as of this printing, quite serious.

"Dad, I need to go to St. Mungo's, now!" Daphne said standing up. "He's one of my closest friends, and I have to see if he's ok."

"He's my friend, as well." Hermione said. "Please, Mister Greengrass."

"It's ok, girls. Get dressed, and I'll take you." Aurora said, looking to her husband, who simply nodded.

A quarter of an hour later, Hermione and Daphne were standing outside Blaise's room, comforting a very tired looking Susan Bones. Her eyes were very puffy from crying and her face was dirty. She hadn't changed her clothes, and she still smelled of smoke.

"I don't know who he was, but he was so cruel. He touched my face and I

wanted to vomit, and then he...he tore a piece of my mothers cheek off."

Susan told them, before breaking down into fresh sobs.

"What happened to Blaise?" Daphne asked gently.

"We got Banished through a wall, and fell from the balcony to the floor of the Entry Hall. I was fine. But Blaise..." Susan looked away, hand covering her mouth. "He got something else. Like he got cursed and Banished. He had this big piece of wood in his chest, I thought he was going to die. They've been working on him all night. They just told me before you got here that's he's going to be ok."

Both Hermione and Daphne let out a long sigh of relief. They looked to Susan, who mirrored the sentiment.

"They haven't let me in to see him yet, but just knowing he's going to be ok...I don't know what I would have done if he..." She couldn't continue.

"Do you have any idea who this lead Death Eater was?" Hermione asked.

"No. He seemed somehow familiar, but his voice was modified through some spell, and his eyes were glowing red." Susan said tearfully. "It might have been him. V-v-v-Voldemort."

"Susan?" Came a concerned voice.

"Stacey!" Susan said rushing to the young woman. Susan and the tall slender blonde woman embraced tightly. The blonde pushed Susan back a bit. "How are Mum and Dad?"

"The healers say they'll be fine. They even healed Mum's cheek, but she's going to have a scar. Oh, Stacey, I've never been so scared."

"It's ok. You're going to stay with me until they're out." Stacey said, pulling her younger sister into another hug.

Susan nodded and then saw her friends watching. She wiped at her eyes, and smiled softly.

"I'm sorry, guys, this is my sister Stacy. She graduated Hogwarts the year

before we started. Stacey, this is Hermione Granger and Daphne Greengrass, friends of mine and Blaise's from school."

"It's nice to meet you both." Stacey said politely.

"I'm sorry it's under these conditions." Hermione said sadly.

"Come on, red. Let's get you home. You can shower and get some sleep, and we'll come back tonight and check on everyone." Stacey said gently.

"Tell Harry I'm sorry I won't be there with you all." Susan said.

"Harry Potter?" Stacey asked.

"Yes." Susan nodded. "He invited me and Blaise to come stay with him a few days."

"I'm sure he'll understand." Hermione smiled.

"I'd be surprised if he didn't show up and check on Blaise himself."

Daphne reassured the redhead.

"You'd be right."

Everyone turned to see the messy haired, green eyed boy standing before them.

"HARRY!" Daphne said, throwing herself into his arms. He held her tightly, kissing her gently, before pushing her back so he could look on her. He had missed her so much over the past month, and had been anxious to see her. She was more beautiful than he remembered her being.

But this was not the homecoming Daphne had imagined. For one thing, she wanted to look amazing, and make the boy wish he'd never left her alone, not wearing old jeans and a t-shirt she'd just thrown on. She hadn't even brushed her hair.

Second, she had imagined him coming to her home and having a nice long snog, instead of a hospital waiting room. Yet, he was here now, finally. Back where he belonged, and they would have time for a proper

greeting later.

"When did you get back?" She asked.

"A few hours ago. Right when Remus got the paper, actually. I would have been here sooner, but we had to make a stop at the Ministry." Harry said quickly

"Well, I'm glad to see you." Hermione said happily as she hugged her best friend.

"I'm so sorry." Harry said, hugging Susan. "If there's anything you need, just ask."

"Thank you." Susan said gratefully. She introduced Harry to her sister, and after a very short conversation, the Bones girls left. Susan was wobbling dangerously as she walked, obviously exhausted. Hermione explained that Susan had been there all night, questioned by the Aurors and Merlin knew what else. Harry agreed that the poor girl needed rest.

"Any news?" Harry asked.

"Susan said that everyone's going to be okay, but it was close with Blaise." Hermione said.

"Has anyone been in to see him?"

"They're not allowing visitors yet." Daphne shrugged.

Harry went to the door and poked his head in, but snapped it back quickly. A young healer came out, looking quite stern.

"Mister Zabini isn't ready for visitors yet."

"My apologies. He's a friend, and I just was worried." Harry said.

"He will be fine, right now he needs a lot of rest."

Harry turned to look at the two girls who had watched the whole scene.

He just shrugged, and led them down the hall where Sirius was talking with Alastor Moody.

"Sirius!" Hermione smiled brightly and hugged the older man.

"Hello there Hermione!"

"Congratulations on being cleared." She beamed.

"Thank you. I'm still trying to process it all. But it does feel good to be able to walk around among real people. And this must be the lovely Miss Greengrass. What a pleasure to meet you in person." Sirius bowed low, and shook Daphne's hand.

"I thought you said he was a dog?" Daphne elbowed her boyfriend in the ribs. "He's quite charming."

"Oh, trust me, this is just an act. You didn't see him on the French Riviera."

"Now's not the time for besmirching my good name, sir." Sirius said, waggled a finger.

"It wasn't your name I was besmirching. It was your already questionable reputation."

"I see you two had a fine trip, then." Hermione grinned.

"It was." Harry's smiled. "Except for all the times my guardian here tried to poison me."

"You know, you try and expose some people to new things..." Sirius threw his hands up. "For the last time. I'm sorry about the squid!"

Hermione couldn't help but smile. It was painfully clear that Harry and Sirius had not only enjoyed themselves, but had truly bonded. And now, as she watched Daphne snuggling into Harry's arms, and her contented smile, Hermione knew that her friends' worlds were complete. Even with all the sad tidings, Hermione felt a little happy.

"Listen, we have some things we have to do, but I'd like to come get you this afternoon. Will that be alright?" Harry asked, drawing away from Daphne as Sirius finished his conversation with Moody.

"You mean I have to wait longer?" Daphne whined.

"It's only a few hours. I promised your father I would come get you myself. Do this thing properly. That'll be the soonest I can do it."

"Alright. Mother's waiting to take us back anyway. Let me write you directions. You never find me with out them." Daphne asked. The girl got some paper and a quill from the healers station and jotted down the instructions on how to find her home, finally giving them to her boyfriend.

"Great. Remus and I will be there at one o'clock. Be ready." Harry smiled and kissed her gently. Daphne held him tight against her for a long moment, committing the moment to memory.

"One o'clock." He repeated and then he and Sirius were gone.

"I can't believe he's really back." Daphne said, as she and Hermione went in search of Mrs. Greengrass. She was wrapping her arms about her, thinking about her messy haired boyfriend.

"You knew he was coming back today. You woke me up singing about it." Hermione wanted to slap her friend.

"Yeah, and look at me. I'm a mess." Daphne frowned.

"He didn't seem to mind. He barely looked at anyone else. He doesn't care how you look, just that it's you."

"I know, I just wanted to show him how much I missed him."

"You mean by putting on some slinky dress, and having your hair done up and all that?"

"Yeah."

"Trust me when I tell you it wouldn't have made any difference. You could see it in his eyes the moment he saw you. That kiss was so passionate, it made me curl my toes. When he has you alone tonight, and he isn't so worried about what's happened here, he'll show you exactly how much he missed you."

"Oh, we are so finding you a boyfriend." Daphne smiled smugly.

"Harry!" Mrs. Weasley smiled warmly as she embraced the young man, who had emerged from the fireplace. "I see that traveling abroad has agreed with you."

"It's good to see you, Mrs. Weasley. Sorry to just drop by unexpected. Is Ron around?"

"Yes, he's up in his room. I hope you can help him, dear, he's been terribly depressed. I know you two had a bit of a falling out, but I can't help believe he's truly sorry." Mrs. Weasley said, a hint of sadness there.

"Well, I'm here to find out. Excuse me."

Harry was up the stairs and knocking on his best friend's door a moment later. He heard Ron's grunt, and opened the door, peeking inside.

"Harry!" Ron said, stunned at seeing his former friend standing in his doorway. "I was sure I wouldn't see you until term began."

"Well, I had to come by. Sirius and I talked a lot about you while I was away. I feel that I, well we, owe it to our friendship to try and work this out. As stubborn and bigoted as you've been, you've always been there when I needed you the most."

"No, I haven't." Ron said, shaking his head. "I've been there for fighting at your side, sure. But when it really counted, when you needed my support, I abandoned you. When you needed me at your side, like in fourth year. I was too angry and jealous to see the truth until it was nearly too late. Last year...Merlin, last year I let my fear get the best of me. All the time you were telling us how powerful and destructive fear was, and here I was, letting it control me. I let my fear of losing your friendship to people I didn't trust drive a wedge between us. And you were right about the Slytherins all along."

"I'm not a very good friend, Harry." Ron said sadly.

"But, you've just admitted your mistakes. So long as you don't repeat them, and you grow from this experience, you can become a better person, and a better friend."

"Luna's been saying the same thing." Ron commented.

"Luna?" Harry asked.

"It's a long story." Ron shrugged.

"Look. I know this is last minute. But, would you like to come stay with me at my house? I've got to warn you, Daphne and Tracey will be there. If you don't feel comfortable, then tell me now."

"I appreciate the offer. But maybe later. There's something I need to figure out, and I don't know if going away is the best idea. I'm trying to change, and one of the things I'm changing is to not run away from things." Ron said. He looked at his dark haired friend, offering his hand.

"I appreciate the visit."

"You know things will never be the same with us." Harry said, taking his friend's hand.

"No. But maybe they'll be better."

Harry smiled brightly at his friend. "I hope so. I have to get going. Write me if you want to come out. I'd really like having you there."

"I will. As soon as I get...stuff figured out. Thanks for this, Harry. I needed to tell you all that stuff. I would have done it when term began, but now maybe we can get together before then."

"Until then. See you, Ron. And, good luck."

Ron heaved a satisfied sigh after Harry left. A great weight had been lifted. Perhaps things between them would be better. Ron was determined to make it better. He knew that he would have a very hard time with it, but he'd thought about it all summer. If Harry could change and make himself better, why couldn't he?

Ron had already begun his journey. He'd been reading a lot this summer. He'd started with his old school books. Ron was determined to master spells he'd struggled with. His father had been helping him with it all. Mr. Weasley had found Ron one night sitting on the floor of his room surrounded by spell books and notes. He'd asked Ron about it, and his youngest son had come clean about how he'd been feeling and his determination to be the friend Harry deserved.

Luna Lovegood had spoken to Ron several times since she'd admitted her feelings to him. He'd never made fun of her since that day, but instead welcomed her insight. She'd helped Ron with some of the things on his mind and was helping him to see beyond labels.

Ron sighed as he thought of the slightly mental blonde girl. She was something indescribable to him. He couldn't define her in words. She always saw through his defenses and cut right to the heart of the matter with no preamble. Ron was beginning to see that the "Loony" thing was an act. He had caught glimpses of the real Luna several times, and found that she was a charming, thoughtful, and fun person. Ron always came back to the day she had told him how she felt about him, and how honest and forthcoming she had been.

Ginny had spoken to him about the pretty blonde several times since. She hadn't nagged or berated her brother, but talked as one human to another. Ron figured that Ginny was just trying to help, and knew that taunting her brother would only serve to aggravate him. Ron had spent a lot of time alone this summer, much as he had done near the end of the term. It was the only way he felt he could work things out.

Now that he'd spoken to Harry, and that seemed to be better, he could now focus on the other two things he'd been mulling over. Becoming a better student, and human being, and the mystery that was Luna

Lovegood.

Tracey Davis watched her boyfriend tend to his plants. He was always so delicate and gentle and precise when he tended to them. It reminded her of how he was with her. She liked that he was so tender with her. His eyes danced merrily whenever she kissed him, and when he held her, she always felt so safe, and cared for. Tracey had known it for a long time, but it never stopped amazing her how wonderful Neville Longbottom was.

She had been nervous and embarrassed when she'd pinned him to the wall of Greenhouse Five and kissed him so forcefully. He'd been like a scared rabbit when she told him that he would be escorting her to Hogsmeade. She had been told later by Hermione Granger how he had been utterly frantic with nerves the night before. And yet, she had never known it during their date. He had been very kind, and gentlemanly. She had actually been rather impressed by how confidently he carried himself.

"Neville." She said, watching how the young man turned to face her. He had become more of a man this past year. Gone was his baby fat, and a more muscular build was emerging. He was no Quidditch star, but he suited her just fine. His hair was cropped short, and neat, and his face looked less fearful, and awkward. Neville Longbottom had shed away his boyishness.

Tracey held up her slender hand and beckoned him to her with one well manicured finger. Neville didn't need to be told twice. He approached the beautiful blonde girl who had decided he was worthy of her, and wrapped his arms around her.

"You needed me?" he asked softly. Tracey nodded, a small smile adorning her gorgeous face, her blue eyes sparkling brightly.

"I just wanted to tell you that I am in love with you." She said sweetly.

Neville lowered his head and kissed her tenderly for a moment. His heart still pounded madly in his chest whenever they kissed. Neville had never understood why in the world someone as amazing as Tracey Davis would choose him, but he never asked her. He knew that you never questioned the will of destiny.

"This is so touching." A jaunty voice said. The two teenagers broke their kiss and turned to see who had chosen that moment to interrupt them.

"Harry!" Neville said in surprise.

"When did you get back?" Tracey asked. "Have you seen Daphne yet?"

"Yes. Will be going to get her a little later." Harry said as he hugged both his friends in turn.

"I read about Sirius being cleared. Congratulations, mate." Neville smiled.

"Yeah, he had to go to the Ministry and fill out some paperwork, so I'm running a few errands. I just saw Ron, and had a little chat. By the way, Happy Birthday, Neville."

"Thanks."

"Don't thank me yet. Wait until after tomorrow. We are going to have quite a day. I hope you both are ready." Harry said looking at the two.

"Yes, we're all packed, but we weren't expecting you for a few hours."

Tracey commented.

"Well, there's been a few plan changes. I was going to get Blaise and Susan first, but..."

"Have you seen them?" Tracey wondered.

"I did. As soon as I found out I went to St. Mungo's. Blaise is out of the woods. We'll all go see him in a few days. Hopefully they'll let him have visitors. Anyway, since things have spiraled out of control, you two are the first on my 'to retrieve' list. We're going to meet Sirius at the Ministry,

and then we have some things to do. I'm sure we'll have lunch at some point, and then tonight we'll get Hermione and Daphne."

"What about Ron?" Neville asked.

"He declined the invitation. He's going through some things. We had a good heart to heart, and I think he's changing, but we'll see. He mentioned Luna, do you guys know anything about that?"

Both Neville and Tracey shook their heads, just as confused as Harry appeared to be.

"Maybe the little pixie is getting to the redhead." Tracey shrugged.

"What a strange couple." Neville remarked.

"Might be just what he needs." Harry said. "If someone as...unique as Luna can't get him to see the world in a different light, he is truly beyond hope. Alright, daylights wasting, and I have loads to tell you guys. I guess I should wait until Daphne and Hermione are with us, though."

Harry led the others out of the greenhouse and into Neville's house where they gathered their things and Tracey thanked Neville's grandmother for her hospitality. Then, one by one, the three teenagers flooded to the Ministry of Magic.

5. Chapter 5

"I confess myself disappointed, Draco." The cold high voice said. "You were charged to kill the Bones family. Do you believe yourself immune to my anger?"

"No, My lord. I wanted to make them hurt, before killing them." Draco said with out fear. He knew what was to happen. He had disappointed the Dark Lord, and he would be tortured. Draco welcomed it. Unlike other followers, Draco never cowered before Lord Voldemort. No, Draco was in awe of his master's power.

"You enjoy causing suffering. I felt it when you as you sliced into the

Auror's flesh. I felt it when you held the Bones' under the Cruciatus. You are becoming my finest instrument. But you must obey me."

"I will, Master." Draco bowed, still waiting for the curse to come.

Voldemort sat in a high back chair in the middle of circular room. His hood had been lowered, and his face was still raw from the injuries he'd suffered when he had tried possessing Harry Potter. He stared at Draco for several long moments before he continued speaking.

"You are very unique, Draco. Why do you not fear me?"

"I do not fear you my lord, because I am not weak."

"You feel that fear is weakness?"

"Not if you are the one who is the cause of fear, my lord. I wish to be the cause of fear." Draco said evenly.

"You shall be, Draco. You are dismissed until I have need of you. Reveal yourself to no one. Go."

Draco stood, Surprised he had not suffered for his failure. He replaced his mask and hood before leaving the chamber, and left his master to his dark thoughts.. As Draco left, Voldemort suffered through a savage coughing fit. He had not felt right since the failed possession of Potter. The boy was powerful, of that there was little doubt, but the child was inexperienced, untrained. And yet, Potter had hurt him, without even casting a spell. This question plagued the Dark Lord.

It was becoming more and more bothersome. First there was the issue with the twin wand cores, that seemed to refuse to fight one another. And now, Voldemort couldn't inhabit the boy's mind without suffering pain. So what could he do?

He needed a new body. He had chosen Draco Malfoy. He had enhanced the Dark Mark to act as a conduit in which Voldemort could transfer limited amounts of his power into Draco's, essential binding their cores

together. It would be a slow process, but Voldemort preferred it to the alternative of repeating the ritual once again. It had taken too much to get the Potter boy, and the Malfoy boy was already so willing.

This choice came with the added bonus of getting his new assassin close to both Potter and Dumbledore. While he would never let anyone touch the Potter boy, Voldemort knew it would be little effort to get Draco near the interfering old fool, and get rid of him. Voldemort wouldn't even need to expose Snape in the process. The Dark Lord had already begun his plans for the aged headmaster's demise. In fact, Voldemort was sure that the welcoming feast would be the last Dumbledore ever saw.

Voldemort couldn't be happier with his choice. He'd needed little more than which to subjugate the young Malfoy, and in so choosing the young man had not only ensured a new body, but a much younger one. And if all went well, he would be able to face Harry Potter with not only a stronger core of magic, but a younger, more virile body, and the most perfect disguise.

There were of course a few potential flaws, but they were safely guarded secrets. The first would be that someone could learn what was happening. If Draco's body was destroyed before Voldemort's full power had been transferred, and the boy's soul sucked out by the Dementors, the Dark Lord would be stuck in this broken vessel.

The next potential problem would be if Draco realized what was happening. Fortunately, the boy was so obsessed with his vendetta, and also, not one of the more intelligent of his followers. A few empty promises, and Draco had become so blinded by his lust for vengeance, if he ever did fully comprehend his situation, it would be far too late.

This left only one final problem. Malfoy's mother had seen Draco take the new mark. She would have to die, and it must be at the child's hand. The

Dark Lord would not give the boy access to more power, nor would he enhance his spell knowledge for this. It would have to be all Draco's intent this was part of the enchantment. Draco would have to forsake all others, giving himself fully to his new master. Voldemort ad little worry that the boy would follow through. He'd helped the situation along by planting the thoughts into the boy's mind. Again, it had taken surprisingly little to get the boy to desire the kill.

Voldemort let out a long low chuckle. No one could stop him now. He would rule over all of Britain, and he would then lead all of wizarding kind into the future. A future he would rule by right.

"Thank you for seeing me, Severus." Narcissa said. She was trembling, and looked beyond exhausted. They sat in the small study of Snape's home. The usually pallid man, was even more wan, and his eyes had deep dark circles under them. He sat in front of the fire watching the slender woman carefully.

"Your note sounded quite urgent." He said. "I am sorry I have been unable to see you before now, but I have been quite ill."

"I will get right to it, then. It is Draco."

Snape nodded, already having guessed at her reason for requesting to see him. She was fidgeting her hands and looking everywhere.

"He's taken the mark. Our lord is using him as a weapon."

"Indeed." Snape said with no emotion.

"He's a boy, Severus." Narcissa said hysterical. "He's my only son. He's all I have left. I need your help."

"And what would you have me do? I have done my best to protect that arrogant little ponce for five years, and each year it becomes more and more tiresome. Perhaps if you had taken a hand in his upbringing rather than allowing your arrogant husband to do it all, the little blighter would

have had a chance."

"What are you saying?" Narcissa asked, fear in her eyes.

"Your son is lost. He took the mark willingly, and the Dark Lord will know if you try to take him away. Draco's end is near. If he makes it through the summer, his return to school will not be welcome. He has no power in which to rule the other Slytherins. They will unite against him, and he will suffer for all his past transgressions. I will not protect him this time." Snape ranted angrily.

"Snape. Draco is The Dragon. The Dark Lord has done something to him, enhancing his power, but he is not invulnerable. Someone will kill him. I can not lose my son. Please, help me."

"I see." Snape said thoughtfully. His black eyes stared into the blazing fire. This revelation was interesting. If Voldemort had made Draco his weapon, he would have obviously made him stronger, and Draco already had the desire to punish those he felt beneath him. But how to stop the boy? The Dark Lord would surely know if he became involved. Perhaps a conversation with Dumbledore would be in order.

"Will you help him, Severus?"

"No." The Potions master said simply. He looked into the hopeless eyes of Narcissa. Tears began falling down her pretty cheeks.

"He will listen to you." She wept.

"No he will not. He has already told me that I am beneath him. He has lost his respect for me, no doubt thanks to his father. There is nothing to be done. The Dark Lord will soon realize you are a danger to his new weapon and order your death. He may even use your son to carry it out. The boy has no real attachment to you, his father saw to that. You would be best served to leave this place and go into hiding."

"Not without my son." Narcissa stood up, staring at the wretched man

sitting by the fire. "I will find a way to help him, even if I have to go to Albus Dumbledore and beg. I will not lose my son, to that butcher."

"Narcissa, I have already told you. Draco is lost. Do not be a fool. I know you have stashed money away from Lucius. Take it and go. Make a new life for yourself. Stay, and Draco will kill you." Snape rose, trying to make the hysterical woman see reason.

"No. Draco may serve him, and the Dark Lord may order my death, but my son will never do it. He would never see me harmed. Thank you for seeing me. I hope you feel better. Good day."

She bustled out of the small house and disappeared into the afternoon.

Snape sat back in front of the fire. His head ached severely, but he couldn't take anymore pain potions for another three hours. He was well on his way to full recovery, but his head still felt like it was going to burst open any moment, especially after that conversation.

Draco Malfoy was the Dark Lord's new weapon. He had to inform Dumbledore. The boy should not be allowed back into school. The fact that the boy hadn't been issued any notices for underage magic was cause for suspicion until Snape figured the boy was using an untraceable wand. That would have been Voldemort's first order of business in utilizing the boy.

Still, from what he'd heard of the new Death Eater, he used significant amounts of power, and took an almost romantic pleasure in causing pain.

Perhaps the boy took after his Aunt. Snape cringed at thought of Bellatrix's enjoyment of torture and killing. She was addicted to it like a narcotic. If Draco were like that sadist, and had more power, he would need to be stopped at all costs.

Snape stood and went to the fire. He tossed a bit of floo powder and called out, "Headmaster's office, Hogwarts."

"Is this the right place?" Tracey asked. She, Neville, Remus Lupin and Harry were walking up a long path, following directions given to Harry by Daphne. They had apparated to a old unused dirt road off of a major throughway. Though it was still early afternoon, the trees blocked out most of the Sun. Harry had been leading them deeper into the woods for ten minutes now.

"If I'm following this right." Harry said unconvincingly.

"That's got to be the house." Neville said pointing to a building that looked like it was ready to fall apart. The paint was all but gone, leaving the bare rotting wood exposed to the elements. Half of the roof looked to be caved in, and they could swear they heard it creaking ominously.

Harry looked at the dilapidated building with suspicion. He turned to Tracey who shrugged.

"Come on." Remus smiled. "It's most likely charmed to look that way."

"Haven't you ever been here, Tracey?" Neville asked.

"No. I didn't know about this place until you told me, Harry. Usually, I stay at her house or we visit the property outside of Rome. I never knew they had a third house."

The four travelers walked up the broken down steps onto the rickety front porch. Harry took the lead, as the others watched the surrounding forest carefully. Harry knocked three times, and stepped back from the door, waiting for someone to come to answer. All the windows were dark, and several looked like they were broken. After several moments, a voice sounded on the other side of the door.

"Who's there?" the voice sounded quite old and feminine. "What's your business?"

"My apologies, ma'am. I'm supposed to be picking up my girlfriend. My name is Harry Potter."

"Who's that with ya?"

"Remus Lupin, Neville Longbottom, and Tracey Davis."

"Tracey?" the voice asked surprised. "Tell me Tracey, what do you call your favorite stuffed bunny?"

"Astoria?" Tracey looked suddenly embarrassed. "Um. I, uh, call him Sir Cuddles-a-Bunch." Tracey's face was burning red. She was aware that two of the three men were staring at her, mouths open.

"You will say nothing of this!" She said without looking at either of them.

The door opened and a young teenage girl, who looked very similar to Daphne greeted them. She rushed forward and hugged the taller blonde happily.

"I didn't know you were coming, too. Oh, this is going to be so much fun."

"Fun? We're only here for a little bit." Tracey said, obviously confused.

"I know, but...well, I shouldn't say anything. It will ruin it all. Come in, everyone."

Everyone entered the house and were amazed by the change. Inside this seemingly condemned house was a extravagantly beautiful home. The walls were done in stained wood, and the carpet was a striking red. The ceiling of the entry hall was vaulted, and Harry could see that it led down a long hallway. There were stairs to his right that led to the second floor.

"Daphne's in her room. Tracey you can go get her. Dad wants to see Harry right away. This way, Harry."

"What about Neville and Mr. Lupin?" Tracey asked.

"I will entertain them." Aurora Greengrass smiled as she was coming down the stairs. "It's good to see you again, Mr. Potter."

"And you as well, Mrs. Greengrass." Harry smiled, shaking her hand. "This is amazing. I'm still surprised by magic sometimes."

"This place is unknown to the general public. It belonged in my mother's family. We only just finished preparations on it when the term ended. Given our delicate situation, we felt it best to make ourselves harder to find."

"I'm sorry about that." Harry said genuinely. He had never wanted to be the cause of other people's troubles.

"Mr. Potter... Harry. Eventually we would have had to go into hiding. Cyrus and I do not want to be involved in this war. Our daughter has chosen to stand by your side. The best we can do is to try and keep her safe when she is with us. Now, I believe my husband would like a private word. I'm afraid he doesn't want an audience during this meeting, seeing as the last one went so awry." Aurora winked at the young boy.

"Gentlemen, we can wait in here."

Harry gave a nod to Remus and Neville and followed Astoria down the hall. She turned back as they walked.

"Look, I have a bet with my mother on how fast Daddy embarrasses himself. Please let us know about how long into your talk before he says or does anything stupid." She smiled brightly.

"You're hoping he embarrasses himself?"

"Dad has this funny habit of putting his foot in his mouth. You saw that when you first met him." She giggled at the memory. Harry shook his head, a smile coming to his lips.

Astoria knocked on a door, and poked her head inside.

"Dad? Harry Potter is here."

The man looked up from his work and smiled. He stood and approached the younger man, offering his hand. Harry took it and shook it firmly.

Cyrus excused the young girl, who had a broad grin on her face, and winked at Harry before closing the door.

"I'm afraid I'm the subject of much ridicule since our last meeting, Mr. Potter." Cyrus said, motioning to couple of chairs. Harry took a seat and smiled at the older man seated across from him.

"I am sorry about that."

"It's I who should be sorry. I let some of the articles I've read about you go to my head. My daughter has spoken quite highly of you over the years, and of course since you've begun courting her, I've only heard praise."

"I guess I should thank her for that."

"Mr. Potter," Cyrus began but Harry cut him off.

"Forgive me, sir. Harry will be just fine."

Cyrus considered him for a moment before nodding.

"Alright then, Harry. I must express concern over your relationship with Daphne. Understand, before you take offence of what I'm about to say. I find you a pleasant young man. You are polite, honest, and very brave. Dangerously so.

"You see, I had hoped to keep my family out of this war. But you have dragged Daphne into the middle of it. Do not mistake me. I am aware that she chose to be by your side, and it is commendable. I am very proud of what she's done, but I am frightened for her. She has painted a bulls eye on her self and this family. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir, I do. I did try and discourage her from coming with me, but she wouldn't budge."

"She has her mother's stubbornness. Harry, I would like to know your intentions towards my daughter."

Harry hiccupped. He stared at Cyrus, who only watched the boy. Harry's mind raced through a thousand different answers. He figured that admitting he'd like nothing more than to ravage the girls body wouldn't

be a good idea. Harry felt his mouth go dry, and he tried to speak, but only a strangled sort of squeak came out.

"I know that you are still young, and that you have a lot hanging over you, but it is customary in our world to ask of intentions when a relationship goes on as long as yours and my daughter's has"

Harry swallowed hard. He felt himself growing faint from lack of oxygen, and let out a breath he hadn't even been aware he'd been holding.

"Sir, I, uh...To be honest, I've never thought much about it." Harry said honestly.

"Not once?" Cyrus asked skeptically.

"In all honesty, sir, I feel very strongly for Daphne. I've never really had time to think beyond tomorrow for a long time. Last year with OWLs and Umbridge and everything else, it was hard to remember to eat or sleep at times. Daphne's been someone I've been able to count on, and she's always there when I need her. But I don't know if I have any plans. Not to be insulting, but I've just never thought on it."

"As I told you. Honesty. I like that, never lose it."

Harry held up his right hand, showing the scar he'd received under Umbridge's tutelage.

"It's pretty ingrained, sir." Harry said with a hint of sarcasm. Cyrus gave a nervous chuckle.

"Promise me this, Harry. Think about your future. I do not wish to see my daughter hurt. You are still young, I realize, but the years move swiftly. Think about what you see for yourself, and set your self some goals. You and I shall have another discussion regarding this at another time." Cyrus smiled and Harry felt himself relax a bit.

"Now, as for the arrangements for Daphne's stay with you." Cyrus said, more over-protectively.

"To be honest, sir, I've not seen my new house yet. I was there for only a few minutes this morning, but I do know the girls all have their own room, and they are away from the boys' rooms. There are several adults there, including my Godfather, and Former Professor Lupin." Harry said confidently.

"The werewolf?"

"Yes. He's got a room in the basement for his transformations, and it's sealed from the outside. He won't be a danger. Would you care to meet him? He accompanied us here today."

"You know, I think I would." Cyrus stood, and Harry followed him out to the living room where Remus and Aurora were discussing his time as a professor. Neville was seated, with Tracey on his right, holding hands. Astoria sat in a large chair, looking impatient, until she caught sight of her father and Harry. When Harry shrugged, Astoria looked as if he'd stolen her ice cream.

Hermione was standing near the fireplace, looking at some of the wood carving in the mantle piece. And then, Harry saw Daphne. She had cleaned up since this morning at the hospital. She was dressed casually, in form fitting jeans and a light sweater. Her hair was pulled into a loose ponytail, and her eyes shone brightly as he smiled at her.

Daphne practically jumped into his arms, and Harry saw a wistful smile on Mrs. Greengrass' lips. Harry inhaled deeply, reveling in the scent of her shampoo. He could only identify apricot, but knew there was some kind of flowers in it as well.

He could feel her breath on his neck as she nuzzled him, keeping her pressed closely. She kissed his neck softly, and then pulled back enough to kiss him properly. It was a rather chaste kiss, given that her parents were watching them, but it held the promise of a more proper greeting

later.

"Cyrus, this is Remus Lupin." Aurora said, introducing the two men.

Remus shook Mr. Greengrass' hand firmly and Cyrus looked the man over.

"You'll be in charge of all this?" He said waving to the teenagers.

"I will be one of the adults, yes. Sirius Black will be there, as well as a few others who consider themselves Harry's family. We all take great interest in keeping him, and his friends, safe." Remus said matter-of-factly.

"Pardon me, but did you say Sirius Black? He's a murderer." Cyrus bristled.

"Actually, he was framed for that." Harry said, a bit of anger in his tone. Daphne clutched his hand tightly, calming him. "He was cleared of all charges. He's no more a murderer than I am." Harry said proudly.

"And, if I need to reach any of you." Cyrus asked.

"You can floo call anytime." Harry said. "Simply ask for 'the Beacon' and someone will be there, I'm sure."

"The Beacon?" Hermione asked.

"You'll understand when you see it. It's fantastic." Remus smiled at the girl. "If there are no more questions, we should be getting back."

"Thank you for taking time and speaking with me, Harry." Cyrus smiled as he shook hands with the boy. Daphne watched happily as the two most important men in her life bonded. She hugged her father tightly.

"I'll see you soon." She said.

"You go and enjoy yourself." Her mother smiled as she too hugged her daughter. Harry shook hands with Daphne's mother, and then lined up for his turn at the floo. Neville went first, followed by Remus, Tracey, Hermione, Harry, and finally Daphne.

She fell out of the fireplace, but was caught by Harry, who helped her to her feet.

"I always hate traveling by Floo." She said.

"I prefer broomstick, myself." Harry smiled.

"Welcome!" Sirius smiled. All eyes turned to the newly cleared convict.

"Hello, Sirius." Hermione said, hugging the man.

"Hello again, Hermione. Always a pleasure. And the lovely Miss Greengrass, enchanted." Sirius said, kissing the girl's hand. He looked to Neville and Tracey, smiling graciously. "You must be Neville Longbottom. You look a lot like you father. Good to met you, sir. And this must be Tracey Davis. An absolute pleasure, madam."

"Wow, you really can lay it on thick." Harry laughed.

"I am a gentleman, sir, and I'll thank you to not insult me when greeting our guests." Sirius said haughtily. Harry and Remus both stifled their laughter behind their fists. Sirius eyed them a moment.

"Alright, enough out of you both!" Sirius yelled, which only made Harry and Remus laugh harder. Sirius shook his head.

"I'll show you to your rooms." Sirius told the group. Remus stood, still laughing and stopped his friend.

"Do you know where you're going?" He asked. Sirius thought for a few moments, then sadly shook his head. Remus doubled over with laughter, and Sirius sat heavily, pouting.

"This way kids." Remus said after a long moment, and finally regaining himself. "Sirius, would you like to join us on the tour?"

Sirius gave an obscene gesture, but followed the group anyway.

The Beacon was an old Roman lighthouse that Remus and Sirius had remodeled. It had four floors, not counting the actual lighthouse portion. The bedrooms were on the third level, and all the girls shared one large

room together. The room was not unlike the dorms at school, with several large beds and wardrobes. There was a large bathroom across the hallway for their use.

Neville was in a bedroom similar to the girls. Harry explained that he was supposed to have company with him, but circumstances had changed. Neville didn't seem to mind it at all.

Harry's room was in the lighthouse tower, just below the actual beacon light. It was a nice large circular room with large window where he could see the sea. The room had a large comfortable bed, and his own bathroom. Harry loved it. His school things were all put away neatly, his books on a long shelf above a desk, and a perch for Hedwig next to the window.

Remus showed them all through the house, bringing their attentions to the small library, training room, and the swimming pool. All the teens became excited at the sight of the large indoor pool. There were many other bedrooms, and a huge kitchen in which another surprise awaited Harry.

"HARRY POTTER, SIR!" A small blur rushed forward and attached itself to Harry's leg quite firmly. Dobby the house elf was squealing excitedly as he clutched the teen's leg. Harry was looking at the other's who were all smirking at the humorous antics of the little creature.

"Dobby is so happy to be serving the great Harry Potter. Dobby is promising to be the best elf he can."

"Slow down. Wait...What?" Harry asked, confusion evident on his face.

"A gift from Dumbledore." Remus said. "Before you get angry, Hermione, we've already discussed wages and holidays with Dobby."

Hermione, who had been about to complain about Dobby being given as a gift, closed her mouth without a word.

"Wow, I think he loves you more than me." Daphne said with a smile. "I think I should be jealous."

"Dobby, it would be great if you would let go of me right now." Harry said, a little irritated. Dobby jumped back, a slightly embarrassed smile on his face.

"Dobby has much to do. If you are needing anything from Dobby, just call." He was gone in an instant, leaving Harry to suffer all kinds of ribbing from his friends. Harry determined to have a talk with the elf about his enthusiasm.

Remus told the teens how to reach the beach, and the five of them were off to see the shore. It was an easy trail to find and navigate. Hermione excused herself, and set off for the water, rolling up her pants and slipping off her shoes. Neville and Tracey waved and headed off in one direction, hand in hand, leaving Harry and Daphne to wander off in the opposite direction.

"Do you have any idea how much I have missed you?" Daphne asked of the raven haired boy. Harry smiled at the lovely young woman at his side.

"No. But it can't be nearly close to how much I missed you." He remarked.

"You think so?" Daphne challenged.

"I thought of you everyday. I missed you so much. It was awful not being able to receive letters from you. The trip was great and I had so much fun, but I was mentally counting the days until I could be with you again."

Daphne stopped walking, pulling the boy close to her, and staring deep into his emerald green eyes. Her eyes were misting over his declaration and she wanted him to know how she felt. She pulled him slowly closer until her lips were on his. She poured every ounce of love and passion

she held for Harry into her kiss, and he returned it in kind.

Daphne had once read a romance novel, where the lead characters kissed on the shore. She had always thought the imagery was nice, but at this moment, when she had finally been reunited with her true love after such a long time, Daphne was convinced there was nothing better in the whole world.

Narcissa Malfoy returned to the house she was hiding away in with Draco. When she entered to the run down building, she felt an instant sense of foreboding. She grasped at her wand, which suddenly flew from her hand.

"Hello, Mother." Came the menacing drawl of her son. He sat in the chair that Lord Voldemort had occupied several nights prior. His face was paler than normal, and his normally gray eyes looked darker. He was tapping her wand on his leg slowly, little sparks spitting out with each tap.

"Draco." She said stiffly, trying to hide the fear. Snape's words coming to her. "He will kill you."

Her heart was pounding, but she kept her self composed. She eyed her son as if she were becoming angry with him. She removed her cloak, hanging it up, and faced her son as if to scold him.

"Where were you? I have been waiting for quite some time now." Draco said slowly, eyeing her carefully.

"I was attending to some affairs." She lied easily.

"What affairs? We have no money, no businesses. We have nothing for you to attend to. I will ask again. Where have you been?" He said without any emotion.

"It is none of your concern where I have been." Narcissa stood defiantly.

"You are wrong." Draco said, standing slowly. He held up his mothers wand and snapped it neatly in half, tossing the broken pieces behind him

into the fire.

"What have you done?" Narcissa cried out. She rushed forward, slapping her son. His head whipped to the side with the force of the blow, a large red handprint clearly visible on his pallid cheek.

Draco slowly turned his head back, his countenance darkening as he stared at the woman who had given him life. With out any warning, Draco slapped his mother, knocking her to the floor.

"You have betrayed our lord." He said, stalking towards her. Narcissa began to back away, tears stinging her eyes. She was now beginning to regret not heeding Snape's advice. She began to plead with her child for mercy. He heard none of it. His own wand was in his hand, and a sinister smile spread on his face.

"Draco, please. I am your mother."

"All that I deserve shall be mine. You should have never questioned me. Your usefulness is at an end." Draco's head titled slightly, and the smile faded.

"Goodbye, Mother."

6. Chapter 6

"So, Lord Voldemort has made Draco a Death Eater." Dumbledore pondered the news he'd just received. Severus Snape watched the old man for a few moments, while he seemed to be puzzling over the latest revelation. They were alone in the Headmaster's office. Snape had contacted the elder wizard immediately after Narcissa Malfoy had left his cottage to inform him of all he had learned. The Headmaster had been quite taken aback by the news.

"It was Draco who murdered Shackbolt, and the other Aurors. He was the one at the Bones' home last evening. He is dangerous, Albus, we can not allow him to return." Snape said slowly.

"You must be mistaken. Draco could not best a qualified Auror, much less four.." Dumbledore said gently.

"I do not know how it was done, just that it was him. The boy has always been powerful, surely you've felt it radiate off of him. Lucius had him on private tutor for years. I'll even hazard a guess that it was on the Dark Lord's orders. But none of our guess work matters, the boy is dangerous. Do you really believe that Voldemort wouldn't order the boy to execute you?"

"No, I'm not so naïve as that. I still do not understand how Draco could overpower four Aurors. Even with as powerful as he is. To do what they say he did takes a vast amount of control, which many never learn."

Dumbledore said thoughtfully.

"Do you require me to investigate?"

"No. no it would give away that we know. For now it is best we pretend that we do not know. In the mean time, we should concentrate on our own young warrior."

"Do not call him that. He is a boy, not some weapon."

"Surely you are not standing up for young Harry Potter?" Albus said sarcastically.

"I will admit this once, and only to you." Snape growled. "That night in the cave was an awakening. I have let Lily's memory down, I will do so no more."

"Very good." Dumbledore smiled, eyes twinkling madly.

"What do you have in mind for him?"

"Harry as a very powerful aura, much like mister Malfoy's, yet his power has been increasing of late, and I dare say it is due to so many positive reinforcements. I am anxious to see how his travels have affected him. But before we can begin a regiment of training, there is still something

that is blocking his access to his full core."

"What is it? A mental block?"

"Something like that, yes. It was given to him the night his parents died."

"The scar?" Snape asked surprised.

"Indeed. You see, I think that Voldemort did something he intended to do, but not in the way he desired. I think there is a piece of Voldemort's soul inside young Mister Potter."

"No." Snape said utterly bewildered and horrified.

"I would like to test this theory, but I believe it to me true. Would you be willing to assist me in ascertaining the truth of this?"

"Of course. And if he is?" Snape asked, worry evident in his voice.

"If it is true, I am unsure what we will do. But we will discover a way to help him. We must."

Snape stared at the headmaster in silence. Only the occasional trill of Fawkes disturbed the strange contemplative silence. Snape put the pieces together. It was why it had been so important to teach the boy Occlumency, and why Voldemort's emotional state had such an impact on the boy. Snape felt himself become lightheaded with the realization.

"What do you suggest we do about the Malfoy boy?" Dumbledore asked after many long moments.

"Allow him to think he's coming back to school. Even let him ride the train, I doubt he will do anything there with so many witnesses. The Dark Lord will want him to keep his identity and his mission a secret. When he arrives in the castle, we arrest him."

"A very good plan."

"I wish we didn't have to do it, but it's the only way. If we move too early, we tip our hand. Perhaps if we have him in custody we can reach him, but I think he's beyond that. I told you already of my suspicions

regarding the tortures."

"Yes. I wish we could have caught the culprits. I must confess that I am afraid for the future, Severus. If we are unable to help young Harry Voldemort will win. Many will die, and we will be powerless to stop him from taking over completely. We are balancing on the edge of a knife here."

Severus Snape stood slowly, still feeling effects from the poison. "Then we must do everything we can to make sure we do not fail. No more secrets, Albus. Those who need to know must be told for what they are fighting for. You can no longer be the puppet master. You must become the leader of the light that we all believe you to be. And it must start now."

The five teenagers made their way back to the Beacon, Harry Potter's new home with his godfather. Harry was in high spirits this evening. He was home, which was still a foreign idea to him. For fourteen years, he'd been oppressed, humiliated, punished, and ignored at the hands of his family, people who were supposed to love, protect and care for him.

For the first eleven years of his life, he'd never gotten a real birthday, or Christmas gift, and his only friends had been the spiders that inhabited the cupboard under the stairs. He'd been taunted and beaten by kids at school, thanks to his whale of a cousin, and had been shunned by nearly everyone.

Then, he'd experienced a dramatic change, when he'd learned of his heritage. Each year since he'd first began at Hogwarts had been a rollercoaster of ups and downs, with making friends, and facing things from storybooks.

But now, he had nearly everything he'd ever dreamed of. A home. A place where he was welcomed, and loved, and treated as a human being.

He had friends, and not just a few, but many. And, he thought to himself as he watched Daphne, he had a beautiful girlfriend who he cared more deeply for than he'd ever dreamed possible.

As the five wayward teens entered the house, they were stunned when many friendly faces screamed out "SURPRISE!"

On the wall opposite the door was a large banner reading "Happy Birthday Harry and Neville!"

The room was filled with people, including the Weasley twins, Remus and Sirius, Alastor Moody, Nymphadora Tonks, Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, Ron, Ginny, Luna Lovegood, and a few people Harry hadn't met yet.

"Happy Birthday, Harry." Mrs. Weasley smiled, wrapping him in her world famous hug.

"Thank you." Harry smiled as he shook Mr. Weasley's hand.

"Hello, Harry." Luna smiled dreamily. Harry hugged the pretty blonde Ravenclaw, surprising her.

"I didn't think you'd make it. Remus said you never responded."

"I hadn't plan to come, unless Ron came as well." She said simply. "I had trouble convincing him that this was a good idea."

"Well, I'm happy you made it."

Harry greeted everyone, getting many hugs and handshakes. He watched as Neville, looking very embarrassed, received many greetings himself. He also noticed that Hermione looked quite pleased with herself, and figured at least part of this had been her doing.

"Hey, mate." Ron said softly, shaking Harry's hand.

"Glad you changed your mind." Harry said happily.

"Luna convinced me that it was where I belonged. Sirius said that you were all going to some kind of park tomorrow. I'd like to come, if it's alright?"

"Absolutely. It's going to be great. Just us, none of the grownups. It's all muggle stuff, so it should be really fun."

"Well, it sounds interesting. I'll let you mingle with your other guests. We can catch up later, yeah?"

"Of course. And thanks for coming, Ron."

The redhead nodded, a slight blush creeping up his neck. Harry chatted with a few more people including, Moody, who was unable to stay for long, but wanted to come by and give his best wishes. Harry thanked the old Auror gratefully, and after Moody promised to stop in again for a proper visit, he left the party.

"You looked like you could use this." Daphne smiled sweetly, handing her boyfriend a butterbeer.

"So how involved in this were you?" Harry asked knowingly.

"Hermione was the mastermind, I swear. I only helped a little. I think she and Remus were the main culprits." She admitted.

"But, you did help. Is that why you kept me so distracted on the beach?"

"No. That was all about my desire to have you alone, and welcome you back properly." She laughed. Harry pulled her close and kissed her soundly. She clutched his shoulders tightly as she returned the kiss.

"How do you think Neville's handling all the attention?" Harry asked after they broke the kiss.

"Tracey's with him, lending support. He's getting more confidence, but I don't think he's comfortable with being the center of attention." Daphne said, nodding in the direction where Neville was talking with Fred and George Weasley.

"'Ello, 'Arry." Said a pretty looking blonde.

"Fleur?" Harry asked in utter amazement. "What are you doing here?"

"I am here with my fiancée', Bill." She said as they were joined by a tall

rugged looking redhead. Harry recognized Bill Weasley and his mouth fell open.

"How did you two meet?" Harry asked, shaking the eldest Weasley boy's hand.

"We met at work. She works at Gringotts, and I just transferred back to be closer to home. With all the things happening, I wanted to be near. We hit it off, and that's that." Bill smiled broadly.

"Well, congratulations. I'm sorry." Harry shook his head shamefully. "I'm being rude. Bill, Fleur, this is my girlfriend Daphne Greengrass."

"Oh, Arry, you little devil. She is very pretty. My poor sister shall be 'eartbroken."

"Charmed to met you." Bill said shaking Daphne's hand. "You've got to be the one Ginny's been raving about. I understand you two really shook up Hogwarts this year."

"We may have turned a few heads." Daphne shrugged.

"Modest. Very nice." Fleur grinned.

"Harry!" Sirius said, joining the group. "Quite a welcome home, don't you think? Dinner is ready, we're all heading to the dining room."

"There's no squid, right?" Harry asked, smiling. The others looked confused, and Sirius threw his hands up, walking away muttering.

"Squid?" Daphne asked. Harry began laughing.

"I think dinner would be a good time to share stories of my travels."

Harry grinned.

And he did. All during dinner, Harry and Sirius kept their guests enthralled with the tales of their journeys throughout Europe and Asia. The told of seeing the Pyramids in Egypt, and Bill weighed in on many of the fascinating facts of the pharaohs. Harry shared the story of Sirius making friends with several muggle hoodlums at a soccer game, and the

chaos of the victory celebration.

They talked fondly of their time in Paris, and of the history and rich culture in the City of Light. Sirius laughed remembering the persistent girl who hounded Harry during their train ride to Rome, and Harry kept his head buried during the entire story. Daphne, hearing of her boyfriend's many polite attempts to inform the would be stalker of his girlfriend back home, clutched his arm tightly and told everyone that Harry was no longer allowed to travel without her, which caused many to laugh hard.

Harry had revenge when he retold the story of how Sirius had tried to kill him repeatedly throughout the trip by tricking Harry into trying different varieties of food. Sirius began protesting against Harry's accusations, but Harry kept pressing, explaining some of the things he'd been presented with. There were peels of laughter as Harry detailed each "delicacy" he'd tried and the results of each dish.

"By the time we got to Hong Kong, I was so suspicious of him, I was nearly picking apart everything. That's when he decided on squid for dinner."

"You're never gonna let it go, are you?" Sirius said, shaking his head. Harry smiled at his godfather, who eyed him dangerously.

"Did you really give him squid?" Ron asked, looking a bit green at the thought.

"Yep." Harry confirmed. "Tentacles and all."

"Ick." Hermione said, shaking her head. "I tried calamari in France, and I didn't care for it."

"What's calamari?" Asked Ron.

"Fried squid." Hermione answered. Ron dropped his fork, staring at his friend.

"They fry it?"

"Yeah, but I got the raw variety." Harry said. "I might have eaten it if I hadn't noticed that my noodles had little suckers on them."

"It is quite good, Ron." Fleur said a little forcefully.

"I'm sure it is, Fleur." Hermione said to the stunning blonde. "It's just not for everyone."

"It's good to try new things when you're in a different country." Remus smiled.

"Ah ha! See, Harry. Good to try new things." Sirius roared triumphantly.

"However, you shouldn't be tricked into it." Remus finished. Sirius deflated a bit at the reprimand.

"Yeah, Sirius. Never trick someone into eating something when they have no idea what it is. I learned that for those to jokers." Harry said, indicating Fred and George, who looked very proud. "Never know when you might turn into something bizarre because you sampled new foods."

"Not to worry, Harry." Fred grinned.

"Yeah, we only dabble in sweets." George confirmed.

When dinner was concluded, and both Neville and Harry received their presents, which were numerous to both, there had been cake, and the party began breaking up. Harry and Neville saw all the well wishers off, before settling down with the remaining friends.

Neville showed Ron to the room he would be staying in, while Hermione and Tracey took Ginny and Luna to the girls room. Daphne and Harry disappeared on their own for awhile.

Sirius and Remus sat down with fresh butterbeer to talk with the few remaining adults, Tonks, and Mr. and Mrs. Weasley.

"I'm so sorry about Kingsley." Sirius began. Tonks, who had been very quiet throughout the evening, thanked the newly cleared fugitive. "Would

you like to talk about it?"

Tonks sniffled, and smiled when Remus put a supportive arm around her. The two had only begun seeing each other romantically, after Sirius had argued with the man over his stupidity in trying to reject the girl. Remus had not wanted to become involved with the pretty young metamorphous for many reason, most of which centered around his affliction. Sirius had helped him to see he was fooling no one, and Remus had finally allowed himself to fall for the young Auror.

"I knew we were being set up." Tonks started. "It felt wrong to me somehow."

"How do you mean?" Mr. Weasley asked.

"The tip that came in telling us to be there, and we would find several high ranking Death Eaters. It was too good to pass up. But it felt like a set up. I tried to tell Kingsley, but he had faith in Rufus' ability to smell a trap. If Alastor had gotten that tip, we would have been more prepared. When that Death Eater killed Borgin, we went in. I went round the back like I was supposed to, and that's where we caught Wormtail. He tried changing into a rat, but I knew about it, and I saw his little silver paw. I nailed the traitor with a stunner and bound him up.

"Barnes had been stunned, and was out. I got the other Death Eater and Fletcher came round to help. I don't know where he'd been, but it didn't matter. I sent him back to the Ministry with Wormtail, and then went inside the shop.

"I got hit with something like a body bind, but different. I can't explain it. Then I saw what that little bastard was doing." Tonks broke down in tears, and Remus held her close. The rest of the room was quiet, waiting for her to continue. She cried for a few moments, until she finally regained herself.

"He put some kind of bind on Kingsley. All the curse he cast couldn't be taken off, not even with a Finite. Then he tore pieces of Kingsley's skin off. He was enjoying himself, like he was painting or something."

"Is this the same one who led the attack on the Bones family?" Arthur asked. Mrs. Weasley looked quite pale, a shaking hand covering her mouth. Her husband had his arm wrapped around her trembling shoulders.

"Moody said it was. He's extremely powerful, and we think it might actually be Him." Tonks said.

"That doesn't make sense." Sirius commented. "He doesn't usually like to get his hands dirty. Usually he sends his followers to do the dirty work."

"You didn't see what he did." Tonks replied.

"I know, and I'm not refuting it. I'm only asking why the bastard would only now start leading attacks. If it were something big, I could understand, but not for these little outings."

"Maybe his followers are beginning to doubt his power. After what happened at the Ministry, and what Harry did to him, who could blame them." Molly Weasley said softly.

"No, there's something more going on here." Sirius said thoughtfully. "Has anyone spoken with Dumbledore?"

"He's been busy with some project." Remus said. "I've been trying to rally Werewolves, but it's a lost cause. So long as Fenrir Greyback is leading them, they'll follow You-Know-Who."

"The Goblins are staying neutral again, and won't be swayed either way."

Arthur shook his head. "And the centaurs won't leave the forest. I heard Amelia Bones is trying to garner support from some of the foreign Ministries."

"Doubtful they'll step in so long as it remains an English problem. The

giants are behind the Death Eaters, and it's only a matter of time before the Dementors join his cause." Sirius sighed.

"Forgive me, Sirius," Arthur said, building his courage. "But is it true? Is it really going to come down to Harry?"

The room fell silent, all eyes on Sirius, who sipped his butterbeer slowly, thinking for a long moment.

"I heard the prophecy with him. I wish I could tell you all one way or the other, but the truth is, I honestly don't know. But my instincts say yes.

Even if it's not true, Voldemort is hell bent in making it true."

The view from the top of the Beacon was breathtaking. Not that Harry or Daphne really noticed. They were so taken with each other that they hadn't even noticed the sunset. They had barely spoken since they'd gotten up in the lighthouse tower.

"Merlin, Harry." Daphne said finally breaking apart from her boyfriend.

"You've convinced me. You missed me."

"I tried to tell you, but you just wouldn't listen." Harry smiled.

"I have to tell you, love. You look happier than I've ever seen. The trip was really good for you."

Harry shook his head. "I don't think it was the trip. It's this. This place, having you here. It's all of it."

Daphne's mental alarms went off. She was close to something here. Harry was an incredibly private person. They had been dating nearly an entire year, and she knew so little of his childhood. He kept a tight lock on those memories, and so many other things. She had never pushed him into sharing, but she had grasped at every little scrap of information he'd shared.

"What do you mean?" She asked coyly.

"I, uh..." Harry released Daphne from his arms, and turned to stare out at

the ocean. "I feel like I'm whole, for the first time in my life. And it scares me."

Daphne stepped forward and touched his shoulder gently. She waited for him to continue.

"I was a punching bag at my Aunt and Uncle's house. I uh, was...uh, I lived in a cupboard under the stair case until I was eleven and I got my Hogwarts letter. They hated magic, and thought they could beat it out of me."

"Oh, Harry." Daphne said, so many clues falling into place. She had seen how he reacted to getting presents. She'd noticed how sometimes she flinched when she touched him. It wasn't often, but she'd noticed. There had been signs, and until now, none of them had made sense.

"I should hate them, but I just can't. I don't feel anything for them. They didn't ask to be landed with me. Sure they could have been nicer, but they were forced into taking me in. But I never have to see them again, so it doesn't matter anymore."

"That's a really mature attitude, but no one would blame you if you did hate them." Daphne assured.

"I can't I can't feel anything when I think of it all. In a way, it's made me who I am. I don't know who I might be if they had treated me differently. But I really appreciate the people in my life. It's why Ron's behavior hurt so bad. It was kind of like he was another version of the Dursleys."

Harry turned to look at his girlfriend, who had tears in his eyes.

"I'm not telling you this to make you cry." Harry said seeing Daphne's distress.

"I know. I just...I'm so angry at those people. I don't understand how anyone could treat a child so poorly."

"It doesn't matter. Besides, I have other things that are more important. I

need to tell you something. I heard the prophecy. I know why Voldemort wants to kill me."

Daphne's eyes grew so large, and her hands flew to her mouth, covering the gasp that escaped her lips.

"I am the one who's supposed to destroy him." Harry said finally. Daphne began to cry in earnest. She pulled Harry into her arms, and he held her tightly. He rubbed her back gently, whispering soothing words to her.

"How can anyone expect you to do this?" she asked, looking into his green eyes.

"I don't know. I don't know what's going to happen. But I know that when the time comes I'm going to fight as hard as I can and do my best to take him down."

"I'll be by your side the whole time." Daphne said sternly. "I'm not going to let you do any of this alone. I love you, and I'm not going let you down."

"I know. I love you, too." Harry smiled, kissing her sweet lips gently. "you and the others showed me that there's no way I'm in this alone, and after a month with Sirius, I know that I'll have all the help I ever want."

"So do you have a plan?" Daphne asked, sniffing.

"I'm going to speak with Dumbledore, and he's supposed to fill me in on a lot of things I don't know. Sirius has spent a lot of time giving me a history of the last war, and I've got a feel for what Voldemort's agenda is. Once I talk with Dumbledore, and I have all the information, I'll start figuring things out. For now. I want to enjoy the peace I have while it lasts. With you."

Harry leaned forward again, taking Daphne's lips with his. She crushed herself into him, holding him tightly. Daphne's head was swimming. She finally understood Harry Potter. He was an amazing young man, who was

so much more than anyone had realized. She loved him so deeply.

In the last few moments, he had opened his soul to her fully. He had allowed her to see his deepest darkest secrets. He had trusted her with it all, even the prophecy. Daphne had known in that moment that she would die to protect him. She would do everything she could to help him face Voldemort, and when it was all done, She would marry him.

As Harry stood there, holding onto the girl he loved, he began to feel something. It sang to him, like Phoenix song. It started in his chest, pulsing with the rhythm of his heartbeat. He'd felt something similar, but never as strongly, except once, just a little over a month ago. Harry tried to clear that dark memory from his mind but it forced it's way to the front of Harry's conscious mind. The beast that had been strangling him, and the wicked voice pleading for Dumbledore to kill Harry. And then he'd seen Daphne and Hermione and Sirius. That was when he'd felt it. A warm, comforting something that had banished Voldemort from his mind.

Harry's mind began repeating words over and over, "A power he knows not."

Draco Malfoy knew he should feel remorse, or sadness or regret. He felt nothing. He was unconsciously rubbing his right arm where his mark of allegiance was resting invisible. He was staring at the now lifeless body of his mother, and could feel no remorse for what he'd done.

The Dark Lord had ordered her death, and Draco had obeyed without question. But now as he stared at her still lovely face, he knew he should be feeling something. Anything, but all that was there was the hate.

Draco had wanted nothing more than to make those who had wronged him to suffer, and the list was very long indeed. The Dark Lord had promised him more power than he could imagine, and he'd tasted it the

night he'd killed for the first time. He now understood his Aunt Bellatrix. He understood why she craved murder. It was intoxicating, and orgasmic. Draco had never experienced anything like it, until he'd begun his ministrations on the big black man.

The screams had been exquisite to him, the blood like the finest wine. Draco had never ever felt such strength. It was why he took his time with the Bones family. He couldn't get enough of the screams.

Then he'd seen that traitor Zabini, and Draco's concentration had been broken. He'd lost his focus. Seeing the dark skinned Slytherin had caught him off guard, and before he could turn his focus on the traitor, the Aurors had come. Draco had not been afraid of the Ministry's lap dogs, but his master had ordered him to retreat when the Aurors showed up. Draco had been able to get a small measure of justice. Banishing the two teenagers through the wall had been most satisfying, and then he'd learned of the grievous injuries the boy had sustained. Draco had felt faint with the rush of adrenaline.

But when he had faced down his mother, when he'd heard her pleas for mercy, he had felt none of those things. He'd not felt anything else either. He had just struck her down, and that had been it.

It was puzzling to Draco that he should feel so little as he had loathed his mother for some time. She had never shown any real interest in him. Only his father had demonstrated any sort of affection for the boy. Not that Draco felt anything for that waste of flesh anymore. He'd never granted Draco any real power.

No, Draco had pledged his loyalty to Voldemort, and The Dark Lord had immediately granted the boy what he'd desired above all else. Power, and the means to eradicate any who forgot where their place was.

Draco Finally felt he would get the respect he deserved. Soon the world

would tremble at his name. He was to be the right hand of the most powerful wizard in the world. First they would conquer England, and then Europe. Soon, the world would be theirs, and they would eradicate the mudblood disease, and he, Draco, would lead the charge.

7. Chapter 7

Harry awoke early the morning of his sixteenth birthday to the insistent tapping on his window. He opened his bleary eyes and lifted his head. He wanted to curse whoever was responsible for awaking him so bloody early in the morning.

He and Daphne had stayed up very late making up for all their lost time. They had talked a lot about Harry's past. Once he'd begun opening up, he didn't want to stop. He wanted Daphne to really know who he was, and what she was getting into.

Harry reached out to the bedside table and fumbled around trying to find his glasses, he shoved them onto his face. All his anger faded as soon as he saw the proud snowy owl tapping at his window.

"Hedwig!" He cried leaping out of his bed and throwing open the window. His beautiful white familiar swept inside, alighting on his shoulder. She nipped at his ear lovingly and Harry rubbed his cheek on the top of her head. Hedwig hoot merrily, and Harry untied the letter attached to her leg and took her to her new perch. Harry dumped several owl treats into her bowl, and smiled.

"It's so good to see you, girl." Harry said happily. He turned his attention to the letter she had brought him, and opened it, recognizing the tidy scrawl.

Dear Harry,

I do hope this letter finds you well. I wish to visit with you and have the conversation I promised that we would have. If you are agreeable, I would like

to come by tomorrow evening at six o'clock. We have much to discuss and it may take more than one visit in which to get through everything.

Until then, Happy Birthday, Harry, and do enjoy this day.

Sincerely Albus Dumbledore.

Harry felt a strange sense of foreboding. He had been expecting this conversation for a long time, but now that it was seemingly imminent, Harry couldn't help feeling he would not like what he was going to be told. He stared at Hedwig, who had folded her head under her wing, and gone to sleep. With a sigh, Harry gathered his clothes.

After a long eye opening shower, Harry dressed and proceeded down to breakfast. Today, he was going to experience something he'd dreamed of since he was very small. Visiting an amusement park with friends, and today promised to be extra fun, as half of his friends had never even heard of an amusement park. Today promised to be hysterical.

Harry went down for an early breakfast. He and his friends weren't due to leave until around noon, so he doubted anyone was up quite yet. As he passed the room Neville and Ron were sharing he could hear Ron's snores confirming his suspicions.

When Harry arrived at breakfast he was surprised to see Sirius and Remus talking with someone he hadn't seen since the night of the Ministry.

"HAGRID!" Harry said, running to his half-giant friend.

"ARRY! Good to see yeh. 'Appy Birthday, eh." Hagrid beamed. "Sirius tells me yer taking yer friends to an amusement park. Should be loads of fun fer yeh."

"What are you doing here?" Harry asked, sitting down.

"Well, I 'ad to come by an' give yeh my present. I'm sorry I couldn't make it to yer party, but I jus couldn't get away."

"No apology necessary, Hagrid." Harry said.

"Hagrid was telling us about his brother." Sirius said, eyeing Harry strangely. "Why didn't you tell me you met him?"

"I'm sorry. I kind of forgot with all the had happened. How is he Hagrid?"

"Coming along. He's still just a young lad, and his concentration isn't that good, so sometimes it's hard to get him to pay attention, but he's doing better."

"Will you be testifying, Hagrid?" Remus asked. Hagrid shook his great hairy head.

"Nah. Dumbledore and I talked about it. The courts wouldn't listen to a witless half-breed like me." Hagrid said, dripping with sarcasm.

"Who else is testifying?" Harry asked.

"We don't know. It's all been kept quiet. Probably to keep those witnesses from being bribed by the defense. Since you've been out of the country, there wasn't much to worry about." Remus said.

"Dumbledore will be there of course." Hagrid smiled.

"Yes, but he'll be unable to rule on the case. As Headmaster, he could be called on as a witness, and since he'll be biased towards the school, and Harry, the law says someone else will act as Chief Warlock." Sirius said.

"It doesn't matter." Remus shrugged. "The evidence against the woman is substantial. It would take quite a lot to get the woman off with less than twenty years."

"Who's getting twenty years?" Asked Hermione as she joined them. "Hi, Hagrid, how are you?"

"Very good, Hermione." the half-giant said, hugging the demure girl, who sat next to Harry when Hagrid released her.

"We're just discussing the trial." Remus informed the girl.

Hermione's face scrunched in distaste. "That woman was absolutely

horrible. What she did to us all was unforgivable. If it weren't for Harry, no one would have passed their Defense OWLs."

Harry blushed at the compliment. "Just once, I'd like to have a year at Hogwarts that isn't fraught with danger, and life threatening adventure."

"What?" Sirius asked with mock indignance. "And give up all that fun?"

Sirius ducked as Harry hurled a piece of toast. His laughter was contagious however, and those watching the two began laughing softly.

"It's good to see you boys acting so grown up and mature." Hermione smiled sarcastically.

"So Hermione, are you looking forward to the amusement park?" Remus asked, as he dodged a spoonful of eggs that had been flung.

"Stop it, both of you!" Hermione said sternly at Harry and Sirius. "Dobby worked really hard to make all this food and you're just wasting it."

Remus laughed when he saw how Hermione had made Harry and Sirius look so shameful. The both bent their heads and began eating slowly.

Remus hoped Hermione was aware that she had unwittingly made herself a target for some future prank from the two she had just dressed down.

"Well, I better be goin'." Hagrid said, rising from his seat. "I got loads to do back at the castle. I know this sounds a bit paranoid an' all, but I was jus' wonderin' if you planned on takin my class this year. I got some real interesting' stuff planned."

Harry looked at Hermione, who tried to keep the fear from her eyes. He turned to Hagrid, smiling politely.

"I don't really know, Hagrid. I haven't seen my OWL results, and I haven't planned what classes I'll be taking yet. I think it would be a good idea for myself."

"I doubt that I will be able to." Hermione answered honestly.

"Well, I jus' wondered. I expect you'll both be quite busy even if yeh can't

take it. But you will visit of course..."

"Hagrid, of that you can be sure." Harry grinned broadly.

The half giant beamed happily, shaking Harry's hand. "Do enjoy yerself, today, 'Arry. And. I hope yeh like yer present."

"I'm so sorry, Hagrid. Wait a moment while I open it." Harry said, as he tore into the wrapped package. Hagrid had gotten Harry a book on dangerous creatures. Harry looked a little apprehensive, while Hagrid chuckled.

"I thought since you've faced so many, maybe you'd like to be a little more prepared in case you run into another one."

Hermione tried to suppress her giggles, while Sirius let his laughter out.

Even Remus was smiling. Harry thanked the gamekeeper who left a moment later. Sirius picked up Harry's new book, finding it very interesting. Harry groaned, commenting that Hagrid would probably be showing some of the creatures in his NEWT classes.

Daphne, Tracey, Ginny and Luna all came down together a few moments later. Daphne kissed her boyfriend as she sat down and began eating breakfast. The girls all chatted happily, ignoring the men for the most part, until they were finally joined by Ron and Neville.

"So," Remus said at last when they were all gathered. "We'll be taking you all to the Amusement park in one hour. You will be on your own, so you must be careful. Harry, this goes for you especially. I've made several emergency portkeys in case anything happens that will bring you back here. If anything happens, no heroics, just use your portkey." Remus stared at them all in turn, lingering on Harry the longest.

All the teens agreed, and Remus and Sirius made Harry swear he wouldn't do anything crazy. Daphne stepped in on her boyfriend's behalf promising that she wouldn't let him be the hero today.

The amusement park wasn't gigantic, but it did have more than its fair share of rides. Harry had known it was going to be fun when he saw the expressions on Ron, Neville, Ginny, and Daphne's faces. They all stared at the rides with fearful apprehension. Hermione had assured them several times that they were not evil deathtraps, to which Harry added that they would only feel like it.

Luna had the most surprising reaction. She wasn't awed by the park in the same way as the other pureblooded wizards. She explained that when she had been eleven, she and her father had been traveling and come across a muggle amusement park. Luna described the experience as being one of her favorite memories.

They walked around a bit, getting a good look at the park and watching some of the rides. Harry and Hermione answered many questions in regards to the thrill rides.

"So, what should we ride first?" Harry asked the group, after they'd walked through the entire park.

Hermione pointed to the biggest of the four roller coasters, a sly smile on her face. Harry nodded and the group got in line for the monster looping coaster. As the line shrank, and they got closer to the inevitable ride, Harry noticed how much tighter Daphne's grip became. He also noticed that Ginny became chattier.

Ron looked incredibly green when he sat down in the car next to Luna who warned him to turn his head the other way if he were going to be sick. Harry swore he heard Neville whimper behind him when the safety bar locked into place.

For never having ever ridden a roller coaster in his life, Harry was surprisingly calm. His adrenaline was up, he could feel it in his veins, and the rate his heart was pumping, but Harry knew that the roller coaster

would be nothing compared to a good broom ride.

Then the train was off, clanking it's way upward. Daphne was sitting next to him, repeating over and over, "This isn't scary." Harry knew she was freaking out, but he also knew that she was going to love the thrill ride. The train began it's run for true now, speeding downward and into the first loop. Everyone on the ride was screaming with the thrill of the ride, but Harry thought that maybe Ron's screams were truly that of fear. He laughed at how girlish the redhead's screams sounded.

As quickly as it began, the ride was over. Two intensely fast, looping, corkscrewing minutes flew by and slowly, the teens peeled themselves out of the coaster. Daphne began hitting Harry's arms, screaming.

"Why do I let you talk me into these things?"

"Come on, Daph," Tracey said laughing as she eased Neville onto a bench. He looked quite pale, but the expression on his face wasn't of fear or anything. In fact, he looked as though he were trying to decide how he felt about the ride.

"Just admit it was fun."

"NO! It was not fun. It was the scariest thing ever." Daphne said sternly.

"It was too fun. Being scary is part of the fun!" Ginny said excitedly. She and Hermione had been in the last car, and had the most fun. "I want to do it again."

"It was alright." Ron said, still looking a little green. "Bit like driving a really fast flying car."

Harry chuckled at the comparison. He and Ron had first hand experience with riding in a flying car.

"Alright." Harry said, holding up his hands so Daphne wouldn't hit him anymore. "You can pick the next ride."

Daphne smiled and pointed to another roller coaster with more twists

and turns than the one they'd just left. Harry and the other's laughed at the black haired girl, who smiled along with them. Taking Harry's hand she led the group to the next ride.

And so it went. They rode all the roller coasters in turn, getting back in the line of the last one as soon as they got off it. After the roller coasters, they took a break and tried some of the smaller thrill rides. Ron had not enjoyed the bumper cars, as everyone ganged up on him, and bumped him into a corner. Ginny had not agreed with the Tilt-a-Whirl. The group needed to take a break so the youngest Weasley's head could stop spinning.

They rode everything at least once before they decided to visit the game midway. All three boys were goaded into showing off their skills and win their ladies prizes. Ginny got in on the fun and won a pink teddy bear, which she gave to Hermione. Hermione didn't think it was as funny as the rest of the group.

After a bit, the group decided to break apart and experience things on their own. Hermione and Ginny went back to the first roller coaster, while Luna and Ron continued through the games. Tracey took Neville to the haunted house, which they laughed all the way through.

Daphne and Harry took a walk, visiting some of the attractions. As they walked, Daphne saw a fortune teller, and convinced Harry to go in with her.

"Come on. Let's see how a muggle seer works. It'll be really funny." She smiled brightly at her boyfriend.

Harry thought about it for a moment, and, deciding it could be no worse than Trelawney constantly predicting his death, followed his girlfriend.

The tent was lit by red lights, and in the center sat a small table, with a large crystal ball. On the other side of the table was a young woman with

red hair covered by a black hood. Her eyes were brilliant blue, and her lips were bright red. She had a friendly face, and welcomed the young lovers to sit.

"I am Lady Dominique." She introduced herself. "I can see that you two are special. I don't see many with an aura as brilliant as yours, I must confess."

"Thank you?" Daphne said, not sure what was proper in this setting.

"I see in you two so much love. Tell me, are you newlyweds?" Lady Dominique asked.

"No." Daphne giggled. "We're still in school."

"Ah. High school?"

"More like a boarding school." Harry responded quickly.

"Have you been together long?" the fortuneteller asked.

"Nearly a year." Daphne said, her eyes sparkling as she ran a hand through Harry's already messy hair.

"Well, it is a powerful emotional bond you have. Try not to lose it. You can overcome anything if you stand together. Shall we look into the crystal and see what your future holds?"

When the teens nodded, Lady Dominique stared at them for just a moment, then bent her gaze into the large glass orb setting on the table. She peered at it thoughtfully for several minutes, then looked to Harry seriously.

"You have been marked. You're being hunted."

Both Harry and Daphne's smiles began to fade. The gypsy continued, obviously used to the effect she was having on the teens.

"You're being hunted by a terrible man, and he wants you to die, but it's not going to happen. He won't be able to kill you."

"Can you see why?" Daphne asked, curiously.

The gypsy shook her head. "It's unclear. But, I see heartache for you both, sadness and loss. You're going to say goodbye to friends, people who are close to you. But it's only temporary darkness. There will be a reckoning, and you shall triumph, and the both of you will live for a very long time, together."

"Do you see a family?" Daphne asked, her hand squeezing Harry's, her eyes hopeful.

"Yes." the woman nodded, a smile on her young face. "Little black haired children."

Harry watched Daphne as her gaze became far away and her smile became wistful.

When the session was concluded, Harry and Daphne went to find a place to sit. Both were disturbed by what the woman had told them, and needed to discuss it.

"Do you think she was for real?" Harry asked.

"I don't know. She was pretty on the nose for a fraud, don't you think?" Daphne asked.

"It was so strange. Trelawney is always predicting my death, I expected that. Some gruesome way that I'll meet my end. But she seemed to know things..."

"They were pretty vague." Daphne said shrugging lightly.

"So is Trelawney. I saw how you smiled when she told you about kids. Is that something you've thought about? I mean, us being married?" Harry asked.

Daphne's head lowered a bit, allowing her hair to hide her face, but she nodded slowly. Harry took her hand in his and smiled.

"You know, your dad asked me about my intentions." Harry said softly.

Daphne looked up, her face still burning red, but her eyes were as wide

as saucers. Harry only chuckled at her embarrassment.

"What...uh, what did you say?" She asked hesitantly.

"I answered honestly. I told him that I had never thought about it. But, the talk with him made begin thinking about it. I love you. You make me feel whole, like I could take on anything. I would be lucky to have you by my side for the rest of my life. No matter how long that may be."

Daphne smiled sweetly at the boy. A small tear on her eyelash. She clutched his hand.

"Are you proposing?" She joked.

"Let's call it an agreement to revisit the subject at a later date, when certain obstacles to our happiness have been removed." Harry grinned slyly. Daphne laughed as well, and they both felt the tension that had begun building over the topic abate.

"There they are." They heard Ron's voice over the crowd. The two young lovers turned to see the rest of their friends approaching.

"Hey, guys." Tracey said as the group joined Harry and Daphne. "What have you guys been up to?"

"We saw a fortune teller." Harry said simply.

"They should all see her." Daphne said quickly. She explained to the group about her and Harry's visit with the faux seer, and how seemingly accurate the young woman had been. There was much skepticism amongst the group, but Harry insisted if they were to do it, to think of it as just a fun experiment.

Once it was agreed that they would not speak of what was said until everyone had gone, the group followed Harry and Daphne back to the fortune teller's tent. There was another discussion on whether to go as in groups or solo. Tracey and Neville wanted to go together, and before anything could be decided, they went into the tent.

After twenty minutes, the young couple emerged looking simultaneously anxious and excited. Ron went next, still thinking that this was going to be a waste of time, however when he emerged, his face and demeanor had become darker, sadder. He sat on a bench and stared at his shoes, as Luna entered next.

Harry was strangely curious what the woman had told his friend. Every so often, Ron would look Harry in the eyes, and he saw determination in his friend's gaze.

When Luna emerged, she immediately sat next to Ron, grabbed his face and kissed him deeply, and soundly for several minutes. The rest of the group could only watch in stunned silence, until the two broke apart.

"What was that about?" Ron asked, gasping for breath.

"We said we wouldn't say what we talked about until everyone had gone."

Luna grinned as she took Ron's hand. The redhead didn't even try to take his hand back, so deep was his bewilderment. The others were so stunned they didn't notice Ginny slip into the tent.

When the youngest Weasley emerged after her twenty minutes, everyone stared at Hermione, who'd been standing with her arms firmly across her chest. She saw the looks, and huffed. She had been against the idea from the start, stating over and over that Divination was nothing more than poppycock.

Hermione relented however, and entered the tent.

"What do you think she'll tell her?" Daphne asked Harry quietly. Harry shrugged. He couldn't think what the fortune teller might be saying to his rational friend. He became extremely curious when the girl emerged after her session, with a very somber, slightly delighted expression on her face.

As promised, the group didn't speak until they were all seated around a large table. Ginny was the first to speak up.

"She said I had strength. I was going to be strong for those who were at their weakest. She mentioned a reckoning and that I would be able to avenge family." The young redhead girl said. "Do you think she's talking about the war?"

"I think it's more likely the final battle." Neville said. "Do you think she's a witch?"

"Maybe she's like a squib. You know, like a really strong seer but nothing else." Hermione remarked, her voice a little breathy, and her eyes were unfocused.

"What'd she tell you guys?" Daphne asked of Tracey and Neville.

"She said that I had chosen well." Tracey said. "She said I was nearly too late."

"She told me my parents were sad because they couldn't tell me how proud they were, but that they understood when I talked." Neville said softly.

"That's it?" Harry asked. He didn't miss the look they gave each other. Something else had been said that meant something to the pair, but they seemed to not want to speak of it. Harry decided not to press the issue.

"I want to know what she told Luna." Ginny smiled. "What got you to just snog my brother like that?"

"Yeah, I'm more than a little curious about that as well." Harry smiled.

"She just reaffirmed what I already knew. Ron and I are meant to be."

Luna smiled. Then her expression fell a bit. "She seemed sad when she spoke about him though. What did she tell you, Ron?"

Harry, who had been extremely curious, watched his friend carefully. His behavior since coming out of the gypsy's tent had been the most curious.

Ron shook his head slowly, a strange sort of sadness in his eyes.

"It was stupid. Worse than Trelawney." He frowned. "What about

Hermione?"

The bushy haired girl had not been paying close attention. She had seemed lost in thought for a while now. She suddenly realized that the conversation had ended.

"What?" She asked, now aware that everyone was watching her.

"What did she say to you?" Tracey asked.

"Oh," Hermione shrugged. "I'm to be a big part of the coming reckoning. She was surprised that we all had such bright auras. I asked about each, and she said that the black haired boy's was the brightest, but that there was a shadow falling over it. Like she was looking at it through sunglasses.

"She said the redheaded boy had a strong aura, but his own self doubt kept it from becoming what he needed it to be. She also said that as long as we stood together, and let no more pettiness try and break us, we would be unstoppable."

"But what did she say about you, specifically?" Daphne asked impatiently.

"That love was searching for me." Hermione sighed. "She said he's been in front of me the whole time, and that he was something very special. She told me that he would speak to me on the train."

"What if it's Draco?" Ginny asked.

Hermione's blissful expression faded to one of horror. Everyone laughed as Hermione began trying to punch her friend.

"That's not funny, Ginny." Hermione huffed. "I think I would hex my eyes out."

"I'm positive it's not Draco." Harry said. "More likely it's Crabbe or Goyle."

"You're all horrible people." Hermione shouted at her friends who were bent double with laughter. Hermione shook her head and began walking away from the giggling bunch. The rest of the teens recovered and chased

after the brainy witch, apologizing for taking the mickey out of the girl. It was growing late, so the group decided on a few more rides and then they would head home. Harry thought as they were all exiting the park that it had been the very best, if not the most strange, birthday he'd ever had. He couldn't stop thinking about the gypsy's predictions, and wondered not for the first time if he should mention it to Dumbledore when the old man visited the next night.

8. Chapter 8

The double doors opened slowly, and Harry followed the scribe who had been tasked with escorting him to the courtroom. It was a giant circular room with witches and wizards seated in rows all around, and a seat for the Chief Warlock at the front. The room was brightly lit by torches, and there was a general murmuring present as Harry walked toward the witness stand.

He was surprised by the amount of people inside the large circular room. Seated in the center of the room, looking exactly as he remembered her, was Dolores Jane Umbridge. She was wearing a gray set of robes, and her hair was a bit disheveled. She glared hard at Harry as he passed her, as if she wanted nothing more than to strangle the life from him. Harry looked around at the many wizards, all wearing black robes, thinking he might see someone he recognized.

The trial had been going since nine that morning. Harry had known little of what had been happening, only that the other witnesses had spoken, and as his was the supposed to be the longest testimony to be given, Harry understood that he would be the last to speak. He'd been in a small room by himself all day, very bored, and wished he'd thought to bring something to read. Around noon a young witch brought him a plate of sandwiches and told him that someone would be there to get him soon.

He sat in a high, straight backed chair, that faced Umbridge and most of the room. Next to the former defense teacher was a thin balding man with deep set dark eyes, and an almost comical face. His hair was thinning, and grey, and his nose was very pointed. However the man was impeccably dress in some of the finest robes Harry had ever seen.

"Let's have order." the Chief Warlock said loudly. The presiding judge, as Dumbledore had been unable to rule in this particular case, was a stout looking witch by the name of Melody Thatcher. She wore small wire frame bifocals and her hair was a dark auburn, with streaks of silver. When she spoke, Harry was reminded of Professor McGonagall. The murmuring stopped immediately and the presiding Warlock seemed to settle her self into her seat more comfortably.

"Mr. Monroe?" Madam Thatcher asked. Harry turned to see another wizard approaching, holding a long roll of parchment. He was very large, nearly the size of his Uncle Vernon, and had large round brown eyes. He had an ease about him, as if all the excess weight were not there at all. He moved gracefully, and smiled as he eyed the young man before him.

"Sir, would you be so kind as to state your name and age for the court please?" Mister Munroe's voice was like very deep and he spoke very properly. The man was barely paying attention to Harry, his attention glued to the parchment he now held.

"Yes, sir. Harry Potter, and I'm sixteen." Harry said easily.

"Mr. Potter, you served several detentions with Madam Umbridge correct?"

"Yes, sir."

"Do please tell the court about the first detention you served with Madam Umbridge."

Harry recounted going to Umbridge's office and being told he would be

writing lines. He then went on to tell how she had presented him with a bright red feathered quill with a black metal tip. Harry described in detail about how with every word he wrote on the parchment the word cut itself into his hand.

"How long did she keep you in that first detention?" Munroe asked.

"Three hours. I arrived at five in the evening and she let me go around eight. It was the same fore every detention over the next two weeks."

Harry said confidently. He noticed Umbridge little fat fists balling up.

"Was this the only detention you served?"

"No, sir. I had several more with her."

"Can you give us an estimate of how many you served with her?"

"She usually gave me detention for an entire week at a time. I must have served a total of ten weeks with her." Harry shrugged.

"Can you tell us the reasons for these detentions?"

"She said I was telling lies." Harry nodded.

"Lies?"

"Yes, sir. I even got detention for things I did outside of school and on my own time."

"Such as?"

"I got detention for granting a single interview with a reporter while I was in Hogsmeade."

"You say you received these detentions for telling lies, is that correct?"

Munroe asked.

"Yes, sir."

"What is it you were supposed to be lying about."

"Voldemort's return."

There was a collective gasp about the courtroom, and Harry saw several people fall from their seats. Harry seethed inwardly. Something had to be

done about people's fear of that idiot's name. It had held society in it's grip far too long.

"Did you ever suffer any other punishments, Mr. Potter?"

"I had my broom confiscated after I allowed a friend use it in a Quidditch match. I was also not allowed to be a part of my house team because of my temper."

"I see. Your friend would be Ginevra Weasley, correct?"

"Yes, sir."

"Anything else?"

"Yes sir. She used the Cruciatus curse on me."

"The boy is a nasty little liar!" Umbridge screamed. The court exploded in murmuring and hisses. Harry turned to try and see the many faces who were obviously angered by his statement. Madam Thatcher banged her gavel, repeatedly calling for order.

"Madam Umbridge." Thatcher spoke when the court room finally settled down. "I will remind you that it is not Mister Potter that is on trial. It is you. If his statement is untrue, I am sure your solicitor will root out the truth. In the meantime, you will refrain from anymore outbursts." Madam Thatcher motion for Mister Munroe to continue.

"Are you sure about your statement, Mr. Potter?"

"Yes, Sir. I was put under the Cruciatus curse by Lord Voldemort before." Again there was the many gasps, and shudders. "I know what the curse feels like. There is no mistaking it."

"Thank you, Mister Potter, that will be all." Mr. Munroe smiled politely, and the wizard who'd been sitting next to Umbridge stood up. He smoothed down his thinning hair and eyes Harry critically.

"Mr. Potter, is it true that you received your fair share of detentions over your career at Hogwarts?" the wizard said in a nasally kind of voice.

"Yes, sir."

"Do you think you are above rules, Mister Potter? Do you believe you should not be punished when you step out of line?"

"No, sir. If I break a rule, I should be punished. I'd accept it because I was in the wrong. But, I find it more than a little odd that a person would be so severely punished for telling the truth, which as I understand it, is the right thing to do." Harry said carefully, eyeing the thin graying man who was pacing slowly.

"I see. So you believe that, when you have broken the law, that you should be punished accordingly?"

"Yes." Harry said, eyebrows raising questioningly.

"So, seeing as you feel so strongly, why do you think you haven't been punished for the murder of Cedric Diggory?" the nasally voice wizard said, pointing his long crooked finger at Harry who's mouth had fallen open.

"Objection. Higgins, there is no proof that Mister Potter has committed murder. In fact, his story regarding the demise of Mister Diggory seems to check out, as we all know for fact that You-Know-Who is back." Munroe shouted.

Harry straightened himself up and looked at the man, now identified as Higgins.

"Sir, I would be willing to be questioned under Veritaserum in regards to this matter." Harry held up his right hand, showing the entire court the scar that was so clear.

"Madam Umbridge saw to it that no matter how you ask me, the story will always be the same, because it is true. Peter Pettigrew killed Cedric Diggory before he performed the ritual which gave Voldemort a new body."

There was more murmuring and Madam Thatcher banged her gavel. "Mr. Higgins, that was uncalled for, and has not relevance to this case. If you have no questions for the witness he will be excused."

Higgins glared at Harry for a moment and finally shook his head. Madam Thatcher turned to Harry and thanked him for his testimony and excused him from the court room. Harry thought that things would have been much different, but shrugged it off as the double doors closed behind him.

The Court scribe met him and told him that he was free to go home.

Again, Harry felt no sense of relief or justice. He wanted to know what was going to happen to Umbridge. Yet, there was nothing he could do, short of what he'd already done. He'd answered the questions honestly, and directly, without going into long winded explanations. It was in the hands of the court, hopefully they would give justice.

Albus Dumbledore arrived at Harry's home precisely at six o'clock, along with Severus Snape, who still looked sickly. There was not small talk made, or niceties observed. Dumbledore asked that Sirius joined them for their talk, and that they not be disturbed, and Harry led them to the study where they could sit comfortably. When the door closed, Dumbledore waved his wand several times. Harry knew that the old man was putting up wards to keep any who might want to eaves drop from hearing what was going to be said.

"Well, Harry, allow me to wish you a happy birthday. I hope that it was a good day for you and your friends." Dumbledore smiled.

"It was, but I have some questions. They can wait, but I do need to ask you before you go."

"Of course. Next, I would very much like to apologize again. This conversation is long overdue, but I felt it was to your benefit to have

your childhood. I realize now that you have never truly had one, and for that and my part in it all, I am very sorry. You have been given a seemingly impossible destiny, which is to save the wizarding world from Lord Voldemort. And so, here we begin that task.

"Tell me, Harry, have you ever heard of a Horcrux?" the ancient headmaster said, watching Harry over his half-moon spectacles. Harry shook his head, and Dumbledore let out a small laugh.

"I thought not. It is not a topic brought up in civilized conversation. In fact, it is almost entirely unheard of. You see, a horcrux is an extremely dark object, which uses the darkest of magics to even create, but once it is made, the maker can never ever die. Do you understand so far?"

Harry nodded and Dumbledore continued.

"Our Lord Voldemort has made such an item. In fact, he's made more than one. He has made seven. Seven items which prevent him from ever dying."

"How can these items keep him alive?" Harry asked.

"They do so by keeping a portion of the soul anchored to this world. It takes a very strong bit of magic in which to rip a person's soul in to, but there is one thing that does it easily. Murder. Anytime a person kills another in cold blood. Understand this, Harry, for it is important.

"If you kill someone to defend yourself, or a loved one, you do not rip your soul. But, if you kill out of hate and spite, you tear the very fabric of your being. When you have done this, and you know how to perform the ritual, you could take that ripped piece of soul and hide it in an object, like a diary."

Dumbledore let the words sink in. He watched as Harry put the puzzle together, smiling as Harry's face showed that he had figured it out.

"The diary in second year. That was one of these, uh...Horcrux things?"

"Precisely, Harry. Very good. Now, Voldemort, who is so fearful of death, made seven in order to protect himself from ever dying. As you well know, when he was originally vanquished by you as a mere child of one, his body was destroyed, but the remaining piece of his soul was free to roam until he was able to make a new body.

"When you brought the Diary to me after your encounter in the Chamber of Secrets, I learned soon after what it was. It was then that I began my research trying to track down how he had made this item. It was then I learned that he had made others. I have since located two others, and am still searching for the rest, though I believe to have a very strong idea of where three of them reside. Once I have found them all, I will destroy them, and at that point, Voldemort will be mortal once again. I would like your help in discovering two more of the Horcruxes.

"Of course, however I can help." Harry agreed. Sirius nodded as well, showing he would do whatever he could.

"Wonderful. If you are agreeable, I should like it if you could show me into the Chamber of Secrets tomorrow afternoon."

"Of course sir. You think one of the Horcruxes is in there?"

"It seems quite likely. While he attended Hogwarts, I believe that Lord Voldemort discovered more of the castle's secrets than any other since the founders. As the Heir of Slytherin, it stands to reason that he may have hidden one of the items in the chamber of his forefather, knowing that none would ever discover it."

"What about the other?" Harry asked, and both Snape and Dumbledore looked at each other.

"Harry, this is going to be difficult to hear, and I ask that you don't, as they say, 'freak out' over it. But, it is my belief that you are the final Horcrux."

Harry's face flushed, and his heart began beating rapidly. He looked at Sirius, who looked rather panicked as well.

"I believe that when he tried to kill you," Dumbledore went on, hoping Harry would calm down. "Your mother's sacrifice put a protective spell around you, which bounced the killing curse off of you and destroyed Voldemort's body. In the process, however, it somehow made you a horcrux for part of Voldemort's soul. It is how part of his power was transferred to you, and also how you have been able to feel what he is feeling, and see into his mind."

"So I'm...I've got some of him inside of me?" Harry said shakily. His eyes were wide in horror at the thought that Voldemort, or at least part of him rest inside of Harry.

"I believe so. What I would like, Harry, is your permission for Professor Snape and myself to use Legillimency on you and see if that it is truly the case. I promise that we are not going to pry into your private thoughts. What we wish to do is to see if there is indeed another presence inside of your mind. It is part of the reason I have asked your godfather to join us."

"How are you going to do it?" Harry asked, still frightened. His mind was having a hard time working. There was a piece of the thing that had murdered his parents inside of him. He knew everything Harry knew, it saw what Harry saw. Harry felt like his lungs were constricted, and his vision was becoming blurry.

"What happens if it is in there? How do we get it out?"

"I do not know, at this time. But, I think it will be Lord Voldemort himself who will do it. Who must do it. I think that this has to do with the prophecy, Harry. But, we are jumping to conclusions. May we proceed?" Dumbledore asked, looking quite upset at having to ask this of Harry, who looked quite afraid. Harry nodded and closed his eyes, trying

to calm himself.

He opened his eyes and looked at Dumbledore, who was staring very intently into his eyes. Harry tried to keep his mind as calm as he could, thinking it might make it easier for Dumbledore to find what it was he was looking for.

He could feel something in his head, something he'd never experienced before. It felt like gentle pressures on his mind, as if someone were pushing against his conscious. Harry tried to keep his breathing even, and to focus on the headmaster's brilliant blue eyes. The process took a very short period of time, and when it was over, Harry felt a little dizzy.

"Severus?" Dumbledore asked. The sickly looking Potions master nodded.

"I felt it. It's there."

"As did I. I am afraid our worst fears are true. Harry is a Horcrux."

"It's very strong, and it seems to feed of the boy's negative emotions.

Undoubtedly it became very strong throughout the boys." Snape said.

"You've got to do something." Sirius said angrily.

Harry heard the words, and felt anger rise up in him. His eyes began to burn with tears and he began pounding at the arm of his chair.

"Why?" He screamed. "Why me? Why couldn't it have been someone else's problem? I don't want this. I don't want to have him in my head. I want him out. Now!"

"I am sorry, Harry." Dumbledore said, a few tears spilling from his eyes.

"If I could take away all of your pain, I would do so."

"Potter." Snape said gently. "I know that you're angry, and there is nothing anyone can say to take that away, or make this situation better.

But, you have never given up in all the time I've known you. You will fight this, and you will win because we are all doing our best to figure it all out."

Harry watched the greasy haired man for a long time. He saw no more malice in the man's eyes, there was only empathy. Harry could see that Snape meant what he was saying.

"Severus is right, Harry." Sirius said. "None of us are going to let you face this alone. Not me, or Remus, or your friends."

"Which brings me to the next topic." Dumbledore said. "Harry, I wish for you to continue the DA this year. I also wish that you and your friends take advanced lessons with some private tutors. This will mean giving up Quidditch, as you will have little time for it, but I think it for the best."

"How many of my friends?" Harry asked, still having difficulty in calming down. His anger and despair had such a strong hold on his heart at the moment.

"I think it would be prudent to have Miss Greengrass, Miss Granger, Mr. Longbottom, and Miss Davis as a part of it. If you should like more, I leave it up to you. You would be having advanced lessons three nights a week. You will be learning very advanced spells, potions, and several different styles of fighting. I am asking you to do this, Harry, because I want you to survive, and I must make sure you have everything I can give you to ensure it.

"I know that you will teach your friends, so it is wise for them to take these lessons with you." Dumbledore finished.

Harry had finally settled down a bit and was looking at the headmaster with a blank expression.

"Who'll be teaching us?" He asked with no emotion. Dumbledore frowned. He had not wanted this for Harry, it was too big a burden. He could only hope that when they were finished, his friends would help Harry to deal with this information better than he could.

"I have asked several of the Hogwarts professors to help. Professor Snape,

who has a very expansive knowledge, has agreed to teach, Professor Flitwick as also agreed to teach dueling. I will be asking several members of the Order to come and train with you, as well as you're godfather, if he is agreeable."

"I'm in, you don't even need to ask."

"Harry, it is important that you begin soon. I understand that your house has a training facility. I believe it would not only help you to work out some of your obvious frustration," Dumbledore smiled when Harry finally looked at him again, a slight frown on his young face. "But it would help shake off the cobwebs. You will, of course, be unable to use magic as you are still underage, but perhaps an exercise routine would help build your stamina and physical strength."

Harry nodded again. Dumbledore sighed wearily and looked to Snape, who shrugged.

"I believe you had questions to ask of me, before we concluded?"

Harry's face lost its look of despair and he seemed to brighten a little.

"Yes, sir. While we were at the amusement park yesterday, we met a fortune teller. She said things that were vague, but also very spot on regarding all of us. She told me that I was being hunted but that my hunter would not succeed. She said I would be victorious at the reckoning."

"Interesting. You think perhaps she was a witch?"

"I think it more likely that she was a squib, who could have been a great seer if she'd had a proper teacher." Harry hypothesized.

"I believe you might be right in that assessment. Harry, you know as well as I that Divination is a dodgy aspect of magic at best. I would not hold too tightly to anything that you were told. There are many variables, and no one's journey is written in stone until it is ended."

Harry nodded and the Headmaster rose to his feet. He turned to face Snape who had not yet risen.

"I wish to speak to Harry alone." The professor said lightly. Harry turned to look at the Potions master, and nodded. Sirius and Dumbledore left them and neither spoke for several moments.

"I must apologize to you Harry." Snape said, finally breaking the silence.

"I misjudged you when you first stepped into my classroom. All I could see was your father staring at me. I forgot that you were also the child of Lily Evans. My friend. I have many sins to repent for, and I may never be truly free of them all. But I must make amends to you. For the sake of your mother.

"I know that we will never be friends, but I wish to be your ally. I swear on my magic that I will teach you everything I know, not just in magic, but what I have learned as a Death Eater. I will help you understand how the Dark Lord functions and why he chooses to act as he does. Sirius is correct when he tells you that knowledge is power.

"I must also tell you something the Headmaster neglected to mention. I will ask that you keep this between us, as it is very important. You do not have complete access to your magical core. This Horcrux that is inside you is dampening your power. Now, whether the Dark Lord is able to use your magic is unknown. It is my belief however that he can not.

"I would also like to tell you that you will probably not feel much from him in the future. After your encounter at the Ministry, the Dark Lord was terribly injured. He now knows that you can hurt him through your bond. He is also unaware that your bond is a Horcrux. It is why he still pursues you. We'd like to keep it this way. If he learns the truth of it, he will kidnap you and torture you forever, but he will never let you die. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir. I do. Thank you."

"I want you to do something, Potter. I want you to try and keep as much positive emotion as you can. I have a theory that the Horcrux inside you was strengthened through all your years with your relatives. As I said, it is my belief that all the negative emotions, the sadness and despair you felt growing up allowed the Horcrux to become very strong. I think it was how Lord Voldemort was able to access your mind so easily. If you can reverse that, by feeling love and happiness, it is my theory the Horcrux will weaken. We might be able to get it out of you if we can weaken it enough. Spend time with Miss Greengrass, and try not to let this dampen your emotions.

"I promise you, Harry, we will get rid of it. I will make sure you are well informed, just as your godfather has been doing." Snape stood, shakily.

"Sir, are you alright?"

"Yes. I will be fine. I have just been taken ill." Snape lied easily. He inwardly cringed and promised he would tell the youth later. He had enough to deal with at the moment.

"I would suggest that you seek out your friends, Potter. Tell them all that you feel comfortable with, and allow them to try and lift your spirits. You will find great strength in their camaraderie. Good night."

Harry watched his former menace leave, and thought of his advice. Harry knew that Snape had no friends when he had been in school, so he would truly know how lucky Harry was. Harry knew as well that he now had such a diverse group of friends that they would all be able to see his problem from different angles and come up with several possible solutions.

Harry had to think of who he wanted to train with him. Of course Daphne, Neville, Tracey and Hermione, but Harry knew that the five of

them wouldn't be as formidable as say if Ron were a part of it. Or Luna and Ginny. And what of Blaise and Susan? Together they could be a major force to be reckoned with. They had all been the strongest in the DA, mostly because they all studied together, and had learned to work together, but this was going to be something deeper.

Harry rose from his chair. He needed Daphne. He didn't want to talk about anything just yet. He needed to process it all himself. But he also knew he couldn't wait forever with it. He promised himself that he would talk to them tomorrow. Tonight he just wanted to be alone with Daphne. To be a teenager for a little while.

Ron sat in his room, staring out at the woods. He and Ginny had come home that morning right after Harry had gone to court. Ginny had to appear but she had come back just after lunchtime. She had nothing to report as far as the case had gone, but Ron wasn't really interested. He had spent the day sitting alone in the woods, and staring into the pond. The amusement park had started out as a really fun day, until they had gone to see the fortune teller. He had thought it would be a laugh until he sat down with the young woman. She had looked right into his soul. "You carry a heavy burden." She had said, a small smile on her face. "Too big for one so young. Don't let your guilt prevent you from being who you should be, or with one who loves you so deeply."

Ron had smiled, and his mind flashed to Luna, who had been so happy to spend the day with him. They had flirted shamelessly all day, and she had even kissed his cheek a few times. Ron was beginning to believe he may be worthy of the strange Ravenclaw girl.

"Hell, if Harry can look past a person's flaws, why can't I? Luna's very pretty and she's not always mental. She's really a good person, and I could do a lot worse. Besides, life will never be dull with her." He had

thought to himself.

The young fortune teller had begun gazing into the crystal orb then and her face fell into one of deepest sadness. When she looked at Ron she looked as if she wanted to cry.

"What is it?"

What she told Ron made his blood run cold. He felt himself shiver at the revelation. He watched the woman carefully for any signs that she was having him on, but her face looked so genuine and remorseful. The young woman reached across the table and clutched his hand, apologizing profusely.

When he had calmed down sufficiently, he left the young woman. He decided he would not tell the others. What she had told him had shaken him to his very core. He couldn't even look at the others, save for Harry, who was watching him curiously. Ron wanted to tell his best friend, but his throat had closed up. He simply began staring at his shoes. When Luna came out and kissed him so soundly, Ron had nearly broken out of his dark mood. He had put on a good act for the rest of the day for his friends, even dodging the question about what the gypsy had told him. Once he was home, and could be alone, it weighed on his mind. He kept trying to convince himself that the woman was a fraud like Trelawney, but inside he didn't believe it was true. Still he kept trying. He couldn't let this phony's "prediction" run his life.

Now as he stared at the darkening woods he made his choice. Ron would not let it rule him. He would live his life as best as he could. She had said it. The future was not set in stone. It was possible that things could change and nothing she had said would ever come to pass. If he dwelled on it, it very well may happen.

No, Ron would go on living. He would work at his goals of becoming a

better student and a better man. He would make himself worthy of Harry's friendship and he would take a chance with Luna Lovegood. Ron Weasley was going to be the man he knew he was meant to be.

And, if that silly prediction did come true, Ron knew that he wouldn't hesitate in his choice. He would sacrifice himself to save Harry Potter.

9. Chapter 9

DOLORES UMBRIDGE SENTENCED

FORMER UNDERSECRETARY GETS 50 YEARS

Late yesterday afternoon, the Wizengamot decided the fate of Dolores Jane Umbridge. Until last month, Umbridge had served as the senior undersecretary for former Minister of Magic, Cornelius Fudge. During the trial it was discovered that Fudge had appointed Umbridge to the post of Defense Against The Dark Arts at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry as a spy.

Dumbledore had been leading the charge, proclaiming that He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named had returned from the dead. Fudge, fearing these warnings a ploy to seize power over wizarding England, used Umbridge to relay the goings on at Hogwarts and to stop the training of a potential army.

However, Umbridge used her new power to intimidate and torture students, including Harry Potter, the Boy-Who-Lived. Through the use of illegal dark items, namely Blood Quills, and the use of the Cruciatus Curse, Umbridge single handedly turned an institute for learning into her own personal concentration camp.

Of the revelations made during the trial, the most surprising was that Umbridge authorized and encouraged students she deemed of a high caliber to take away house points, and even torture other students.

Umbridge was sentenced to fifty years imprisonment at Azkaban. Many on the jury wanted a sterner punishment, but Madam Melody Thatcher, who presided over the proceedings, took into account Umbridge's service record and age.

"I do not doubt that she will not leave Azkaban alive." Thatcher told the Daily Prophet. (For More on Melody Thatcher, turn to page 19.)

Blaise Zabini smiled as he read the article. Today was shaping up to be a fine one. Not only was he finally getting out of the hospital, but the toad was getting basically a life sentence. There was still some who believed in justice.

"Well, your smile is back." Susan Bones grinned as she entered his room. Blaise was happy to see his girlfriend so happy. She had been a mess over the past couple of days. Not that he could blame her. Both her parents had been tortured and he had been blasted through a wall. On top of that, their house had nearly burnt down. All of this to send a message to Susan's aunt, who was acting Minister until November when an election would be held.

"Have you seen the Daily Prophet this morning?" Blaise asked. Susan nodded as she hopped up onto Blaise's bed and snuggled beside him. She gave a soft sigh as he wrapped his arm around her.

"The toad is toast." She said softly.

"This means that there are still good people in the Ministry. Not everyone's as corrupt as Fudge."

"So you're saying there's hope for our society?" Susan asked, tilting her head towards his. He kissed her very softly, savoring the taste of her.

"I hope so. Maybe they can focus on the bigger problem now, and protect us better."

"Can we talk about something else?" Susan asked, her eyes misting. Blaise understood. She had been very scared that she had lost everything.

Fortune smiled on her, however, and everyone she cared for had been alright, but it had affected her deeply. Blaise smiled and held her a little tighter.

"I got a letter from Harry this morning." He said. Susan didn't say anything, but waited for him to continue. "He said he had come by but I was still out of it, and not being allowed visitor. He wants the both of us to join him at his house. He mentioned training."

Susan sat up. She looked Blaise in the eyes and took both his hands in hers.

"I don't want to be involved anymore. I want to stay out of this war, Blaise. I almost lost you to Death Eaters, and my parents and my home. It was too close, and I don't know if I can ...I don't have the strength."

"So you want to give up? Just let Voldemort take over?"

"No. But I don't think I'm strong enough to fight. You have no idea what it was like to see you like that. I felt like someone had just ripped open my chest and cut out my heart. I love you so much, Blaise, I thought I wouldn't be able to go on without you." Tears were streaming down her cheeks now. Blaise had known that she had barely been away from the hospital over the past few days. Between being with him and her parents, and trying to keep a brave face for everyone, she had exhibited a strength Blaise had always known she possessed, but it had still been rough on her.

He tried to imagine their roles reversed. If she had been the one hurt. He couldn't imagine how he would react. What he might say or do. The only thing he was sure of was that he would find the person responsible and make them pay. Yet he understood her reluctance now. She had nearly lost what she valued most. It would be natural for her to want to not risk those things again.

He sighed, brushing crimson strands out of her face.

"What if I want to fight? What if I need to do this?" He asked.

"I want to tell you that I'll be with you, every step of the way, but I don't

know that I can. It's one thing when we were training in the DA, and it was safe, but facing it for real. I don't know how Harry does it, and doesn't fall apart."

"This isn't about Harry, Sue, it's about doing what's right. It's about making a world that's safe to raise a family in. Isn't that worth fighting for?"

"Yes, but I don't know that I can. Can't you understand? I'm not brave, I'm not strong.."

"Don't say that." Blaise stopped her. "Never say that. Over the last few days you showed more courage and more strength than I ever knew was possible. You never showed how tired you were, or how upset you were until just now, when you knew it was safe. You are the strongest person I've ever known. I would never have been able to keep my cool like you did."

"I just had to be strong for you, and my parents."

"And that's when it counted. It's not about being fearless. It's about putting aside your fear to do what needs to be done because it's right and you believe in it."

Susan nodded slowly. Blaise squeezed her hands in support. He reached out and lifted her chin so she was looking at him again.

"You know this is right. You know the risk, and what's at stake. You're a Hufflepuff, Susan, and I know that you'd never forgive yourself if you turned your back on your friends when they need you"

"Promise me that you'll not do anything stupid." She asked softly. He barely heard her words, but he crossed his heart, smiling.

"I promise. I have plans for us, I don't intend to get hurt."

"Plans?" Susan asked through teary chuckles.

"Oh, yeah. Big plans."

"What kind of plans?"

"Long term kind of plans. Plans that involve a home and rings and the like."

"Are you talking about marriage? Blaise were only sixteen!" Susan said, eyes wide with shock.

"I know, and it's not as if I'm proposing. We have to finish school and get our lives started, but I think about the future, and what I'd like in mine. I think it would be nice spending my life with you."

"Well, no one ever said you took your time with things."

"Not true. It took me nearly three years to ask you out."

Susan melted into him, holding him tightly to her. The tears that fell from her pretty blue eyes were of joy now. He was her world, and he wanted her in his for the rest of his life. She knew it wasn't a proposal, but to her, it was as good as one. She would not tell him, but if he had truly asked for her hand at that moment, she would have said yes, with no hesitation. Susan knew that she would never find a man half as good as Blaise Zabini.

Daphne stood on the beach staring out at the ocean. She had removed her shoes and was enjoying the feel of the cold sea as it washed over her bare feet. The air was chilly today, though it was a clear, bright day.

Daphne was troubled. She had a lot on her mind at the moment, and all of it had to do with her boyfriend, Harry Potter. The night before his birthday he had opened up to her so completely and shared his entire life with her. She had felt so good that he had finally trusted her with his darkest secrets.

Then there had been a discussion about their future, thanks to the vague predictions of a potential seer. The young gypsy woman had said she saw children in their future. After their visit to the fortune teller, the young

lovers had begun discussing the possibility that they might have a future together.

And then, just last night, something had been said to Harry that had frightened him, or at least upset him. He had sought her out after his meeting with Dumbledore. Harry wouldn't tell her what was said, and had been very shaken by it all. He hadn't even wanted to snog.

Daphne knew how Harry worked by now. He would have to try and figure out things for himself. He had to come to terms with whatever he'd been told, and then he would share it with her.

This morning, he had awoken everyone at six o'clock and asked them all to join him in special training. He had explained that Dumbledore wanted them all to train with him for the coming war. They had all agreed, and thirty minutes later had all regretted it, including Harry. Their training for the next month was going to be all conditioning, to build up their stamina and reflexes.

"A battle almost never ends quickly." Sirius had told them all as he ran them all through their paces. "The key is to not let yourself tire out before your opponent. You want them to tire out and make mistakes. That's how duels are won."

They had worked out for two hours, running, basic calisthenics and swimming. The swimming had been the hardest for Daphne as she had never seen Harry so undressed before, and it was all she could do to not snog him senseless right there. She had never known how much Quidditch had done for him. His baggy clothes had hidden his physique so completely that if she had not seen his tight abs and muscular chest, she never would have believed it. She knew that Harry felt the same when she removed her robe and revealed her dark green bikini. Daphne was no slouch to be sure. She was quite proud of how she had developed.

She was not so skinny that you could count her ribs, but she had a very natural beauty. She wasn't extremely busty, but she thought her chest was ample, and her stomach was fairly flat. Her hips weren't too big, but help give her hind end a good sway when she walked. Daphne was very happy with her long slender legs, and Harry had appreciated them as well.

Daphne made Harry swear they would go swimming later that night, just the two of them. She wanted to touch him, she had been nearly unable to think of much else all day. Daphne had often imagined herself in lurid situations with Harry, but they had always been dressed. After this morning, however, her mind kept providing her with many scenarios in which a very undressed Harry would do things to her body that made her flush with excitement. If only the real Harry were as bold with her as her fantasy Harry.

"There you are." Tracey said coming up behind her friend. "I've been looking for you."

"Is Harry back?" Daphne asked.

"Do you think I'd be looking for you if he were back?" Tracey smirked.

"Actually, I need your advice on something."

"What's up?"

Tracey turned away for a moment, and Daphne saw her face reddening.

Tracey stammered a few times and rubbed her face.

"What is it Tracey?"

"I want Neville." Tracey blurted. Daphne was confused.

"Don't you have him? You guys have been together almost as long as Harry and I."

"No, I want him." Tracey said, trying to communicate her meaning.

Daphne just stared for a moment and then Tracey's hint became clear.

Daphne herself had just been thinking along the very same lines only ten seconds earlier.

"I mean, I really want him." Tracey said, her face becoming a red as a ripe tomato.

"Wow." Was all Daphne could say.

"It's so weird. I love him so much. He's better than I ever imagined he would be all those years I watched him from afar. But he's so noble. I want him to be a little naughtier with me, you know?"

"I do. I know exactly what you mean. I wonder if it's a Gryffindor trait to not want to grope your girlfriend." Daphne sighed.

"Not according to the rumor mill. Seamus Finnegan has the fastest hands in...Wait. Are you saying Harry's never coped a feel?"

Daphne shook her head. "Not once."

"Bloody figures that we would find the greatest two guys in the entire world, and they won't even grab our chests" Tracey sighed in frustration. She grabbed her breasts and shook them. "What good are these things if Neville won't touch them?"

"Tracey! You sound like a harlot or something!"

"No, harlots get action."

"Oh my god. What is wrong with you?" Daphne said simultaneously appalled and amused.

"I don't know. Ever since we went swimming, I can't get the image of a wet, muscling Neville out of my head. I never knew he looked like that, and all I want is to get him out of his clothes. It got me thinking about all the times we've snogged, and the way other girls have talked about things they've done. I always thought they were being slags, and what they were doing was wrong, but now I want Neville, who I trust and love to do those things to me. And the worst part is, I don't know how to bring

it up to him. I know if I just went for it, he'd freak out.

"He's not as shy as he was when we first started dating, but he's still...I don't know, he's just Neville."

"I understand." Daphne smiled gently. "I think I understand why Harry hasn't done more than kiss me. Don't get me wrong, I love kissing him, but we've been together nearly a year, and it's never been more than that."

The two girls began walking back towards Harry's house. Daphne's toes were quite cold now, and she wanted to go sit down. They found a large drift log and sat down. Daphne was hugging herself against the brisk ocean wind.

"I never thought much about our physical progress until this morning, too. I was so taken aback by his body. I never imagined what he might look like under all those baggy clothes. What's worse is that I saw how he looked at me when he saw me in my swimsuit. I've never seen him look so animalistic. He just had this look in his eyes, that made me shiver, but in a good way." Daphne shrugged.

"Now that you mention it, Neville kept watching me. It was funny. Like he was hungry, and I was a steak or something. And he stayed in the pool until everyone was gone. When I asked if he was getting out, he blushed and said he wanted to do a few more laps."

"Maybe he was hiding something?" Daphne said, waggling her eyebrows. Tracey gasped and covered her mouth.

"Oh, Merlin! I didn't even think about that! Oh, the poor boy. I should have jumped back in with him!"

"See, he is a man, after all." Daphne said proudly.

"The question is what to do. I don't want to push him. I'm not even sure what I'm ready for."

"The only thing either of us can do is talk to them. Figure it all out together. See what he thinks about it all, and try and find a place where you're comfortable and he's comfortable."

"I'm so glad I found you. I really didn't want to talk to Hermione about this. The poor girl is already feeling like she's putting a damper on things, and what with her breakup and everything else, I didn't want to put this on her." Tracey sighed.

"Yeah, and could you imagine what her answer would be like?"

"Oh, I know there'd be books and diagrams and all sorts of stuff that would just make me want to die from embarrassment. I already had the talk with my mother, and that was enough."

"Oh, Merlin. I never wanted to be swallowed by the earth more than when Mom gave me and Astoria the talk. I thought poor Tori was going to need Essence of Mandrake to get her unpetrified."

"What's worse is, someday we'll have to have the talk with our own children." Tracey said grimly.

"No, I'm just going to get Hermione to bring her diagrams and books and do it for me."

Both girls fell off the log laughing hard.

Severus Snape put the stopper in the last bottle of Basilisk venom. He and Dumbledore had been escorted into the Chamber Of Secrets four hours ago, and Dumbledore looked very angry. Though they had discovered an ancient library, with many scrolls and books written by Salazar Slytherin himself, there had been no sign of the Horcrux. Dumbledore had search the chamber quite thoroughly, but there was no Horcrux.

The old man was visibly distraught. Snape felt a bit of despair as well.

Finding the Horcruxes was key to destroying the Dark Lord. Dumbledore was beyond positive that there was one hidden inside the school.

"I was so sure it would be here." Dumbledore said as he paced around the rotting corpse of the Basilisk.

"There are still many places it could be, Headmaster."

"Indeed." Dumbledore sighed. "We must find it, Severus."

"What of the others?" Snape said, hoping to distract Dumbledore from his rantings.

"I've really no idea. I have ideas of what they may be. Tell me Severus, do you think it peculiar how easily Voldemort controls his familiar?"

"Nagini? Since you bring it up, he does have unusual....You think the snake?" Snape turned to face Dumbledore, who was eyeing the Potions professor seriously.

"I do. He is very protective of the serpent. It seems to make sense."

"Indeed." Snape sat back on his haunches, rubbing his chin thoughtfully.

"She will not be easy to get near."

"She will be the last. She has to be in order to keep up the charade that we are painfully unaware of his situation."

"That makes good sense."

"Severus, I wish to speak with you on another matter. I have been once again unable to find someone suitable to take up our perpetually vacant post. I think it is time for you to become our new Defense teacher."

Snape stood up suddenly, his black eyes wide with surprise. "Me?"

"I have decided that you are ready. You're evolution these past few months have shown me that you are ready to take the post you have longed for. I have every faith in you that you shall prepare our students to protect themselves."

"But, what of my current position?"

"You need not worry about that. I have convinced Horace Slughorn to come out of retirement to teach once again."

"I don't know what to say." Snape said earnestly. So long had he wanted to show the students what it truly meant to fight the dark, as he had been uniquely qualified to do so. His years in service to the Dark Lord had given him insight on how dark wizards thought. He bowed his head low to Dumbledore.

"I shall make you proud, Headmaster."

"I know you will. I ask that you be fair, and diligent. You must help Harry and his friends, Severus. I fear the final battle will come sooner than we hope for."

Snape watched as the ancient Headmaster turned to leave the Chamber.

"Please seal the entrance when you leave." Dumbledore said sadly.

Snape collected the bottles of venom into a large box and sealed it shut.

He shrunk the box and shoved it into his pocket. Snape was grateful to be in the position he'd long for, but he was also filled with a sense of dread.

No Defense teacher had lasted more than a year in over twenty five years. It was rumored that the job was cursed. Snape was determined to break the jinx.

Snape took a final look at the Chamber, and felt as if something bright had lit him from within. He smiled his first real smile in over fifteen years. Somehow he felt a presence watching over him. A calming, loving warmth deep inside his blackened heart.

"Lily." He said softly.

"So, you'll be in here with Neville." Harry said helping Blaise to the boys room at the Beacon.

"I do appreciate this, Harry." The dark skinned boy smiled as he chose a bed.

"Don't say that until after you get through your first workout tomorrow." Harry grinned. After he had left Hogwarts, he and Sirius had gone to St.

Mungo's to retrieve Blaise and Susan. He had met Blaise's father, who had been quite surprised to learn that Blaise had been speaking of Harry Potter. Apparently, Blaise had never mentioned Harry's last name to his father.

Susan had seemed oddly quiet all afternoon. She looked rather frightened, and Blaise had assured Harry that the redhead was just feeling the exhaustion of the past few days catching up with her.

"Harry, I lied to you at the hospital." Blaise said. He looked at Harry seriously. Harry stepped closer and sat across from the handsome young man.

"Susan isn't tired. Well, she is, but that's not all of it. She's feeling very frightened. She nearly lost everything she holds dear in one moment. She believes that she can't do this, that she isn't strong enough."

"But she is." Harry said.

"We know that. I need your help in showing her that she can stand with us."

"I see." Harry said thoughtfully. "To be honest, I don't know how I can do that. I don't know that I'm even strong enough. But I can't not fight. We all have a choice to make here. To do what's right, and possibly lose everything, or to do what's easy, and still lose everything."

"I think I explained that to her this morning." Blaise nodded.

"How do you feel about all this?"

"I knew what I was doing when I decided to be your friend. I knew what I was getting mixed up in when Daphne first confessed she had a crush on you. I knew then I would have a loyal, trusted friend in you. I also knew that I was going to be subjected to all sorts of dangers. My father was one of the few who never believed Voldemort to be dead. My mother as well. When she died, I lost a piece of myself. I can identify with you a little,

because of it. The short version is, yes. I know what I'm doing, and I want to do, because it's right."

"Thank you, Blaise. Susan will see it in time. Be patient. As you said, she did nearly lose everything that matters. She's scared it will happen again, but deep down, she knows what it means to not do anything. She will lose everything. Give her a few days, and let her see what we can be when we work together, then let her decide." Harry smiled. Blaise nodded and he and Harry joined the others for dinner.

"Harry, I wanted to go swimming with you." Daphne whined a little as they climbed in to the light house tower.

"I know, but I just don't feel like swimming right now." Harry said, taking the black haired girl's hand and helping her into the glass room.

"You don't want to see me in my bikini?"

"No, I'd walk through fire to see you in your bikini." Harry blushed as he spoke.

"Can I ask you something?" Daphne said, a little worriedly. Harry took her fidgeting hands in his, smiling softly. He kissed her tenderly and looked into her deep dark eyes, waiting for her to continue.

"Why haven't we done anything?" She asked, a deep crimson blush coloring her cheeks.

"What do you mean?" Harry asked bewildered.

"I mean, yes, we've kissed, but we've never done anything else. Am I repugnant?"

"What are you talking about? You're stunning. Why would you think that?" Harry said, clearly not understanding any of this conversation.

"It's just that you've never tried to touch me."

"I touch you all the time."

"Yes, we hug, and you hold me, and that stuff, but you've never tried to

touch me."

"I don't understand." Harry said stepping back. "You're not making.....oh."

Harry's mind finally put the pieces together, and he looked at his girlfriend, who was trying to look anywhere but at him.

"What brought this up?" He asked.

"I think it's been rolling around for awhile, but when I saw you in your swimsuit this morning, I just felt this urge. I wanted to...to...I don't know, to do things to you. Then after you left I got to thinking about how long we've been together, and all the times we've been together, and it hit me that not once have you done anything like a normal boy would."

"So, I'm not normal?" Harry asked, a little anger bubbling up.

"No. Not like that. Please try not to misunderstand me. Harry, I know that I'm not ready for us to ..."

"Make love?"

"Yes! I'm nowhere near ready for that. But I wouldn't mind exploring."

Harry nodded, a small smile playing on his lips. "You're asking me to cope a feel once in a while."

"There's no need to be crass, but essentially yes." Daphne said, a small smirk on her face.

"I get it. Look, I don't want to push you into anything. And to be honest, I never thought of it, at least not when we were together. I don't want to hurt you, or make you angry."

"Then don't." Daphne smiled as she stepped closer to her boyfriend. "Take things slow. I'm giving you permission, Harry, but just listen when I tell you to stop. It doesn't necessarily mean I don't like it, just that I'm not ready to go farther. And when I say that I want you to take me swimming, then by Merlin, take me swimming!"

"Ok. I get it." He said, kissing her lips gently. "We'll go swimming

tomorrow night. I promise."

"You should be thankful that you're with me, and not Hermione. She would have come here with loads of books for you to read on the matter."

"Maybe I should read a book. I have no idea what I'm doing." Harry shrugged. Daphne held him closer, kissing him for a long time. When she released his lips, she grinned.

"That makes two of us, my love."

10. Chapter 10

The rest of the summer passed in a blur. Everyday, the teenagers woke up to run, swim, and do calisthenics. The rest of the day was spent reading and compiling lists of spells to practice when they returned to Hogwarts, or just being teenagers. They had journeyed to Diagon Alley to pick up their supplies for the coming school year and had been surprised at the near emptiness, except at one shop.

The shop was huge and featured a giant, two headed display which actually cried out to passersby. Weasley Wizard Wheezes. The group entered and were nearly blinded by the intense brightness of the place. Along every wall, and reaching to the high ceilings, were rows and rows of products. Fake Wands, Skiving Snackboxes, Personal Daydream Charms, Self Inking Quills, Reusable Hangman sets, Punching Telescopes, and Patented Weasley Fireworks.

There were love potions, and exploding whoopee cushions, and glasses that would tweak the wearers nose, and the famous portable swamps.

Fake galleons that you could use to communicate with friends.

Harry was stunned into a fit of hysterical laughter when he read a giant sign over a display that advertise there newest product, U-No-Poo.

"I believe the boy likes it." George said as he met with the group. Fred was there as well.

"What do you think?" He asked.

"This is amazing." Harry said, wiping tears from his eyes.

"I love it." Neville grinned. Tracey nodded.

"Guys, what are these?" Daphne asked, poking her finger into a large cage where tiny little creatures that looked like small balls of fluff with cute stubby little legs were running and frolicking.

"Ah, Pygmy Puffs. Miniature Puffskiens. We can't keep them in stock.

They're quite easy to train and just so darn cute." Fred said. "We got a license to breed them a few weeks ago. Only place in England to get them."

"Haven't you ladies found our Wonder-witch products? Ginny's working the counter, she'll love to see you guys." George said to the four girls, and led them to a large counter off to one side.

"Come with me, Harry." Fred said seriously. "You guys look around, whatever you want, fifty percent off." Fred smiled to Blaise and Neville, who looked as though it were Christmas.

Fred led Harry into a back room, where they were met by George.

"We kind of came up with a few happy accidents. So we began experimenting some more, and now we have a more serious line. We're providing this stuff to the Order." Fred smiled.

"We want you to take a few things, as well. You might find it all very useful." George added. The Weasley twins began packing a rather large bag full of boxes of varying sizes, telling Harry what each item was as they packed.

"Shield Cloaks. They won't stop Unforgivables, but they are quite useful against most other curses."

"Peruvian Darkness Powder. Smash the vile on the ground and it provides a cloud of darkness that no light can penetrate. Great for making

getaways."

"Decoy Detonators. Wind it up, let it go and it walks away. After about a minute, it explodes with an enormous boom."

"You'll like this. Drop the bundle of wire behind you if you're running, it straightens out and hovers, tripping your pursuer, then wraps itself around their legs so they can't chase you. We don't have a name for it yet. Just perfected them a week ago."

"This is great guys. What do I owe you?" Harry said, going for his money bag.

"Your gold's no good here." Fred said, stopping Harry.

"But..."

"Harry, do you have any idea how long we've dreamed of doing this?"

George said, waving to the shop around them. "You made it possible, mate. Whatever you need, whenever you need it, it's yours."

"Mr. Weasley?" A young witch stuck her head inside the room.

"Yes, Grace?" Fred smiled brightly.

"Fred's got a bit of a crush on our employee." George whispered, then grunted when his twin elbowed him.

"We need more fake wands. The deluxe versions are all out." Grace smiled shyly.

"I'll be right there." Fred said. He went to the back storerooms, whistling, leaving George and Harry laughing at his antics.

"Come on, you've got to get some of the fun stuff while you're here."

George smiled, escorting Harry back into the shop.

And hour later, the group had returned to the Beacon just in time for lunch.

And so August passed, and it was finally time to head back to Hogwarts.

The morning they were to leave, Sirius had awoken them for their last

workout at the Beacon. The group, with the exception of Harry who seemed intent on his workout, groaned and complained, even though they had all come to enjoy the exercise. After a month, they had all felt more energetic and stronger.

Daphne and Tracey ran together, discussing, as usual, their boyfriends, who were running at the front of the pack. Daphne had noticed that they had fallen into running in pairs, with the exception of Hermione, who was lagging in the rear of the group. It wasn't surprising, as Hermione had stayed up very late reading her new school books.

Daphne and Tracey also knew that Hermione had been becoming quite nervous for school to start. She hadn't said it to anyone, but both Slytherin girls knew that Hermione was anticipating meeting her true love on the train. Both girls knew that Hermione was becoming more and more flustered with the coming train ride.

Daphne shook her head as they were drawing closer to the bushy haired bookworm. A evil idea popped into her head. She looked at Tracey, a sinister smirk on her face.

"Hang back and follow my lead." She said softly, and sped up her run a bit to catch up to the Gryffindor.

Smack!

"Hey!" Hermione squealed as Daphne passed her, smacking her bottom.

"Come on, Hermione, pick up your pace!"

"Alright, fine. You needn't smack my bottom."

"But I thought you liked it." Daphne pouted playfully. Tracey came by then, also slapping Hermione's posterior.

"Let's get it moving, Granger!"

"Enough." Hermione huffed. She began to quicken her steps when Susan ran by her, also reaching out to slap the bushy haired girl's rear end.

"Stop spanking me!" She cried. Susan could only giggle, looking over her shoulder as she continued her run.

Hermione scowled. She was about to chase her three female friends when she felt another hand smacking her now burning cheek.

"Did you not hear me?! Stop spanking me!"

"What?" Blaise said, now running backwards. "I thought it was like a luck thing. You know like rubbing a bald guy's head. Spank Hermione's arse for luck."

"We're spanking Hermione?" Neville asked as he and Harry came running by. Harry could only chuckle and arch his eyebrows menacingly.

"I swear I will hex the next person to lay a hand on my posterior!" She screamed, pushing her hind end against the wall to prevent further spankings. Daphne and Tracey, who were approaching again, began laughing.

"But Hermione, what if it's your boyfriend?" Tracey giggled, then began sprinting as Hermione tore after her.

"Alright, you lot." Sirius said, signaling for them to stop. "I think we've all heard quite enough about Hermione's love of being spank. You naughty little thing"

"It's not funny! I do not like to be spanked!" Hermione's face was red with embarrassment. The rest of them were laughing hysterically.

"You're all going to get it. I'm getting Ginny to teach me her Bat Bogey Hex!"

"We don't have time for swimming today, so everyone get a shower and get to breakfast." Sirius continued, wiping tears from his eyes. "You'll need to keep this up at Hogwarts. So every weekday, at least once around the lake before breakfast. If you need anything, I'm a mirror call away."

Sirius said, leading them all out.

Harry was surprised how organized and quickly they got to Kings Cross.

Unlike when he'd stayed with the Weasleys, there had been nothing forgotten or last minute packing. They had arrived with plenty of time, and Daphne had been able to catch up with her parents when they arrived with her sister.

"Harry, good to see you." Cyrus Greengrass smiled politely as he shook the youths hand.

"Good to see you as well, Mr. Greengrass."

"I see you took good care of my daughter, thank you for that."

"Thank you for allowing her to stay so long." Harry smiled genuinely.

"Since you were so gracious to our Daphne, Aurora and I would very much like it if you were to spend Christmas with us."

"I think I'd like that."

"Good. I'll expect you for the holidays. We can finally get to know one another."

"I'd really like that, sir."

The platform filled rapidly with students and their parents, and Harry and his friends said their goodbyes, and boarded the train. They found two compartments next to each other and made themselves comfortable, waiting for a few others to join them.

"Luna!" Harry said spotting the pretty blonde Ravenclaw.

"Hello, Harry." She smiled as she was greeted by the others as well.

"Would you like to join us?" Daphne smiled.

"Will Ron be with you?"

"I hope so." Harry said.

"Then I would be most pleased to join you." Luna grinned.

The train got under way at exactly eleven o'clock, and Hermione went on to the Prefects meeting, telling them all that she would most likely see Ron

there and bring him along when it was over. Not long after she left, Ginny Weasley found them and came to say hello. She wasn't alone either.

"Hey, Dean." Harry smiled.

"Hi, Harry. Good summer?"

"Traveling and spending a lot of time with this beautiful lady." Harry grinned, nudging Daphne, who blushed lightly. "Yours?"

"Good. Stayed with Seamus for a bit. Was good fun."

"Good to hear it."

"Are you going to keep the DA going this year?" Dean asked.

"Actually, I am. Dumbledore asked that we keep it going and open it to anyone. I think it's a good idea."

"Fantastic. I did excellent on my OWLs because of it." Dean nodded.

"Dad told me that there was a large number of Outstandings in Defense this year." Ginny smiled. "Too bad Umbridge can't take credit for it." She said, dripping with sarcasm.

"Over half the people in our year were in the DA." Daphne thought out loud. "You're going to have to have different levels this year, Harry. Not everyone was involved and you can't expect second years to just pick everything up."

"I've thought about that. I'm going to break it up and have some of you guys help teach."

"That's a good idea." Ginny said.

"I learned as I was teaching." Harry said. "I think it might help you lot understand things better if you were teaching someone else."

They continued talking, going back and forth between the two cabins, laughing and joking and sharing stories of their summer. It was one of the lighter spots along the train. But somewhere near the rear of the train

was another matter entirely.

Draco Malfoy was exhausted. He felt drained and sick. His face was sweaty, and his normally slicked hair was messy. The Slytherin Prince looked like a pauper, with torn clothes and deep black circles under his eyes.

This was the fourth time this summer that he felt like this. It happened after every mission he'd accomplished for his new master. He had been called to the Dark Lord, and given his assignment. He would journey to wherever the Dark Lord had sent him, and he would feel an incredible surge of magical power. It was like being charged by lightning. Draco sometimes swore he could see little crackles of energy burst between his gloved fingers.

But then, when it was all over, and Draco had returned to that shabby little hut in France, he would feel as if all of his energy had been sucked away. He always felt normal after he ate and slept for an entire day, sometimes he felt stronger than he had before he had been called.

Something was happening, and Draco knew that it was the Dark Lord's doing. He thought he was being rewarded, just as he'd been promised. He didn't dare question his master. Draco knew that to question his reward would be like spitting in his master's face. No, he would not disrespect his great master. He would simply have to figure out how his power was growing on his own.

"Draco." Pansy Parkinson said as she threw herself at the blond boy. "I've missed you. Did you get any of my letters?"

Draco looked up to see both Crabbe and Goyle along with Millicent Bulstrode, who looked bigger and stronger than both of his goons. Draco felt no happiness at the sight of them. He felt contempt for Pansy, who was watching him like a love sick puppy.

"I got them." Draco said slowly, his gray eyes looking past her and out the window. "I burned them without reading them."

"What?" Pansy asked, eyes wide.

"Parkinson, you must know you and I were never going to be." Draco said lazily. "All you were was a shag when I needed a release. I put up with your lost puppy routine because it was easier than pretending to apologize whenever I wanted to get off. You were the easiest girl to get into bed, but not the prettiest. I've outgrown you."

"How can you say this?" She asked, her tears streaming down her cheeks.

"Because it's true. I don't need any of you. Leave, now."

Pansy didn't need to be told twice, she pushed past the other three and raced off. Millicent followed, while Crabbe and Goyle simple stared at their leader.

"I thought I was clear." Draco sneered. Crabbe nudge Goyle and the two left the Slytherin Prince to his thoughts.

Draco smiled to himself. He needed no one now. He had the Dark Lord, and that was all he needed. His power was growing and soon, he would exact his revenge on those who had wronged him. His only dilemma was who to start with. He fell asleep dreaming of the sweet music of screaming victims.

"Ron." Harry smiled, shaking his friends hand as he sat down with the group.

"Hey, Harry."

"Where's Hermione?" Daphne asked.

"She got stopped by Ernie. He wanted to talk to her about something."

Ron said. Daphne got up, kissed Harry quickly and left. Harry shrugged as Ron smiled. Luna poked her head in just then.

"I thought I heard you, Ron." She smiled.

"Hey." Ron responded, holding out his hand for the pretty blonde who took it, and sat in Ron's lap.

"Looks like you guys got closer since Harry's birthday." Neville smiled as he too joined the group.

"Yeah." Ron smiled lightly. "It was hard to let her go after she kissed me like that."

"If I had known, I would have done it sooner." Luna smiled.

Harry noticed something then, in that moment. Luna looked different. Her eyes didn't look so far away, and her smile wasn't so dreamy. She looked, well, normal. A thought occurred to him. What if Luna's "loony" persona was just an act as Daphne's "ice queen" was. A way to get people to be themselves around her, without realizing that the blonde was listening to everything that was said. It was something he would have to ask Ron about later.

"Where's Tracey?" Ron asked.

"Daphne popped in and they took off. Looking for Hermione, I guess." Neville shrugged.

"I suppose they went to give her support with Ernie." Harry smiled.

"Do you think Ernie was who the fortune teller was talking about?" Luna asked, her eyes back to their normal surprised state.

"I hope not." Neville shook his head. "Ernie's not real nice. He's no Draco, but he's kind of jerk."

"Maybe Hermione can cool him out." Ron commented. "She improved all of us."

"You mean by making us take our studies seriously, and keeping us from beating Malfoy into a pulp?" Harry asked sarcastically.

"And, keeping us from getting expelled from school at every turn." Neville remarked.

"And, trying to improve our manners." Ron added.

The three boys began laughing as they lamented Hermione's qualities. A few cars away, the three girls were sitting in a compartment. One was pacing back and forth, shaking her hands frantically.

"Slow down, Hermione. What happened?" Daphne said trying to calm her friend down.

"Ok, so right after the prefect meeting, I was walking back, and Justin Finch-Fletchly stopped me. He seemed kind of nervous and I thought that I've known him for awhile, maybe he's my true love, like the fortune teller said. I got kind of excited, but then Terry Boot came in and he wanted to ask me something, so I started thinking maybe it's Terry. He's not bad looking, right? Then in walks Eddie Carmichael from Ravenclaw. I panicked and got out of there. Then I ran into Ernie. I don't know which one it's supposed to be."

Hermione sat down heavily and leaned into Daphne.

"Calm down." Daphne smiled. "We'll help you figure this out."

"Most girls would kill for this sort of problem." Tracey grinned. "To have four boys to choose from."

"What did they ask you?" Daphne asked.

"Nothing. Justin was interrupted by Terry, who was interrupted by Eddie, and then I ran. Ernie only wanted to know if the DA was going to continue."

"Do you like any of them?" Daphne asked.

"Not Ernie. He's just not for me. I don't know Eddie at all. But both Terry and Justin are very nice." Hermione answered.

"And cute." Tracey added. Hermione frowned and Daphne chuckled.

"What am I going to do?" Hermione whined.

"This from the same girl who thinks Divination is rubbish." Tracey

grinned.

Hermione looked up, her face lifting. "You're right." She said to the both of them.

"Why am I stressing over this? It was some fraud at a carnival." Hermione stood up. She balled her fists and straightened her shoulders.

"Where are you going?" Daphne asked.

"To find out what each boy wanted. I'll see you back at our compartment." Hermione walked out to find each of the three boys who had stopped her earlier.

"Great, now we have to wait for her to get flustered again." Daphne said disappointed. "I wanted to help her."

"So did I." Tracey smiled. "First she has to figure which one she likes. I'm rooting for Finch-Fletchley."

"Why him?"

"Simple. He's a good looking bloke, but he's also Muggleborn. He's uniquely qualified for our little brainiac. Plus, he's top in his house. Can you think of anyone better?"

"Boot's not bad."

"True, but after the Goldstein incident, she's going to be a little weary of Ravenclaws. Speaking of which, it's going to be interesting to see how Cho and the others treat Harry this year. There's going to be fall out from all the false accusations and everything from last year."

"What about our own house. We still have the Draco problem. Is he going to continue with his tortures? What do we do if he does?" Daphne queried.

"We're going to have to be on guard, as always." Tracey shrugged.

"It's strange, we haven't seen the little ferret yet." Daphne stood. Tracey followed her example. They began returning to where their friends were.

"Maybe he's made his customary visit to Harry already."

The girls returned and learned that there had been no sign of Malfoy. The group shared laughs as they came up with more and more wondrous reasons as to why Malfoy had not graced them with his annoying presence. Hermione joined them a few moments later, a bright smile on her face, though she would not give any reason as to why.

After a while they all changed into their school robes in preparation for their arrival. The train finally came to a complete stop and all along the platform students began disembarking.

A smile came to Harry's face as he heard the familiar call "Firs' years this way!" Harry looked and saw Hagrid's silhouette waving the youngsters to him. Daphne took his arm and began leading him to the carriages when Harry heard something else.

"Draco Malfoy, Please take your wand and place it on the ground."

Harry and many others turned to see eight Aurors, all with wands out and pointing at the aristocratic youth, who was sneering back.

"What is this?" Malfoy demanded.

"You are under arrest for the murder of four Aurors. Place your wand on the ground." The lead Auror said again.

"Killing an Auror?" Draco asked, raising an eyebrow. "How could I kill an Auror?"

"Just place your wand on the ground, boy!"

Harry felt a wave of anger flush through his mind. Anger that wasn't his own. Harry flicked his wrist, and his wand shot out of its holster and into his hand. His scar prickled, which set Harry in motion. His friends grabbed him quickly, keeping him back for the moment. The Aurors were closing in on Draco, who was still smiling malevolently at them all.

Slowly, and purposefully he reached into his robes and took out his

wand, holding it away from his body so they could all see it.

The lead Auror again ordered the blonde boy to place it on the ground and to step away. Draco began bending low as if to place the wand on the ground, and suddenly flicked the wand at the lead Auror. A nasty looking flash of purple shot from Draco's wand and hit the lead Auror in the chest, knocking him back several feet, where he began tearing at his chest and coughing up blood.

Two more Auror's moved in, but Draco had anticipated this and surged forward out of the way of the two stunning spells that had been fired at him. Draco spun letting loose a volley of different spells.

Screams were heard as children all along the platform began running away from the growing battle. Draco quickly analyzed the situation. One Auror was down, and would be dead in another few moments. The others would be more difficult to eliminate now that he had lost the element of surprise, but it didn't matter. Two stunning spells came at him, but Draco got his shield up in time, and returned with two more of the purple spells.

One of the Aurors tried to get behind the boy, but Draco spotted the move and hit the woman with a leg locker curse and followed it with a stunning spell. His movements were lightning fast. Draco blocked another volley of stunners, laughing as he conjured his shield. He was beginning to see why his Aunt Bellatrix was so fond of fighting these buffoons.

Though Draco still felt exhausted from his previous nights exertion, and he didn't have the energy he usually received from the Dark Lord before an assignment, he felt this was no contest. He had studied the Aurors tactics in his encounters. They were predictable, and uncreative. Draco rolled into a crouch, sure that these fools would be no problem. As he prepared for another volley of spells he felt several somethings hit him in

the spine, sending him sprawling into the midst of the Aurors. He scrambled up as the Aurors were grabbing him up. He suddenly found himself bound and his wand taken from him.

His gray eyes searched frantically until he saw them. Daphne Greengrass looked pleased, while Tracey Davis was laughing. She was laughing at him. Draco's face burned with anger. Blaise Zabini still had his wand leveled at the blonde boy, his eyes cold, while that blood traitor Bones held his arm. The mudblood Granger was there. Her wand was in her hand and she was watching him closely. But in front of them all were his most hated foes. Longbottom and Potter.

Draco began struggling against his bonds, his rage coming to an intense boil.

"You. You've been thorns in my side too long." He growled sinisterly.

The remaining Aurors checked on their fallen comrades, and collected Draco's wand. One of them nodded at the group of children, a grateful smile on his face. Two of them hefted the corpse of the fallen Auror and they awoke the one woman who had been stunned. Still Draco continued his tirade of curses and threats.

"They won't keep me, Potter. I'll be coming for your blood. Do you hear me? I'm going to kill you, Potter. I'm going to kill you. I'll see your blood spilled, Potter, mark my words!"

Harry slowly lowered his wand, still watching the boy who had done his best to make Harry miserable over the last five years. He couldn't look at anyone else until the Aurors apparated him away, still screaming and ranting.

It was a long moment before anyone moved. At last it was Hagrid's voice that finally broke the silent din and released people from there shocked stupors. Harry continued to stare at the place where Draco had been only

moments before, a shiver of something crawling up his spine. Something in his head told Harry that this had not been his last encounter with Draco Malfoy.

"Come on, love." Daphne said softly. "Let's go. It's over."

"OH, DEAR!" Hermione gasped. The others turned to see what had frightened the bushy haired witch, and received a shock themselves.

Harry and Neville had no idea what the others were gaping at until Hermione stepped closer to the carriage, reaching out to the leathery skinned skeletal horse who was sniffing at her hand curiously

"I can see them. I can see the thestrals." Daphne whispered horrified. She quickly turned back to look at the spot where the first Auror had fallen.

Harry saw tears falling from her deep chocolate eyes. He held her close as she began to cry in earnest. The others gathered closer as well. Harry could see Tracey clinging to Neville, who looked quite upset himself.

It was bittersweet. None of them had known the man who Draco had cut down so mercilessly. But together they had stopped the little bastard from harming anyone else. He was on his way to Azkaban, and with that came a promise for a better year at school. However it had come at a price, one that Harry had hoped they would not have to pay. Harry knew it was war and eventually they would see the atrocities. He had always hoped it would be much later, and not at the hands of someone they knew so well, even if it was Malfoy.

Harry understood that they were mourning now. Harry couldn't help himself as he, too, shed tears. Childhood had ended and they were mourning it's passing.

11. Chapter 11

The sorting ceremony was just as enlightening as always, as the Sorting Hat sang a brand new song in which it praised those who had united and

encouraged the rest of the school to join together against the coming darkness.

Dumbledore gave a very short speech in which he quickly addressed the arrest of Draco Malfoy, only saying that the young man had broken the law, and would be paying for his mistakes. The Headmaster also introduced Horace Slughorn, who had come out of retirement to take up teaching Potions, while Snape would take up the vacant post of Defense teacher. This had led to much murmuring and a few shouts of disbelief. Harry had been very surprised by the appointment. He had known, as many others had, Snape had wanted to teach Defense Against the Dark Arts for ages. Even though things between Harry and Snape had changed, Harry was still unsure of the man. He had only had one conversation with the man since he had come clean with the reasons for his loathing of Harry. Harry had seen a change in the man, but had not made up his mind about Snape.

Harry was supposed to be taking lessons with the man to train for his inevitable confrontation with Voldemort. Harry would have plenty of time to figure out what to make of this new Snape. For now, there was the new teacher, Slughorn, to take the measure of.

He was a beefy man, bigger than Uncle Vernon, if it were possible. He was bald, but had a walrus like mustache. He was dressed in the finest suit Harry had seen on such a large man.

"Hermione, do you know anything about Slughorn?" Harry asked.

"No. I've never heard of him." She responded.

"He taught my parents." Ron said. "They said he's fair, and kind of fun, but he does play favorites."

"So, like a kinder Snape." Neville commented.

"That'd be my guess." Ron nodded, filling his plate with his third helping.

Harry had noticed that he hadn't spoken once with his mouth full. He had to admit, Ron was actually trying to break all of his bad habits.

The rest of the meal was quite uneventful. Harry kept looking over to Daphne, who was watching him as well. Harry's mind recounted his past month with the girl who held his heart. They had become so much closer. He trusted her more fully than anyone in his life. He felt an emptiness without her near him, as if a piece of him was missing. It was only now that he began to understand the power of his emotions for her. He knew what it meant to love, and to be loved. It was an intense epiphany, and his head began to ache at the thought.

He watched Daphne, as she whipped her silken black hair over her shoulder and smiled at something Tracey was saying to her, and his heart was filled to bursting with his love for her. His head pounded harder, and Snape's words came to him.

"If you can reverse that, by feeling love and happiness, it is my theory the Horcrux will weaken."

Harry concentrated hard on how it felt to kiss Daphne's sweet soft lips, and he felt a strong pulse of pain, and his vision went blurry and darkened. He scoffed when he felt the pounding in his head intensify. Of course this would be painful, why should it be any different than anything he's ever done before. Harry kept focusing on the beautiful black haired girl. Her soft cream colored skin, her deep chocolate eyes, and her bright warm smile. The way she would run her fingers through his hair when she held him. How her body felt against his when they would lay together in the lighthouse tower watching the sunset.

With each pleasant thought, there was a intense burst of pain and a rush of fear. Harry tried to ignore these. He clutched the table, focusing solely on the girl at the Slytherin table, who was now watching him with a look

of concern. Harry never felt the warm trickle of blood that was falling from his scar. He didn't hear his friends calling out to him, he never felt his head hit the stone floor. The last thing he would remember was the violent scream of pain before the darkness washed over him, and wrapped him in it's loving embrace.

Hermione and the others had not been allowed to go visit Harry in the infirmary. She had been ordered to return to her common room along with all Harry's other friends. She, Ginny, Ron, and Neville had come back to the common room, where they were assaulted by questions over the boy. Neville answered the questions while the others had snuck away. Soon after, the interrogation ended and Neville joined the group in front of the fire.

Ron and Neville began a whispered conversation over Harry's collapse, while Ginny was talking to Lavender and Parvati over boys. Hermione's own mind was a wash of subjects. She had her customary book in her hands, but hadn't turned a page in some time. Her thoughts were on two boys. One who was unconscious in the Hospital Wing, and another who had her interest piqued.

She was having a hard time trying to focus, her emotions as split as they were. She wanted to be happy. Malfoy was on his way to Azkaban, and Hermione had a boy crushing on her, but her best friend was lying in the infirmary on the very first night of school, a new record for him.

Hermione's mind kept replaying the train ride. She wanted to worry and fret over Harry, but somewhere in her brilliant mind, Harry's voice kept telling her not to worry. And so, her mind kept throwing up distractions in the form of the boy who had so nervously asked her to be allowed to join her to study.

Hermione had three boys to hunt down and find out what they had

wanted of her. She had been overwhelmed by boys, and her mind kept repeating the fortune teller's words that she would meet her true love on the train. She had scoffed at first, but over the next month it had become quite the daydream for the brainy girl.

She had found Terry Boot, who had only wanted to know if the DA was going to continue this year. Eddie Carmichael had disappeared so, she never did find out what he had wanted. She had finally found Justin with Zacharias Smith, who smiled at his acquaintance, and queried about her summer.

When Hermione had said that she had come to find out what Justin had wanted earlier, the boy flushed red, and Zach tried to disguise his amusement in a coughing fit. Justin stood up and moved into the corridor with the girl and fidgeted as if he had fire ants crawling under his robes.

"I never had the chance to talk to you properly last year, and I tried to perfect a speech to you over the summer, but I was rubbish with it."

Justin Finch-Fletchley stammered. Hermione's eyes widened, knowing what the poor boy was trying to say, but she couldn't find it within herself to ease his agony, mostly because she was unsure of what to do herself.

"I know that we don't know each other all that well, but I thought that maybe you'd allow me the privilege of getting to know you. I find you very attractive, and well, I just wondered if, perhaps, we might study together sometime, and perhaps get to know one another." He said, wiping his hands on his robes, nervously.

"I think I would like that, Justin. Perhaps after dinner tomorrow night?"

Hermione smiled shyly. Justin nodded his acquiescence and they bid each other a fond goodbye. Hermione swore she heard whoops of joy

coming from Justin's compartment.

Justin had always seemed nice to Hermione. He was often at the top of classes, and he didn't seem to be the macho, arrogant type like some. He was a Muggleborn like herself, so they already had something in common. And, Justin had become quite handsome. He was much taller than she was, and his dark chestnut hair was styled nicely. His eyes were bright brown, almost hazel in color. And when he wasn't so nervous, Justin usually had an easy smile on his face.

Hermione wrapped an arm around herself as she allowed a smile to play at the corners of her mouth as she thought of the boy. She wanted to take her time, and really get to know the boy, but something about him made her heartbeat quicken. Perhaps the fortune teller wasn't a fraud, but only time could tell.

"Hermione!" Ginny's voice cut through her thoughts. Hermione looked up into the smiling face of her redheaded friend.

"What?" she asked, shaking her head to clear her thoughts.

"I thought we were best friends."

"We are. What's wrong?"

"How come you never told me? Why did I have to hear it from others?"

"What are you talking about?"

"That you liked to be spanked. I never ever pictured that you were into that kind of thing." Ginny was smiling mischievously. Her voice was loud enough for the entire common room to have heard, and sure enough heads were turning in her direction.

"Wow, Hermione." Parvati giggled. "We've shared a room with you for five years, and you never once said anything."

"It's always the bookish ones that are the wildest." Lavender added.

"I do not!" Hermione blustered, her face reddening. Both Ron and Neville

had fallen into silent guffaws, and Ginny's face was a mask of amusement.

"Come on, Hermione. You're among friends, if you can't talk about it with us..." Ginny smiled.

"Whoa, Hermione." Seamus said, leaning over the couch and placing his head next to hers. "If you're into that, what else are you hiding?"

Hermione grimaced, and popped Seamus with her book. Seamus fell back onto the floor, gripping his face, and laughing at the same time. The rest of the common room burst into laughter.

"I'm only going to say this once!" Hermione stood up quickly, staring at everyone angrily. "I do not, and have never, enjoyed being spanked! I would appreciate it if you would all keep your disgusting thoughts to yourselves from now on." She began to storm out when Colin Creevey shouted at her.

"It'll be hard when your shaking that thing like that!"

Again the room burst with laughter, and Hermione shrieked and ran up to the her bed. Tomorrow several people were going to get hexed, and Colin would be first. Then she was going to hit Blaise. Hermione knew it had been the dark skinned Slytherin who had told Ginny about how they had all slapped her posterior that morning in an effort to get her moving and embarrass her, which they had succeeded with on both counts. Yes, Blaise was going to get the worst of her wrath.

When Daphne and Tracey entered the Slytherin common room after trying to check on Harry, they had been astonished by the change. The other Slytherins were dancing and singing, and carrying on like they had just won the Quidditch cup. With very few exceptions, all the Slytherins were having a very good time.

The two girls asked about the older students, and it seemed the party was

for the arrest of Draco Malfoy. They all seemed happy that the blonde prince was no longer in school with them to ruin their lives and make them afraid.

Crabbe, Goyle, Theodore Nott, and Millicent Bulstrode sat in a corner eyeing everyone dangerously, but had made no attempt to stop the festivities. Daphne found it odd that Pansy was not among that small group, but her mind was too full to really think on it much. Daphne knew that there was now a power vacuum in the house. Slytherin House had long been a aristocracy of sorts, with the one who seemed to wield the most power leading the house. It had been Malfoy since second year, his father had all but assured it, but now the ferret was gone. Daphne looked about the room, trying to puzzle out who might try to be the next Slytherin Prince.

Nott stood a good chance, but the little blighter wasn't cunning enough. On top of that, he had no supporters. None of the seventh years would try, as they all seemed wrapped up in their own lives. Some of them would be forced into the Dark Lords service right out of school, if they hadn't already taken the mark.

There were younger students who might try, but it was really a matter of who had the strongest support. Then, an idea occurred to Daphne. She had only two years left, and she had no ambitions to lead a bunch of school children, but maybe her sister could do it. Astoria was a very strong young woman, and she had the cunning and the intelligence to make the house better for all, and even help to rid them of the stigma that all dark wizards came from Slytherin.

Astoria was already holding court with her many friends in the house, and some of the first years were listening to her sister with rapt attention. Yes, why not, Astoria. She was charismatic and easy to get along with, if

you weren't related to her. She was only a third year, but it didn't matter, Draco had only been a second year when he gained power. Daphne would talk to her sister, and begin helping to make Astoria the new Slytherin Princess.

Daphne grabbed Tracey and began leading her to the dormitory to get her best friend in on the idea. They hurried into the dorm, and Daphne was about to tell Tracey was about to explain her idea when they heard someone crying. The two girls pushed aside the curtains on one of the beds to see Pansy Parkinson balling her eyes out.

"Pansy?" Tracey said awkwardly. "Are you alright?"

"No. You were right." Pansy said angrily. "He was just using me. Why couldn't I see it?"

Daphne sat on her dorm mates' bed and put her hand on the upset girls back.

"I just kept thinking if I give him what he wants, he'll come around. He'll love me. I am so stupid. I even agreed with all his shite!"

"What happened? What did he say?" Tracey asked.

"He just told me what he truly thought of me. How I was only kept around so he could get his rocks off. He said I was easy. Merlin I am easy!" Pansy flopped back onto her bed.

"Well, this is just your chance to be who you want to be." daphne said softly. "You shouldn't chase someone around who just wants to use you as a .."

"depository?" Tracey remarked.

"Delicate. Learn it!" Daphne shouted, smacking her best friend on the arm. Tracey shrugged but looked a little shamed.

"The point is," Daphne continued, staring icily at Tracey. "is that you shouldn't change yourself just to make some boy, who isn't worthy of you

in the first place, like you. Draco was a ponce. You've known that all this time, but for whatever reason, you chased after him. He had his head so far up his arse to see who you really were. It's his lose. Find someone better, someone who's worthy of you."

Pansy sat up, rubbing her eyes and sniffing.

"I'm sorry." She said. "To both of you. I've been so mean to you because I was trying to impress that pillow biter. I am going to be my own person. I'm going to find someone to make me happy."

"Good." Daphne said.

"That's the spirit. Besides, you get the last laugh. He's going to Azkaban, and in a month he's going to be wishing he were with you." Tracey smiled.

"You're right." Pansy smiled, tears still in her eyes. "He's going to wish he could be with me. I hope he gets what he deserves!" Pansy nearly screamed.

Daphne felt as if the world had suddenly begun spinning out of control.

Draco had been arrested, she and Tracey were comforting Pansy who had always been somewhat fiendish to them. What else was going to happen this year, Daphne could only guess at.

Draco was pacing back and forth in his cell. He had been shoved in there immediately after he'd been brought in. He was fuming. He would have been able to beat those damn Aurors if it hadn't been for Potter. Once again, Potter interfered, and here he was in the custody of the impotent Ministry.

Draco wasn't worried. He would be taken to Azkaban and soon after, he would be released. There was no way the Dark Lord was going to allow his weapon to be taken away from him.

Draco smirked. The Dark Lord would probably unleash his wrath on the

Ministry for this affront. Draco would be able to fulfill one of his innermost desires. He would wade through the Ministry and mutilate every single person he came across. Perhaps he would be lucky and find a Weasley.

That thought made him laugh. Draco actually fell over laughing at the thought of getting his hands on Arthur Weasley and ripping his flesh from his bones, and sending his face to the rest of the redheaded blood traitors.

Draco pulled himself onto his cot, still chuckling. Oh the fun he would have when the Dark Lord set him free. He no longer had to attend that travesty of a school, and he could now put all his energies into ridding the world of the disease of mud bloods.

Oh yes, he could feel the magic tingling in his very veins. He would be free very soon, and the world would soon tremble at the name Malfoy.

Harry awoke well past midnight. His head throbbed dully and his stomach lurched lightly. He sat up and heave a sigh. He was in the hospital wing on his first night.

"This has got to be a new record or something." Harry groaned.

"It is, Potter." Came a voice Harry recognized.

"Professor Snape?" Harry asked.

"Indeed. I have been waiting for you to awake. I had to know what happened to you."

Harry looked to the man who was veiled in the shadows. He felt no hate towards the man anymore. He felt no malice towards the man anymore.

Harry wasn't sure what he felt towards the man who had made it a habit to torment and punish the boy for his entire career at Hogwarts. Until late last year, Snape had took great pleasure in finding new ways to goad the boy into saying anything to allow for the taking of points. That all

changed when Harry finally confront the former Potions Master about his grudge against the Gryffindor. Snape had come clean about his friendship with Harry's mother, and how Harry's father had menaced a younger Snape throughout school. But worst of all was Snape's confession of how it had been him that had led Voldemort to kill Harry's parents. It was something Snape had never forgiven himself of. The guilt and his own self hatred had been projected onto Harry. But Snape was changing.

"Your scar split open, and then you passed out. Did you have a vision?"

"No. I was watching Daphne at dinner and just thinking about how I felt about her. Then my head began pounding." Harry said thoughtfully.

"Go on." Snape urged.

"I started thinking of what you said to me, about weakening the Horcrux, so I focused on how Daphne made me feel, and the pain increased, and then I blacked out."

"Interesting. It seems I may have been correct. With your permission, I would like to examine your mind."

Harry thought for a moment. He wanted to know if he had managed to weaken the cursed Horcrux. He nodded slowly and Snape rose to his feet.

He urged Harry to lay back and try to relax.

Harry kept his eyes open and imagined a warm empty beach, like the ones he and Sirius had visited during the summer. He could feel a pressure in his head, but this one was not like the brute force attacks Snape had made him endure during their Occulmency training. Harry kept focusing on the white sand and the gorgeous blue waters. After a few moments, the pressure receded and Harry stared at Snape.

"Well, Potter. You have impressed me. I am unsure of how much damage you caused, but the link feels less powerful. This is not to say that it is as weak as I think we'd like it, you still have a long way to go. I want to

help you in further weakening this accursed thing inside of you."

"How?" Harry asked weakly. He was beginning to feel tired again.

"We will discuss it when you are feeling stronger. Rest, Potter. We will speak tomorrow evening in my office." Snape rose again and stared at Harry for a long time. "Your mother would be proud of you, Harry."

"I think she might be proud of you as well, sir." Harry commented before falling into a deep sleep.

Snape stood agape at what the child had said. Did he truly think that Lily could be feeling pride if she were watching the man? Surely not. Snape knew he could never fully atone for all he'd done, and yet there was that spark of hope in his chest.

Snape lowered his head and left the sleeping boy. He was tired, and he had classes to prepare for. He would need to get some sleep before the morning.

It was then that he felt it. A burning pain in his left arm. He was being called. Snape grimaced as he clutched the foul mark upon his forearm. He waited for the pain to pass, and then he quickly made for the gates of Hogwarts.

Snape touched his wand to his Mark and just as always happened, the Dark Mark acted as a Portkey to wherever the Dark Lord was residing. Snape stood outside a once glorious castle. He could hear the forest that surrounded the broken down ruin. Snape sniffed at the air and smelled the familiar stench of decay that accompanied the Dark Lord. He surrounded himself with Death, which Snape found strange now that he knew to what lengths the evil wizard had gone to prevent his own death. Snape cautiously entered the ruins and followed the pulsing pain in his arm which would lead him to the Dark Lord's chamber. It wasn't long before he arrived at what had once been a grand hall. At the farthest end

was a glorious big back throne in which sat a stooped over cloaked figure.

"At last you have arrived, Severus." The Dark Lord spoke, wheezing a bit. There were other Death Eaters sitting in chairs along the walls, Bellatrix Lestrange sat at Voldemort's right, staring icily at Snape as he approached and bowed low.

"Master." He said with little emotion.

"I am in need of your services, Severus." Voldemort hissed. "But first, I must finish other business. Please be seated on my left." A thin, withered ghostly white hand motioned to an empty chair next to the robed figure.

"Now then," The Dark Lord wheezed. "I would like volunteers for another rescue mission at Azkaban. To many of my loyal followers have been kept in the clutches of the Ministry. Tomorrow evening, there will be another transfer of prisoners, one of which is important to my future plans. I want the boy, Malfoy, brought before me unharmed. Should anything happen to the boy I will be very angry, and I will not merely punish your failures.

"Bellatrix, I am placing you in charge of this. I want your nephew before me by Midnight tomorrow evening. You may take as many of my Death Eaters as you wish. The Dementors will be no trouble to you. They have sworn fealty to me, and they will be leaving the island tomorrow."

Bellatrix's mouth split in to a Cheshire grin. She arose and bowed low, before leaving to plan the assault. Voldemort excused the other before turning to Snape, calling him to kneel before him once again.

"You are to share this information with no one, Severus. I do not know why, as of this moment, but this body is weakening. I fear it will not hold me for much longer. I will need to begin work on a ritual to construct a new one. Something stronger, but until then, I need you to provide me

with strengthening draughts."

"I live to serve." Snape lied easily.

"Do you? I have been receiving disturbing reports about you, my slippery friend. Tell me, Have you not been taking journeys with Dumbledore?"

"I have, My Lord." Snape answered, curious as to how the dark lord knew of this.

"Tell me, what is the old man looking for?"

"I do not know, my Lord. I am sure it has to do with the Potter boy.

Perhaps he believes he has some way to defeat you."

"Does he now?" Voldemort sneered. "Has he mentioned what it might be?"

"Not straight out, but he does keep mentioning the connection between your wands. Perhaps he means to find a way to increase Potter's power."

Snape said flatly, cursing inwardly for not being able to think of something more clever.

"Perhaps I have allowed the man to live to long now. I believe the time has come to finally put an end to the old man's meddling. You have your task, Severus." Voldemort hissed through a fit of wheezing coughs . Snape bowed again and swept from the hall, leaving the Dark Lord to ponder this news. Could Dumbledore find a way to make the pest more powerful?

Voldemort rose from his throne. Even if Dumbledore could accomplish such a task, he would be to late to stop Voldemort. The Dark Lord smiled as he thought of his new plan. Having Draco near him at all times would speed up the transfer of power. There would be Dementors near by him now, so when the transfer was complete, Voldemort could take over his new youthful body, and with the combined power, he would be stronger than ever before.

Draco would be to blinded by his own rage to realize what was happening to him. Voldemort would send the Dragon out now in force. Allow the boy to as his aunt, a raving psychotic, then when he was mad with his bloodlust, and the world feared the boy, Voldemort would take the boy's body, and the world would be his. It was just a matter of time now.

12. Chapter 12

Dumbledore sat back in his chair, stroking his long white beard thoughtfully. Snape had just told him of his meeting with the Dark Lord the previous night. The Headmaster was curious about the damage inflicted onto Voldemort due to his possession of Harry, and exactly how deep it went.

"Of course, you should make him the strengthening draught, just maybe not as powerful as you can make them, eh?" The Headmaster said, a twinkle in his eyes. Snape gave a smirk at the comment.

"Very Slytherin of you, Albus."

"Do you believe his further weakening is due to what you told me of Harry's collapse?"

"They could be related. The only way to find out would be to help Potter repeat his experiment. In safer conditions."

"I agree. We can't have the boy passing out everywhere. There are enough rumors about him as it is." Dumbledore nodded slowly, thoughtfully.

"What of the attack on Azkaban?"

"We have a choice to make." Dumbledore said, turning to look at his new Defense teacher. "Do we inform the Ministry, and lead them to slaughter, or do we do nothing and keep the body count as low as possible.?"

"What makes you think it would be a slaughter?" Snape asked.

"My friend, how many times must we fall for the same trick? As you have said, he is allowing Bellatrix to lead this break out. Do you believe for a second that she will hold back in her bloodlust?" Dumbledore smiled benignly as he peered over his half moon spectacles. "I hate to think this, but our focus must be in preparing Harry and his friends. Soon we must pass this burden to them, and I can only hope that they are fully prepared for what is to come."

"No luck in finding anymore of them?"

Dumbledore deflated. "I believe I may at last know where it was hidden, but it will take a very long time in finding it. I was wandering the seventh floor yesterday before the students arrived, thinking on the matter when the Room of Requirement came into view. I entered the room to discover a virtual wasteland of forbidden items. I think that it has become a repository of lost, stolen and hidden items over the course of Hogwarts' History. If it wasn't for the need for secrecy, I would have the elves clean out the room. But I think that the staff will have to do some extra duty."

"A good idea. The elves might become possessed by it and hide it again."

Snape nodded.

"And, we might make some money for the school by selling off the millions of fanged Frisbees, and school books." Dumbledore smiled. "This Saturday evening, be prepared to get dirty, my friend."

"Do you really think I can oversee Slytherin?" Astoria asked. She had been awoken very early by her sister, who had taken her to an unused classroom and laid out her plan for their house. Astoria had liked the idea of being the leader of the house, but was unsure that anyone else would be willing to follow her.

"Tracey and I are going to begin talking to people. You already have all

your friends, who will back you, as will most of the first years. It's a matter of getting fourth and fifth years in your corner. A seventh year might not hurt. All you have to do is what you already do naturally."

"And what's that?" Astoria asked skeptically.

"Lead. I know you haven't noticed, but when you speak, other people in our house listen. We're ready for a change, Tori. Besides, You'll be the first girl to dominate Slytherin in who knows how long. Professor Snape already loves you, so you've got that in your favor, as well." Daphne said confidently.

"Why are you doing this?" Astoria asked, keeping her eyes locked on her older sister's. Daphne straightened up and smiled proudly.

"Because I know that you can make things better for the future. Do you want another Malfoy in charge?"

Astoria shook her head quickly, her eyes wide with disgust. Daphne clutched her younger sister's shoulder, and squeezed.

"We all have a destiny. I believe this is part of yours." Daphne smiled.

"And what's yours?" Astoria asked, a bit of worry in her dark eyes.

"I think mine is to help Harry." Daphne said shyly.

"You really love him." Astoria said. Daphne nodded, her eyes wandering to the door. She had planned on going to check on Harry this morning right after she talked with her sister.

"Do you think you'll marry him?"

Daphne turned back to her sister who was smiling, but not in her normal teasing way. She was genuinely asking her sister of her feelings. Daphne shrugged.

"There's a lot standing in our way." Daphne said finally.

"You mean the Dork Lord?"

"What?" Daphne asked laughing. Astoria grinned.

"Harry's going to fight him again. I figured it out. All anyone has to do is look at their history. Voldemort keeps coming after Harry, so I figure it's going to be the two of them until the end. I don't think the Daily Prophet is far off when they call Harry 'The Chosen One.'"

"You are incredibly brilliant." Daphne said smiling. Astoria grinned at the compliment. Daphne stood up and shook her hair out a bit. "You just worry about your new House. Let me worry about Harry."

"When you and Harry do get married, I want to be one of your bridesmaids." Astoria grinned again. Daphne turned back to her sister, a grateful smile on her lips.

"Duh." She chuckled, and then she was off to check on Harry.

Daphne raced to the Hospital Wing and quickly went inside. All the beds were empty and there was no sign of her black haired boy. She sought out Madam Pomfrey who informed her that Harry had been released and was probably down at breakfast. Daphne silently cursed the boy for not waiting for her or sending some kind of message, but then she couldn't think of how he might have done it.

Still, she wasn't going to let a little thing like common sense keep her from taking out her frustration on the boy. She was out of breath when she reached the Great Hall, and nearly knocked over several first years Ravenclaws who darted out of her way.

Harry was sitting halfway up the Gryffindor table by himself. No one else had come to breakfast yet. She sat down beside him and began punching him mercilessly.

"What I do?" He asked, trying in vain to dodge and block the angry girls fists.

"You great prat! I was worried sick about you. You are not allowed to end up in the Hospital Wing anymore!" Daphne huffed.

"I'm sorry. It wasn't on purpose!" Harry tried calming the girl. "If you don't stop beating on me, I'm going to wind up there again."

"I'm sorry." Daphne huffed. With one last punch, she sighed, and then hugged him tightly, kissing him. "You really had me worried. What happened to you?"

"I'm not really sure." Harry said. "This isn't the place to talk about it. I promise to tell you what I know, but later. In private."

Daphne caught the look in Harry's eyes. He was worried, scared even. He had been this way since he had spoken with Dumbledore right after his birthday. Daphne nodded, knowing how Harry's mind worked. He would open up to her eventually, she only had to be patient, but sometimes it was very difficult to do.

"Hello, lovebirds." Tracey grinned as she sat down across from Harry and Daphne.

"Good morning, Tracey." Harry smiled. Daphne waved and then put her head on Harry's shoulder. She was relieved that he appeared to be alright, but her heart was still feeling some tension, as if the full story would terrify her. Damn Harry for not just telling me this stuff right away, she thought.

"Good Morning, all." Hermione said politely as she sat with the growing group. Ginny was with her, giggling lightly, tears streaming from her eyes.

"What's up with you?" Tracey asked of the redhead, who couldn't speak for her laughter.

"I did something she found rather funny." Hermione said nonchalantly as she poured herself some juice.

"What?" Daphne's head came up. Harry was also looking on curiously.

"Let's just say that most people will-" She was cut off when Ron and

Neville sat down with them.

"Merlin's pants, Hermione." Neville said, eyes wide with admiration, and a bit of fear. "I am so glad I didn't add to the conversation last night."

"No kidding." Ron said. "I swear, I am never ever saying anything in jest to you again."

"I don't mind joking around, but it's gone too far." Hermione said firmly.

"No, you like joking when it's not directed at you." Neville said. "I've seen how you were at Harry's house all summer. When we poke fun at Sirius, or Harry, or anyone else, you get right in there with the jabs and the one liners, but when it turns on you, you get defensive and mean."

"Look, when I was growing up, I got picked on a lot by very mean people. So I have a bit of an issue with it. I'm working on it."

"Yeah, but did Colin really deserve that?" Ron asked.

"What happened?" Harry asked again.

"For his comment? I went easy on him." Hermione shrugged.

"What did you do?" Tracey asked, curiosity burning in her. Ginny's head was buried in her arms, her hand slapping the table.

"It was just cruel." Neville said. "Funny, but cruel."

"He's not going to be able to sit down at all today." Ron added.

"Did you spank him?" Daphne asked, a cheeky grin on her face. Hermione turned cold eyes to the black haired girl.

"No. I didn't spank him. But he'll think twice before mentioning my posterior again. By the way, have you seen Blaise this morning. I owe him as well. I know he opened his big mouth on the train." Hermione said coldly.

Daphne and Tracey began laughing. Harry was still curious about Colin, and what had happened to him, when the mouse haired Gryffindor was all but announced upon entering the great hall.

It began with snickering, and grew to great guffaws. Even Ron and Neville, who had been chastising Hermione for her retribution, had to laugh. The poor boy was waddling down the hall as his left rear cheek was engorged. The boy had a sheepish smile as he passed, a mixture of pride and embarrassment. He stopped at the group and gave a mock bow to Hermione, who watched him haughtily. Colin went to join his friends further along the table.

"What did you do to the boy?" Daphne asked, a huge smile on her face. She was still chuckling, watching as the fifth year boy was standing up, eating his breakfast.

"A stinging hex, with an Engorgio charm. It'll be gone by dinner, but in the meantime, people can watch him shake it." Hermione said venomously. "Where is Blaise?"

"Ok, Hermione, I'm going to be a real friend here and warn you to drop it with Blaise." Tracey said.

"She's right." Daphne added. "If you leave it alone, the joke will stay where it belongs. Among us. If you retaliate, you won't be able to walk the halls of this school without having yourself spanked around every corner."

Hermione huffed. Daphne looked at Tracey who shrugged.

"I don't think she believes us." Daphne said.

"It's her arse. I think she protests too much. Perhaps she really does like a little slap and tickle."

"URRGH! Why do you all have to be so vulgar?" Hermione asked.

"Human nature." Neville said before biting down on his bacon.

"Boy's right, Hermione." Tracey said. "Trust me, when you and your new boy finally get past the formalities, you'll find that even you have a dirty mind."

"Here you are." Snape said approaching the group, schedules for his two students. "Mr. Potter, I would like to see you this evening at six o'clock."

"Yes, sir." Harry nodded. Snape left with no more words and both Ron and Neville watched him go.

"That was odd." Ron commented.

"No remarks, or insults." Ginny said, finally able to contain her laughter.

"We've reached an understanding." Harry said as he was gazing at Daphne's schedule.

"Good morning." Professor McGonagall said as she too handed out schedules for her students. "Mr. Longbottom, I was very impressed with your work last year. Now I expect you to perform at that level this year."

"I promise to do my very best, Ma'am." Neville nodded looking over his schedule.

"Best to be off. Classes start soon. It would not do to be late on your first day." The stern professor waved them in the direction of the door.

"Do we all have Potions?" Harry asked looking at his own schedule.

Everyone nodded and they headed for the dungeons for their first class of the new school year.

Draco Malfoy stood up when the Aurors opened his cell. He had been feeling a growing surge of power all morning. He knew that he would be freed today. All he had to do was be patient. The Aurors slapped manacles on his wrists and began leading him out of his cell and down a long tunnel.

There was a moment when Draco thought of dispatching the two guards there, but he held back. It would be foolish to act now. He had no idea where he was or how many Aurors stood between him and ultimate freedom.

"Patience." He kept repeating to himself. He allowed himself to find peace

in the feeling of his core growing. Just a little longer.

The dungeons had gone through an extraordinary change with the new professor. The room was brighter, cheerier. The class looked clean and pleasant. Harry led the group into the class, and set up his things.

Daphne took the table with him. The class was a hodge podge of sixth years from all houses.

Harry noticed Justin Finch-Fletchley asking to join Hermione, and the strange way the bushy haired girl looked to be hiding her face. Neville and Tracey had also set up together, and Harry noticed Susan Bones and Hannah Abbott grab a table. Ron was left with the only other student in the room, Pansy Parkinson. Ron looked a little unsure at the girl, who for all the world looked lost. Her eyes were puffy and red as if she'd been crying a lot.

"What's with Parkinson?" Harry asked his girlfriend. She shook her head, and indicated with her eyes they would discuss it later.

"Good Morning class, and welcome to sixth year potions. I thought we might keep it light this morning and try something fun. First, I have four potions that I would like you to identify. Then, we're going to have a bit of a contest. Shall we begin?"

Slughorn moved his massive bulk around with great ease. He had a bright round face and cheery eyes. Harry was struck at how much the new teacher reminded him of images of Father Christmas.

"We'll start with this one. You of course have yet to attempt brewing this, but you've no doubt heard of it.."

Hermione's hand shot into the air, as did Daphne's. Harry looked at his friend and his girlfriend with pride. He had the two smartest witches in the world as his friends. Harry smiled at the thought.

"And you are?" Slughorn asked pointing to Hermione.

"Hermione Granger."

"Excellent. Give us your guess then."

"It's Veritaserum, sir. Or if you like, truth potion. It will force the drinker to tell the truth. The Ministry uses it in criminal cases."

"Very good. Very good. Ten points to Gryffindor. Now the striking young woman there, would you care to identify this potion, Miss...?"

"Daphne Greengrass, sir."

"Greengrass? Would you by any chance be a relation of Tobias Greengrass?"

"Yes, sir. He is my great Uncle." Daphne smiled gently.

"Then I am sorry to have heard of your loss. Tobias was a brilliant man with Charms work. Now, a guess, if you please."

"Polyjuice Potion. You can assume the identity of another person for an hour, by dropping a few of their hairs into the potion right before you drink it."

"Very well done." Slughorn clapped his chubby hands mirthfully.

Harry smiled at Daphne as she brushed some of her hair out of her eyes.

She smiled back at him shyly.

Harry had known the lumpy mud-like potion right away, having partaken of it in his second year. Hermione flashed a smile back at Daphne as well.

"Any one care to identify this last one?" Slughorn smiled. He was pointing to a cauldron of liquid that had a sheen that looked like pearl, and steam rising in lavender colored spirals.

"Is it Amortentia?" Tracey asked.

"It is indeed." Slughorn grinned. "Ten more points to Slytherin. Tell me how you identified it, Miss..."

"Tracey Davis. It smells like my boyfriend." Tracey smiled looking to Neville, who flushed deep crimson. "Like freshly turned earth and

flowers."

"Very good. But you know that it smells differently to everyone. I wonder if your boyfriend would be so kind as to tell us what he smells." Slughorn said, a wry grin on his face as he eyed Neville.

"Vanilla and cinnamon, sir." Neville said nervously. Slughorn laughed heartily, clapping his hands. Tracey rubbed Neville's back, smiling at him sweetly. Daphne turned to Harry and whispered.

"What do you smell?"

Harry took a long sniff, and exhaled slowly. He looked at his girlfriend, who had a slightly concerned look on her face.

"Apricot, and flowers. Like your shampoo." He smiled. Daphne's face brightened intensely, and she squeezed his hand.

"Sir, what of that potion?" Hermione said pointing to a tiny vial that the new Potions master lifted to show the entire class.

"This, is today's prize. Felix Felicis, or Liquid Luck. Once taken, you will be successful in all your endeavors, for up to twelve hours. I must warn that this is a banned substance in organized sports or examinations, so it should not be taken before a Quidditch match, but this tiny vial contains enough for twelve hours of luck. To win this, you must produce a batch of Draught of Living Death. We have an hour left in class, and that should be plenty of time. Off you go."

The class was a flurry of motion with student chopping, mashing, grating, stirring and rechecking instructions. Harry focused on his potion. He had never been a great potion maker, but his skill had improved greatly in the last year.

Still, he was having difficulty getting his potion to the smooth black color it was supposed to be at this stage. He was halfway through brewing the sleeping potion, but it looked more like a dark cloud grey than the

smooth black like Hermione's or Daphne's.

But Harry wasn't worried. He would be happy to see either witch win the prize. He could not imagine what they might use it for, though Harry had a sneaking suspicion Hermione might use it to find a good boyfriend. She had been having terrible luck in the love department. She had never once mentioned it during the summer, but Harry knew that she felt like an outsider a lot of the time. She really did deserve to have a bit of happiness as well as the rest of them.

Harry glanced over at Neville and Tracey. Both of their potions were coming along nicely. He could see they were helping each other out. It looked to Harry as if they didn't care about the prize, only about making a good grade. That said a lot to Harry. The bond the two lovers had forged was amazingly strong. Harry laughed to himself. He hoped Neville would ask him to be the best man at their wedding.

What surprised Harry, however, was when he saw that Ron and Pansy were talking. They weren't throwing insults, or taunting, but really talking. Ron had lost the sour expression on his face, and Pansy looked pleased. Harry again thought of how strange the year was going to be without Draco.

"That is time, ladies and gentleman." Slughorn announced. He began moving about the class looking into cauldrons. "Well it looks as if I have some very gifted potions brewers this year. Yes, indeed. Now this is magnificent work, Miss Greengrass."

"Thank you, sir." Daphne nodded.

"I think you are today's winner." Slughorn smiled, handing the vial to Daphne, who held it delicately. Her smile was amazing. Harry looked to Hermione, who looked a little sad that she had not gotten her potion just right, but she looked pleased that her friend had won.

They all packed away their things, and began heading out.

"What's next?" Ron asked.

"I have a free period until lunch." Neville said.

"Me, too." Ron smiled.

"I do too." Harry added, looking to Daphne who shook her head.

"You're all a bunch of slackers." She smiled. "We have Ancient Runes."

She said pointing to Tracey and Hermione. "Try and stay out of trouble."

She kissed him before leaving with the other girls.

"What does she think, I'm going to go off looking to pick a fight or something?" Harry asked sarcastically.

"I think your reputation for finding trouble is beginning to affect your life." Neville joked.

"Let's go find some sunshine." Ron smiled leading the other two boys outside. They found a nice spot near the Black Lake in which to throw stones and chat.

"You and Pansy seemed to be having a nice conversation." Harry began. Ron shrugged.

"She apologized for being so nasty." the redhead said.

"Apologized?" Neville asked incredulously.

"Yeah." Ron answered, leaning against a boulder.

"I noticed that she looked like she had been crying." Harry commented.

"I saw that, too." Neville remarked. "Tracey said that Pansy had some sort of epiphany, followed by a near breakdown, but she wouldn't say anything else."

"It was Malfoy." Ron said. "She didn't give a lot of details, but I think Malfoy hurt her. She told me that she wanted to be her own person, and that she never really thought herself better than me, but she was being stupid. So she apologized. We had a nice talk. She's actually not a bad

person." Ron shrugged again.

"Wow!" Neville said, eyes wide. "If I didn't know better, I'd say you were someone using polygenic potion. Luna's been really good for you if you're actually telling us sincerely that Pansy Parkinson is a nice person."

Ron's face darkened a bit.

"I was an arse last year. Everyone helped me to see that. Luna's something different. She's special, and I don't want to screw things up with her, or any of you. I hated being by myself last year."

"Well, I'd say you're off to a good start." Harry grinned.

"I don't know about that." Ron said sadly. "Can I tell you guys something without it getting back to the girls?"

Both Neville and Harry nodded and Ron seemed to deflate a little.

"I think I screwed up with Luna."

"What did you do?" Harry asked, a bit of anger coming to the surface.

"We...I mean, well...the night before we came back to school we got pretty intimate. I wasn't thinking clearly, and we had..."

"You had sex?" Neville whispered in shock. Ron nodded, and both Harry and Neville looked as if they'd been socked in the face.

"It was too fast. We should have waited." Ron said, yanking his hair. "But she was so beautiful, and we kept kissing and touching, and I lost control. I love her. I really do, but I think I just messed things up."

"Has she acted any differently?" Harry asked.

"No. Well, she's more affectionate I suppose, which isn't bad, but I feel guilty. I took advantage of her."

"Wow. I don't know what to say here." Neville remarked.

"I need to make things right." Ron said sadly.

"What are you going to do?" Harry asked.

"I got to talk to her. Apologize for letting things get out of hand. We've

only been together a little while, and I don't want her to think I'm going to get rid of her. It was a mistake, and we should have waited."

"Good on you, mate." Neville said, clapping Ron on the shoulder. "Too many blokes would freak out and ditch the girl in order to make the problem go away."

"You mean like Seamus?" Harry chuckled.

"Michael Corner, as well." Neville added. "Once he got into Cho's knickers, he dropped her like an exploding cauldron. Not that it matters. She was never that stable to begin with."

"I hope she figures things out." Harry said, shaking his head.

"She's a brilliant witch with a serious axe to grind." Neville said wisely.

"Having it confirmed that you had been telling the truth about Cedric really messed her up. She still blames you for it all, but now she's not sure what to do. I'd be careful, Harry."

"How do you know all this stuff?" Ron asked.

"Tracey makes Lavender and Parvati look like amateurs when it comes to gossip." Neville smiled proudly.

13. Chapter 13

Harry knocked on Snape's office door at six o'clock. He had hurried through dinner and promised to meet his friends in the library just as soon as he could. He opened the door when he heard Snape's voice beckon him inside.

"Good evening, Professor." Harry said politely. He still felt uneasy around the new Defense teacher. After five years of perpetual abuse, Harry felt he was allowed his anxiety.

"Right on time. I just wanted to update you on some things quickly before we got to the purpose for this meeting." Snape said coolly as he motioned for Harry to take a seat. Harry complied and waited for the professor to

continue.

"First, I'd like to warn you to keep your guard up. Malfoy may be gone, but he did have some loyal friends who may feel you are to blame for his absence."

"I understand." Harry nodded.

"Second, since we are speaking of Mr. Malfoy. I am afraid that he will not be a resident of Azkaban for as long as we might have hoped.

Unfortunately it is the belief of the headmaster that we should do nothing to prevent this, and I hate to say, but I agree."

"What?!" Harry exploded.

"Please Potter...Harry, allow me to explain." Snape said, motioning for Harry to sit down again. "If we were to raise the warning, more people would be killed. We are still ill equipped to fight. The Auror's numbers are not what they should be, and we have no assistance from foreign ministries. We are alone.

"The Dark Lord will be sending his best. The strongest, most ruthless of his followers, and they will be led by Bellatrix Lestrange. If we sound the alarm, we will lose more people who could be helpful to us later on."

"How are we going to stop him if we don't even try? Why not just let him take over then? Harry said angrily.

"You don't have to like it. I certainly don't, no more than I like having to rush to the his side when he beckons. These are the cards that fate has dealt, we must make due. Now, I must ask you about last evening again."

Harry perked up a bit. He had wanted to know what exactly he had done, and how he could continue. He wanted the piece of Voldemort that was inside of him destroyed.

"Can you share with me what you were thinking of before you're collapse?" Snape asked.

"I was just thinking about Daphne."

"What specifically. Believe me Potter, it gives me no pleasure in hearing about your personal thoughts, but I think they might be the key."

Harry sucked in a long breath. This was not what he had in mind when he agreed to come to Snape to help get rid of the Horcrux. But Snape seemed very concerned with what triggered his episode.

"I was thinking of how it felt being with her. How I felt when she was near me. What her lips tasted like when I kissed her."

"Interesting. Very interesting. When you thought of kissing her, what did you feel?" Snape said thoughtfully. Harry was strangely reminded of Dumbledore at the moment.

"I felt happy. Warm inside. But I also felt this intense pounding in my head."

"Tell me, Potter, have you felt any pain at other times when you've been happy?"

"Not that I can remember."

"Intriguing. Perhaps you've never allowed your happiness to envelope you as you did last evening."

"I guess that's possible. When I was growing up with the Dursleys, any moment of happiness I ever got was quickly smashed. They really made it their job to make sure I was miserable."

"I see. That has to change. You did affect this thing inside you, Potter. I would like you to speak with Miss Greengrass joining you and I in a little experiment this Friday evening at Seven o'clock. I must warn you, if I am correct, it will be excruciatingly painful. In the meantime, I would like you to continue clearing your mind before you sleep. I believe it might help." Snape said.

"I will." Harry promised.

"Good. We are finished for now. Go find your friends and remember what I told you. They will be your strength."

Hermione sat in the library with Justin Finch Fletchly. He was very nervous, she could tell. She was nervous as well, but she thought she did a fine job of hiding it. They had only really talked about non important things, just chatting as they perused their textbooks.

Hermione was surprised to learn that Justin enjoyed reading as much as she did, but that he didn't believe everything he read. He had told her that a lot of times, especially in the wizarding world, putting your own nuance to a wand movement would enhance a spell.

"It doesn't change the spell. But it's like it enhances your intent. I sometimes wonder if flicks and waves and swishes are just a tool to help us learn spells, but that they're not really necessary to the spell at all."

"That's a very interesting theory." Hermione nodded. "Have you tried it out?"

"On a few spells." Justin admitted. "I can use it in most transfiguration spells. But my theory falls apart in charms work."

As they continued talking, Hermione felt more and more at ease with Justin. He was always polite, and sweet. She found herself staring into his eyes a lot. He had an easy smile, and as he settled down, Hermione caught glimpses of a very fun, and interesting person.

She was still cautious however. Her experiences with boys before now kept her on guard. Hermione didn't want to feel so trepidatious, and she silently cursed the three men who had made her so apprehensive.

"So, You're different from what I expected." Justin said. Hermione looked a little uncertain. "You have this reputation for being bossy and snooty, but you're not at all that way."

"I don't think I'm bossy. Maybe a little pushy because I want my friends to

do their best and be successful." Hermione shrugged.

"There's nothing wrong with that, so long as it doesn't become annoying."

"Harry and Ron would disagree, I think. I'm sure they've wanted to hex me for hounding them to do their homework."

"But it paid off. Harry's marks improved last year, and Neville, wow. He used to be such a joke around here, and now he's showing up some of the Ravenclaws."

"Neville always had it in him to be a strong student, he just lacked confidence. I think his growth is more due to Harry's friendship rather than my nagging." Hermione admitted freely.

"You're tight with Potter, then?"

Hermione's alarms began sounding internally.

"He's my best friend."

"I used to be afraid of him. Especially after second year, but then I watched him these last two years, and I think I get him. He's had it rough, and I don't mean just in school. I've seen how he watches families at King's cross. He always looks so sad, even when he's happy, there's this hint of sadness in his eye. It's like he's waiting for bad things to happen all the time. I don't know how he can do it. Be so strong when all he sees is bad things."

"He's got a strength in him." Hermione said matter of factly. "When you're around him, you'll see. His friends are his family, and he'd do anything to keep them safe. And it affects you, to the point where you're doing everything you can to protect him."

"He's changed since he's been with Greengrass." Justin observed as the boy in question entered the library and sat with the others at another table. Hermione turned to see Harry smiling as he kissed Daphne. Daphne seemed to brighten as Harry took the dark haired girl's hand.

"They're in love." Justin smiled gently. "It's a powerful sort of magic.

Nothing more powerful. It's why we boys get so stupid."

Hermione nearly got whiplash as she turned her head sharply to face a smiling Justin. He was smiling shyly.

"I heard from Seamus last year about that little speech you gave. I think you were spot on. We boys are really stupid when it comes to girls, and how to get you to notice us. It took me all that time to figure out a way to ask you out. I figure you wouldn't appreciate some grand display, so I went with subtle."

"So this has been a date?" Hermione asked a little nervously.

"No. this was me getting to know you a little more. This is me asking you if we could go out together sometime in a date like fashion." he smiled, his hands fidgeting nervously. Hermione bit her bottom lip as she watched the boy's discomfort.

"I think I'd like that." She smiled softly. His smile was so amazing, Hermione swore that her heart skipped a beat or two. She was still unsure of him, but she was in no hurry. She would keep things light, and allow whatever this was to grow in it's own time.

"I need to talk to you about something." Harry said to Daphne. "Now." She looked at him and saw the seriousness in his eyes. He was going to tell her what it was that Dumbledore had told him during the summer. She gathered her books and they said goodnight to their friends.

Harry escorted his girlfriend to the seventh floor and into the Room of Requirement. When they were inside and the door had closed, Harry motioned her to sit on the sofa that had appeared.

"What's wrong?" Daphne asked of her love.

"I need your help." Harry said taking her hands. "There's something wrong with me."

"What is it?"

"Dumbledore found out how to defeat Voldemort. But we can't do it."

"Why?"

"Because if we were to do it now, I would die." Harry said simply

"What?" Daphne asked, tears coming to her eyes. "Why would it kill you?"

"Do you know what a Horcrux is?" Harry asked. When Daphne shook her head, Harry explained all he knew of the item and how it worked. Harry went on to inform her how Voldemort had created several of the soul anchors and hidden them, so that he had achieved a sort of immortality. He then told her how he had destroyed one in his second year and how Dumbledore had been searching for others.

"But that's not all is it?" Daphne asked, still trembling. Harry's face was grim as he shook his head.

"No. Dumbledore believes that I'm one." Harry said flatly. Daphne's eyes widened in surprise. "He made me one the night he killed my parents. He doesn't know he did it. But part of him is in me. While I was growing up, it got stronger, feeding off my misery. But professor Snape believes that I can fight it, make it weaker by using my good emotions. That's what happened to me Last night. I was watching you and just thinking about how good you make me feel. I started getting a severe headache. Snape thinks it was the Horcrux fighting back."

"So by filling you with positive emotions, Professor Snape thinks you can destroy this thing?" Daphne asked.

"Not destroy it, but weaken it enough that they can get it out of me."

"How do we do that? How do we counteract fifteen years of misery?"

"We've been doing it all along. I never really understood love until I realized I love you. That night at the Ministry when Voldemort was possessing me, I saw you, and I felt so much...desire to be with you. It

filled me with this warmth, this heat. That's what hurt Voldemort. My love for you."

"Will it weaken this thing in you?"

"It already has. Snape wants us to come to his office on Friday evening. I think he wants to see if we can weaken it more. I think he wants you there because it was my thoughts of you that started it all." Harry shrugged.

"I'll be there. I swore that I would be by your side no matter what, and I meant every word. I love you Harry Potter." She said, hugging him fiercely. Harry wrapped his arms lovingly around her, holding her tight to him.

"I'm willing to face the pain if it means ridding myself of this thing. I feel tainted now. Dirty. Dumbledore said it might be blocking my magic. That I might be stronger once it's gone." He said.

"This is so unfair, Harry. Why does it always have to be up to you, or happen to you?" Daphne asked tearily.

"I have been asking that same question for a very long time now."

"Does Sirius know?"

"Yeah. It's part of why he started our training, which we need to figure out how to continue."

"We will. We'll talk with everyone in the morning about it."

"Daphne, love. You can't tell anyone about this. At least not until it's over. We can't risk Voldemort learning of this. If he did..."

"He'd take you away from me." Daphne sniffled, tightening her embrace.

"I'm not letting him have you."

They remained holding each other for several long moments. Daphne couldn't even begin to speak. Her heart felt ready to burst with sadness. Hadn't Harry suffered enough already? Why must his life be so hard? She

had no answers to give. She wanted nothing more than to take away all of this agony, and make his life better.

She began kissing him softly, tears still falling from her dark brown eyes.

He held her close as he returned her affections. After several long moments they broke apart. Daphne wiped at her eyes furiously, trying to be strong. Harry held her close again, rubbing her back soothingly.

"I think I understand why you don't share all these things with people."

Daphne tried to smile. "No one could truly understand how you hadn't cracked up by now."

Harry gave a soft laugh. "I've got loads of people to help keep me sane now."

"I'm never going to abandon you." She smiled now. "Face it Potter, You're stuck with me."

"Then my luck is finally changing for the better." Harry grinned.

Draco Malfoy felt increasingly stronger the closer the rickety boat came to the desolate island. He could already feel the Dementors, but unlike his previous encounter, he didn't feel any fear. It was little more than being uncomfortably chilly.

There were four Aurors and the boat driver. Draco stood in the center of the boat, staring ahead at the growing tower of Azkaban prison. Draco's hair whipped in the ocean wind and the mist of the sea stabbed his pointed face. He paid no mind to any of it, only staring at the obelisk like tower.

"Poor boy's frozen with fear." one of the Auror's said.

"Serves him right. He butchered Gibbons when they arrested him."

Another said

"He's just a kid. He couldn't have done what they say he did to Shackbolt" the first said.

"You weren't there when we took him Franklin. You didn't see what he did." a third argued. "I'm happy they're keeping him here until his trial." Draco heard them argue, but didn't move. Let them believe he was frightened. It would make things so much sweeter when he ripped them apart.

The boat was guided into a low cave where the water settled and they all had to duck so they wouldn't hit their heads on the low ceiling. The little boat came to a stop at a small dock, where they were met by a stout looking man with a dark beard. His robes whipped wildly in the wind.

"Malfoy Jr. eh?" the man scoffed. "Let's see if we can get you a cell next to daddy." the big man laughed.

Draco was hauled out of the boat and up a long flight of stone steps. The veil of iciness felt stronger the higher they walked. Draco had noticed that all five of the men who surrounded him wore identical gold locket. Draco guessed they must ward them from the effects of the Dementors. They emerged into a large room where several more men waited. The stout man who had met them at the dock spoke.

"Draco Malfoy to be put into a holding cell for fourteen days to await trial for the murder of Auror Richard Gibbons, and for suspicion of murder for four other Aurors."

"Right this way." A tall black wizard motioned them forward.

Draco felt it first. The chilling veil lifting away from the island. The Dementors were leaving. Screams began sounding all throughout the prison, echoing off the walls and growing in intensity. A small smile began tugging at the edges of Draco's mouth and he slowly began looking about the room at the twelve men who surrounded him, their attentions no longer on the unassuming boy before them.

"What is going on?" One said.

"It's like their all waking up or something." Said another.

There was a clap of thunder and the whole island shook. Draco fell to his knees and he felt it. The surge of power. His master had granted him a boost to his core. He stood again, looking for the stout man who had greeted him so rudely. With a speed that surprised them all, Draco pounced on the bigger man, dropping him to the floor. He swung his chains around the man's thick throat and pulled as hard as he could. The man flailed and tore at the chains that were cutting off his air. There was a second clap of thunder, and once again the island shook.

"Roy!" One of the wizards yelled, seeing Draco strangling the stout man. He pulled his wand, and tried to stun Draco, but the boy hefted Roy's weight and used him to help dodge the spell. The others were reacting now, but far too slowly to catch the young Malfoy.

Keeping the bigger man between him and the others, Draco began backing into a long hallway that led to stairs going upward. Roy continued to tear at the chains that were cutting off his air supply. Draco only tightened the makeshift noose.

"Perhaps if you were smart, you would remove my chains to save yourself." Draco hissed. Roy's eyes bulged and he grasped his wand, tapping the chains to make them fall away. Draco smiled widely as he felt his power surge greatly. The manacles that had bound him were designed to dampen his magic. Now that they had been removed, he was unstoppable.

Roy coughed and spluttered, trying to get his breath back. He looked to Malfoy through teary eyes, who was simply smiling.

"Thank you, kind sir." Draco grinned before reaching out and snapping the man's neck. Draco took the man's wand, smiling as he felt its core react. It would be no substitute for his own wand, but for now, it would

do. He gave it a swift flick at the wall next to him and chuckled when the wall exploded outward.

The other wizards were coming for him now. He stood proudly, waiting for them, daring them to challenge them.

"Good day to you, my nephew."

Draco turned to see his aunt, Bellatrix Lestrange descending the staircase lazily. Her black hair was done up beautifully and her robes were covered in dust. Her sunken eyes shone with merriment and insanity.

Draco had to smile. She was a picture of perfection to him.

"Come to join in my fun?" he asked.

"For a bit. Then I must present you to our Lord. He is most anxious to meet with you." Bellatrix simpered.

"YOU!" One of the Aurors who had escorted Draco had appeared. He saw Bellatrix and stammered. He raised his wand, but the Death Eater was faster."

"Avada Kedavra!" She screamed like a banshee. The Auror fell in a heap, and they could hear the others just out of sight.

"It's not fun when they hide." Bellatrix whined.

"Then we should make them come out." Draco grinned. He and his aunt slowly began walking into the entry hall where Draco had been moments before. He could see two Aurors using a small floo to call for help. Draco sent spells at them which burned them from the inside out. Their painful cries were soothing to Draco.

Bellatrix eyed her nephew suspiciously. She'd only ever seen one person perform that spell, and he was hidden away awaiting her arrival. She pushed the thoughts away as she killed another of the guard.

Draco levitated a man and began smashing him into the walls. Draco had put in so much force that the man was little more than pulp in seconds.

He began to laugh heartily as he turned to another guard who was trying to take cover behind a fallen section of ceiling.

There came a rising cry from above. The prisoners were being released, Draco knew and they were being urged to destroy the prison. There were more and more explosions and the island shook as if they were experiencing a severe quake.

Draco looked to his aunt and she nodded. There was just the one guard left now, cowering behind the slab of stone. They raised their wands in unison and shouted. "REDUCTO!"

The stone slab was disintegrated, and the guard knelt before them, begging for mercy.

"Why do you beg?" Draco crooned. "You must know that there is no mercy here." he reached out tenderly and caressed the man's cheek.

The guard felt like Draco was slicing a razor down his cheek. As he looked into Draco's eyes, tears fell. He pictured his young wife and the daughter he would never see grow into a woman, and he wept.

Draco ripped the slab of flesh from the guard's face and tucked it into his pocket. He smiled coldly and stepped back. He looked to his aunt and gave a small nod. Her face lit up in rapturous joy as she ended the man's existence.

"Where is my father?" Draco asked a panting Bellatrix. She eyed him suspiciously again. This was not the nephew she had believed she was to rescue. This was something more, something powerful. She felt a pull toward him, a yearning she had only ever felt to her master. She was filled with desire, and longing to obey.

"This way." She motioned. The two made their way up wards. The halls were filled with dust and smoke as the inmates continued to destroy their prison. After a few more minutes of running upstairs and down long

narrow halls, passing hundreds of insane prisoners they came to a waiting group.

"Draco." Lucius Malfoy knelt proudly in front of his son. He gripped his boy's arms, wearing a smile of pride.

"Father. You have dishonored me." Draco said. Lucius felt as if his hands burned, and he took them from his son, shaking away the pain.

"What do you mean?" The senior Malfoy asked.

"You are weak, and are of no use anymore. The Malfoy legacy is mine now. I will make sure our family is restored to the glory it should have always had." Draco stared hard at his father, who was looking disbelievingly at his only son. Draco raised his wand at his father.

"I am your father!" Lucius tried.

"DIFFINDO!" Draco shouted over the wind. Lucius' look of terror was preserved as his head fell with a thick clunk to the stone floor, followed by his body.

Draco let out a long breath, feeling stronger than he'd ever known. He was the last Malfoy, and his name would be feared just as his master's.

"We need to go. Gather those who are still somewhat sane. We will replenish our lord's ranks." Bellatrix screamed.

"May I accompany you?" A squat fat woman stepped from shadows. "I believe I have much to offer your lord."

"You were the Minister's assistant, weren't you?" Bellatrix asked coldly.

"Madam Umbridge. How nice to see you." Draco sneered.

"Young master Malfoy, you are looking well." Umbridge smiled her wide toad smile.

"Bring her." Draco ordered.

One of the Death Eaters began passing out portkeys to small groups of prisoners, and just twenty minutes after the attack began, Azkaban prison

was left a crumbling ruin of its former glory. There were still prisoners running all about destroying the once feared prison. When a force of Aurors arrived half an hour later, there was little left of the obelisk but smoking slabs of broken stone, and hundreds of raving mad men and women.

14. Chapter 14

"At last, you have allowed me to look upon your mighty and noble countenance, my lord." Sirius said mockingly.

"Ah, stuff it. It's been a busy week." Harry said irritably. "With classes and all the extra stuff I've gotten into. Thankfully, the exercise is keeping my energies up."

"You're welcome." Sirius remarked.

"Sirius, I'm scared." Harry said quickly. Sirius sobered up and stared into his godson's eyes. There was indeed fear in them, like Sirius had never known.

"What if this experiment goes wrong? What if this piece of Voldemort kills me?"

"Now you listen, and get this through your head. You are far stronger than this thing. You can beat it."

"Snape said I weakened it when I passed out." Harry shrugged.

"Whoa, back up. You passed out?" Sirius eyed the young man through their mirrors.

"Oh yeah. Sorry." Harry shrugged and began explaining what had happened to him the first night back at school and his meeting with Snape. This led to his explanation on how his friends had figured out when they would meet each morning for a run around the lake, and then onto his first meeting with Dumbledore the night before.

"So the old man is still convinced there's one of the Horcruxes in the

castle?" Sirius asked.

"Yes, in fact, he's sure he knows where it is now, though he says it's going to take a while to procure it. He says it was hidden really well."

"When are you going to start your defense club?"

"At the end of the month. Dumbledore suggested we let people get settled into classes and stuff, and then open it up. Quidditch practice will start about then as well, though I'll have to try out again. It should be ok, Katie Bell is the captain this year." Harry smiled.

"Make sure you make time for Daphne."

"I will. She won't stand for not spending time together."

"Ok, listen, pup. You listen to Snape. He's obviously concerned about this thing, and he seems to have pretty good ideas. The fact he wants your girlfriend around is encouraging. I'd be concerned if he wanted to experiment on you alone. You do what he asks, and you'll get rid of this thing. Merlin, Harry, I don't know how you manage. Most people would crack under the strain you've been put under. Remember though, wars never go on forever. We're all with you, and we're all trying to end this thing as quick as possible."

"Can I ask you about something? Why was it Azkaban fell so easily?"

Harry asked curiously.

"Wizard pride." Sirius shrugged. "For centuries we've believed ourselves to be so great and infallible. Azkaban has been guarded by Dementors which kept prisoners weak and nearly insane. They never needed many guards because of that. It was never warded against riots or anything like that because no prisoner had a wand. When the Dementors left, and Death Eaters brought wands with them....well, let's say that the wizarding world had to eat a little crow. Have we learned from our mistakes? Time will tell."

"For being so great, we wizards aren't very smart." Harry looked dumbfounded.

"It's been our way for so long, and only now are we learning the error of our choices. We never should have relied on Dementors. They're nasty dark creatures, and incredibly difficult to kill. There have been only a few, but we've heard rumors that they're breeding now. Voldemort unleashed packs of werewolves on a few villages. Muggle villages. The veil between worlds is being torn away, Harry. If muggles catch on to us, there will be real problems, and many more deaths."

"What is the Ministry doing?"

"As much as they can. Just like in muggle politics, no one wants to solve the problems unless they gain something for themselves, and I don't mean the freedom and peace we'll get from Voldemort's defeat. There's Death Eaters in the Ministry stalling actions. We don't know who they are, and therefore, our hands are tied."

"This is ridiculous." Harry said angrily.

"Harry, there is something that can be done. I know you hate all your fame, and recognition and all that rubbish, but I want you to think about how influential you are on the public." Sirius eyed his godson carefully. "I know the public waffles a lot, but think about what a change your article in the Quibbler did last year. The Daily Prophet is a rag that prints more falsities than a normal tabloid, but people believe it. I think you need to come out and support one of the candidates for Minister. I think you should begin pointing out some of the corruption within the Ministry."

"Can I do that?" Harry looked shocked.

"The public already has this image of you as some kind of savior. Why not use that? It's all about ending the war. Voldemort is using fear, we need to use a weapon just as powerful."

"Knowledge." Harry smiled easily.

"Exactly, Harry. Good man. We need to make people aware of what is going on."

"Which Candidate is the best?"

"I would say Amelia Bones. She's got a very long history in law enforcement and is a very upstanding citizen. I don't know much about Scrimgeour, and I have serious doubts over Thickneese. But do your research, make your own decision."

"I will. Thanks, Sirius. I'll talk to you soon."

"Sooner than what it took this time, I hope." Sirius said hopefully.

"I promise. I'll talk to you Saturday night."

"Good enough. Good night, pup."

The next morning, Harry led the group back into the castle after their run. They had been joined by many more students over the past few days. Harry had to grin when he thought about how this group had grown.

On the first morning, as Neville and Harry were heading out, Ron, Seamus and Dean had awoken and asked as to why the other two were up. Harry explained what they were doing and why. The three other sixth year boys hadn't said anything the rest of the day, but the next morning, the sixth year boys dorm was empty by five-thirty in the morning.

It had been similar with the Gryffindor girls. Lavender and Parvati had joined that first morning, however, instead of waiting until the next day. Apparently both girls had taken up running over the summer. Ginny and two other fifth year girls had also joined.

Susan Bones had convinced Hannah Abbott to join them for the exercise.

Blaise was the only Slytherin boy, but Pansy Parkinson had come with Tracey and Daphne.

Three days into it now, and the complaining had all disappeared.

Everyone who had not been doing it before had felt more energy already.

And there was rumor that Monday morning the group would have more students joining. It made Harry feel good that people were taking the imminent threat so seriously.

At the entrance hall, people split off to their respective houses to prepare for classes, and then they would return to the Great Hall for breakfast.

Daphne gave Harry a quick kiss before she was off, telling him to hurry.

Harry and Neville had lagged behind the group and now walked up to the tower.

"So, Sirius thinks you should back a candidate?" Neville asked. They had spoken a little during their run. Harry and Neville were the fastest in the whole group, though Ron and Blaise were quickly catching up. Soon they would be able to keep pace with the lead Gryffindors.

"Yeah, but I want to meet with them and get a feel for their views. I don't want to put someone in power who's as narrow minded as Fudge."

"Why don't you invite them here. I'm sure Dumbledore would help you."

"I want to do this on my own, though inviting them here isn't bad. That way, if they turn out to be a Death Eater, I'll be safe."

"Always thinking. Good on you." Neville clapped his friend's shoulder.

"Who do you think is best for the job?" Harry asked.

"I got to go with Madam Bones. Thickneese came from nowhere, and no one seems to know his politics. Something about that guy doesn't feel right. I honestly think we'd be better off with Scrimgeour as the head of Law enforcement. I just don't think he's flexible enough to be Minister."

"Sirius seems to be on the same page." Harry smiled as they entered the dorm. Harry gathered his robes and toiletries and made it to the shower. When they had finished their morning routine, the two boys joined the

rest of the sixth years in the common room. They had all waited for Harry and Neville before going to breakfast.

It was a sight to see the entire Gryffindor sixth year class enter the Great Hall together. Harry felt a little wired about it, but shrugged it off. He had noticed a few changes in his classmates this year. The first was that Lavender and Seamus were together. They appeared serious this time. Everyone knew the Irishman couldn't get enough of the pretty blonde who always regarded him with little interest. But something changed, and now they sat together cozily.

Harry had noticed a lot more couples throughout the school. And many of them were not in the same houses as one another. This was most noticeable when he observed the Slytherin table. There were Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs all along the notoriously isolated table.

"Hey, there." Daphne smiled, sitting down next to her boyfriend.

"What's going on with your house? There's other houses sitting at the Slytherin table." Harry pointed out.

"You're girlfriends a genius, that's what." Tracey said sliding into a seat across from the couple and next to her boyfriend.

"What do you mean?" Neville asked curiously.

"Slytherin has always run on this weird sort of hierarchy. There's a leader, which until this year, was Malfoy. Now that he's gone, this power vacuum formed. I simply filled it." Daphne smiled.

"You're the new Malfoy?" Ron asked surprised.

"Merlin, no!" Daphne nearly shrieked. "Astoria is, or she will be."

"Your sister?" Harry asked.

"Yes. She's got the intelligence and the cunning to keep people in line. She knows everything about everyone in our house. I simply made some comments about how Slytherin could benefit with Astoria in charge. We

would no longer be so despised."

"So she what, told everyone to make friends outside of the house?" Harry asked, again looking over to the normally standoffish table.

"No. It was more subtle. She brought her own friends from other houses over. The rest follow her lead. Slytherins always do things subtly, we're never brash and overt." Daphne smiled coyly.

"So, like when you walked in here last year hanging on to Harry, and sitting at our table in front of the whole school... that's subtle?" Hermione giggled.

"Or going to the Ministry to fight? That wasn't brash?" Neville smiled.

"OK! I get it. Most of us are subtle." Daphne threw her hands up, defeated.

"What about Tracey slamming Neville against a wall and kissing him and then telling him he's escorting her to Hogsmeade? What would you call that?" Harry asked.

"Subterfuge." Tracey said, biting into her toast. "Took the heat off you two lovebirds for a bit." Tracey grinned, rubbing Neville's hand.

There was bursts of laughter around the group. Harry shook his head. He suddenly began feeling a bit of pain behind his scar. His eyes closed, and he began breathing slowly, willing the pain away.

"Harry?" Daphne asked, seeing him with his eyes shut.

"I'm fine." He lied.

"Don't lie to me. Tell me." Daphne said sternly. Harry was rubbing at his scar. He looked into her worried eyes.

"I was feeling good, and then it started hurting."

"It's fighting back?" Daphne asked quietly.

"What's going on?" Hermione asked. Daphne looked at the brainy brunette, trying to mask her fear, but Hermione saw right through it.

"Harry?" Neville asked. Harry looked up to see all his friends had stopped eating and were staring at him with concern.

"It's nothing." He tried, but Ron cut him off.

"You passed out on the first night here, and every time you start to get in a really good mood, you get a headache. Something's going on."

"You can tell us." Hermione tried.

"Guys, please just trust me on this. It's better that you don't know right now. I will tell you all, I swear, but not right now."

The group looked upset, but let the subject drop. Harry felt bad for not sharing with them. He hated keeping them all in the dark, but he knew if somehow it got out that he was a soul anchor for Voldemort, there would be dire consequences. For now, he would have to keep it to himself. He knew Daphne wouldn't say anything, and only three others knew of his situation, and he had no worry about any of them spilling his secret.

"Do you think Professor Snape will be able to help you tonight?" Daphne whispered in his ear as she held him close.

"I hope so. I want it gone." Harry whispered fiercely.

The air smelled sweet to him. He filled his nostrils with the fragrant scent of death. He walked slowly among the small house, eyes closed behind his mask. Here, walking among the family he'd just slaughtered, Draco Malfoy felt peace.

He had been sent to the small fishing village by his master. He was to lay waste to the entire community, and had been granted two Death Eaters, and ten werewolves. It was not a full moon, but the shape shifters were thirsty for blood.

This was the third such assignment he'd been given. Since his release from Azkaban, the Dark Lord had been entrusting him with greater missions. First had been the kidnapping of two Ministry officials. Madam

Umbridge had been very helpful in that bit. The old woman had been practically bouncing as she suggested two of her former coworkers. Draco had suspected they had done something to cross the diminutive witch. Next had been to cause a major disaster in Muggle London. That had been a great pleasure. Draco had smashed one of the undergrounds. On the television, they had called it a derailment that had killed a hundred and thirty five people. Draco had killed seventeen himself. Wounded survivors pleading for help he had struck down maliciously.

But this had been nothing short of exquisite. To smash open the doors and strike down the inhabitants of each home. The screams like a symphony to him. His veins pulsed to their bleating and begging. He was growing stronger with every passing day. Little by little his strength was increasing. He still felt exhausted after he completed his task, and still had to sleep for long periods of time. Yet he knew that his body was simply adjusting to his growth. Soon, he would be stronger than any of the other Death Eaters.

Yet something troubled him. He'd only just begun to notice. The Dark Lord was becoming weaker. It was hardly noticeable to anyone else, and Draco only noticed because he was almost always in the presence of the Dark Lord. He had spoken of this to no one, of course, but his master was looking worse. His burn scarred skin looked increasingly redder, and his coughing fits were becoming increasingly frequent.

After a visit from Snape, the Dark Lord would look better, but only for a short period of time. He'd also been becoming increasingly interested in Alchemy, specifically in someone named Flamel. Draco knew better than to question his master, but this troubled him a bit.

Draco had looked on his own and found little on Nicholas Flamel. He was dead now. Other than creating something called the Philosopher's Stone,

there was little else the man was known for. Draco couldn't figure out what was so important about this useless dead man.

Also plaguing him was the increased attention from his Aunt Bellatrix.

The woman hounded him all throughout the Dark Lord's haunt. She

taught him many new and useful spells, but she never gave him a

moment's peace. She was like a schoolgirl with a crush, or a lost dog.

It always was the worst after he returned from one of these cleansing

raids. He knew that as soon as he returned she would be there offering

food, or counsel or whatever else she thought he might like. Perhaps it

was that she felt kindred in their love for causing pain. Whatever it was,

Draco was growing tired of it. If she wasn't one of the Dark Lord's

favorites, he would cut her throat and bathe in her blood.

"Dragon, it's time to leave." One of the Death Eaters said as he

approached the reflective leader. Draco turned to look at the tall figure

he knew to be Dolohov. He nodded once and cast the Dark Mark into the

night sky.

"What of the wolves?" Dolohov asked. Draco turned back to the man and

sneered behind his mask.

"They're dogs. Let the Ministry have them." Draco said. He motioned for

Dolohov and the other Death Eater to Apparate him back to the castle.

"I need to accelerate the process." Lord Voldemort said to himself. He sat

alone in the great hall of the ruined castle he'd taken for himself. He

stared at his thin, pale, scarred hands. The skin was stretched so tightly

over them, he could see the thin veins pumping blood. Potter's blood.

That had been a mistake. To take on Potter's blood to form his new body.

The child's blood was tainted, and was corrupting his new body, decaying

it from within. His plan to take the Malfoy boy's body was not yet ready,

his power was still too weak. Voldemort knew it would still be a few

months before his magical core had fully bonded with the child's. Once it was done, there would be no stopping him.

Voldemort had thought of possessing the boy until that time, but his failure with Quirrell had made him rethink that idea. He was beginning to believe it might be necessary to perform the ritual again, and construct a new body, one without the taint of the Potter boy's blood. It would mean returning to his muggle father's accursed house, and Voldemort couldn't stand that thought.

There was one other option. To collect one of his remaining Horcruxes, and allowing the soul fragment to strengthen him. Voldemort clenched his thin fingers into fists. Lucius Malfoy had been foolish in giving away his diary. He'd never been able to properly punish the simpleton for his failure. But his boy had taken care of the man's failings when he'd beheaded him at Azkaban.

There were still five more that he could use. The cup was quite safe deep inside of Gringotts, the Diadem lost forever in Hogwarts, the Locket in the cave, and his grandfather's ring in that broken down shack. Then there was his precious Nagini. She would not be used. He would not destroy his familiar, she was far too useful.

Voldemort knew that short of finding Nicholas Flamel's diaries, he would never create his own Philosopher's Stone. Flamel probably made sure that Dumbledore kept them or destroyed them. He'd never get his hands on them. The Horcrux need not even be broken, just kept close by him. If he used the locket or the ring, they could be worn at all times. Once his plans reached their inevitable conclusion, he could return the Horcrux to its hiding place.

It had to be one of the items. He couldn't keep Nagini by his side. She would die of starvation. Besides, her own soul blocked the radiance of his

own from strengthening him properly. No, it must be one of the coveted items he'd collected in his youth. The ring would be easiest to retrieve. So it was that Lord Voldemort made up his mind to retrieve his grandfather's ring and use it to keep him from withering to dust before he could inhabit his new body. He would have to send out his Death Eaters, while he journeyed to Little Hangleton. It needed to be precise and it would have to keep Dumbledore's attention. Voldemort would wear the ring of Salazar Slytherin and no one would be the wiser about his ailment until it was too late.

Harry waited for Daphne to join him. She had wanted to drop her books in her dorm before they met with Professor Snape for their meeting. He was nervous. He knew what the purpose of the meeting was, but he was afraid of what might happen to him.

"Ok, I'm ready." Daphne smiled as she arrived in the Entrance Hall and took his hand. Her black hair was pulled into a loose ponytail and her eyes were shining with hope. Harry kissed her sweetly and led her to the dungeons where Snape still kept his office.

It was a very short journey, and Harry knocked on the door. When he was beckoned inside, he was surprised to find the Headmaster awaiting them as well as Snape.

"Good evening, Mister Potter, Miss Greengrass. I trust you are both well?"

"Yes, sir." Harry said softly, while Daphne merely nodded.

"Come in and shut the door." Snape said standing from his desk. He waved his wand and conjured a small cot in front of the fire.

"Potter, please lie down here. Miss Greengrass, I should like it if you sat in that chair so you might be able to lean over Potter's head.

Harry and Daphne followed their instructions and Harry smiled as he looked up into his girlfriend's beautiful dark eyes. She was trying to keep

her expression neutral, but Harry saw his own anxiety reflected back at them.

"Harry," Snape said quietly as he took a chair near the cot. Harry lifted his head a bit so he could see the new Defense teacher. "Professor Dumbledore and I have discussed this all week. I believe that your feelings for Miss Greengrass are one of your best weapons. As the Headmaster is fond of saying, there is no more powerful magic than love. We are going to test that this night."

Harry nodded and he saw a small smile on Dumbledore's face.

"What you need to do is to simply lay there and stare into Miss Greengrass' eyes." Dumbledore began. "Let your feelings for her fill you up. Professor Snape and I are going to probe your mind, specifically the Horcrux, and see what we can do to help you to weaken it. Miss Greengrass, your job is to try to keep Harry calm, and conscious. Shall we begin?"

Harry and Daphne nodded and Harry lay back and stared up at the wonderful girl staring back at him. He took several breaths and focused on her. Harry felt her fingers slowly rubbing his scalp, her eyes locked on his. She whispered softly that she loved him, and he smiled gently.

His mind swam with memories of the two of them during the summer, of how she felt in his arms while they had watched the sunset each night. Of how sweet her lips tasted when they kissed. The way she would look at him from across a room, tilting her head slightly, and the tiny smile on her lips. How when she read a book, she would curl her legs under her in a chair, and play with stray strands of her silken black hair.

His scar began to prickle and as he thought more and more of Daphne, the pounding began. He clenched his eyes shut for a moment, and he heard Dumbledore tell him to focus on Daphne. He opened his eyes again

and he could see the worry evident on her face.

"You can beat this." She smiled softly. She kept running her fingers through his hair, and caressing his cheek. She bent forward and kissed his scar softly. It burned immensely at the touch of her lips.

"Stay with me, Harry. Look at me." She whispered. Tears began burning her eyes as she watched the pain in his eyes growing, and yet he fought on. He never gave up, no matter the odds, and this time he was fighting for her. He wanted to give himself to her, but this curse, this abomination inside him was preventing him from being the man he was destined to be.

Harry began to squirm. He wanted to tear at his forehead, to make the pain stop. Yet he kept his eyes open, despite the sheer agony he felt. He reached up and clutched her hand in his, breathing heavily. The pounding was incredible and his skull felt like it was cracking. He began hearing a scream. An angry, torturous scream in the back of his mind. He saw two cold blood red eyes in his mind and heard the curses and taunts of a soul in anguish.

His vision began darkening, and Harry began to plead with Daphne to not let him go. Daphne held both of Harry's hands tightly in her own, screaming for him to just stay with her. The pain was becoming too much, and Harry felt like he couldn't breathe. His throat was burning and his chest felt as if there was a crushing weight upon him. His eyes never left her face until the cold blackness of unconsciousness took him completely.

"Harry! Harry, come on now." Daphne kept saying, shaking the young man, trying to wake him.

"Miss Greengrass." Dumbledore said, pulling the distraught girl away so Snape could examine him. Daphne fought against the old man's hold

which was surprisingly strong. "Please do not make me stun you."

Daphne settled down a bit, waiting to hear Snape's prognosis. The greasy haired man ran his wand over the prone body of her boyfriend for several moments, and then forced his eyes open, staring into the unfocused green eyes for a few minutes.

"Severus?" Dumbledore asked.

"He'll be alright." Snape nodded slowly, finally looking at Dumbledore.

"He's going to have a terrible headache tomorrow, I fear."

"And of the..."

"He weakened it some more. Significantly this time." Snape said. "Did you feel how it fought him?"

"And us as well. You were wise in suggesting we use Legillimency. Harry would not have lasted as long as he did if we hadn't interceded."

Dumbledore said as he released Daphne, who ran to Harry's side. "We must take him to the Hospital Wing."

Snape levitated Harry's body and the three of them took him to the infirmary where Madam Pomfrey waited. Apparently she had been informed that she would most likely have a visitor that evening. Daphne took a seat right next to his bed, clutching his hand and refusing to look at anything but the boy's face. He still looked as though he were in terrible pain.

"Miss Greengrass, Harry is now in capable hands. I think it best if you went back to your dormitory for the evening." Dumbledore said gently.

"I'm not leaving him. Not after what happened." She said firmly.

"I must insist..."

"I said no." Daphne turned to the two men and the school's healer, who looked quite amazed that a student would speak to the Headmaster in such a manner.

"As I said, Harry is in good hands." Dumbledore tried.

"Yes, he is. Mine. I'm not leaving him. I can't, not after that. I'm staying here until he wakes up, and that's it. I don't care if I'm punished for it later. You can stun me and take me back to my room, but I'll sneak in here later."

"Headmaster," Snape interjected. "Perhaps it is best that she stay. I think she had earned the right." Daphne gave a small smile of gratitude to the head of her house. Dumbledore nodded, and turned back to the sixteen year old girl.

"I trust that you can refrain from any inappropriate behavior?" He asked. Daphne glared at the elderly man in response. Dumbledore chuckled lightly and escorted Madam Pomfrey a little way away.

"Take care of him, Miss Greengrass." Snape smiled, which astounded Daphne. The Defense teacher spun and walked away, cloak billowing out like great wings. Daphne watched them all leave, and she turned back to the boy she loved more than anything in the world. She bent low and kissed his scar, marveling at how hot it felt.

She softly stroked his cheek, whispering to him that she was not going to leave him alone, and that she would be there when he awoke to kiss him and tell him he was okay. She bent her head next to his, her lips close to his ear as she began to tell him her heart's deepest desire. With each whispered encouragement and promise, Harry's breathing slowed and deepened. With every ministrations of her finger tips on his burning forehead, Harry settled into a restful sleep.

When she felt him relax at last, Daphne climbed into the bed and wrapped her arms tightly around him, resting her head on his chest. She closed her eyes and let the steady beat of his heart lull her to sleep as well.

15. Chapter 15

"Well, I think that should conclude our tutelage for tonight." Laughed Professor Flitwick. He stood in the center of the Room of Requirement.

All around him, all lying on the floor panting heavily and slowly rubbing at bruises and sore muscles were, Harry and his friends.

"Please be sure to be back in your dorms before curfew." Flitwick grinned as he exited the room, leaving the exhausted teenagers to recover from their defeat. The diminutive Charms professor had been humorously brutal on the group. Harry specifically asked that no one hold back. They had wanted to learn to work as a team, but unfortunately, they had much to learn.

"I've got an idea." Blaise said, dragging himself to a sitting position. "Let's not do that again. It was really, really stupid."

"I second that." Ron muttered, still face down on the mats that had been conjured.

"Come on you guys." Hermione said, still panting heavily. "I think we learned a lot tonight."

"Yeah." Tracey added. "Like that it's better to fall on your butt than on your head."

"That was rather impressive, darling." Neville smiled. "I think you bounced four times."

"Would you mind massaging it?" Tracey grinned. "I can't feel anything there right now."

"I will gladly massage your butt!" Neville smiled. "As soon as I can lift my arms."

"Harry?" Daphne called out. "I need you to carry me to my dorm. I don't think I'm going to make it on my own."

"That sounds nice. Blaise, can you carry me?" Susan asked of her

boyfriend.

"Oh yeah." Harry said, staring at the ceiling. "I'll carry you, love. Just as soon as I can stand."

"I concur with my esteemed colleague, Mister Potter, Susan my love."

Blaise smiled.

"What the hell happened here?" Ron asked, pushing himself upright. "We outnumbered him easily."

"We got arrogant." Hermione said flatly. "Obviously having a greater force doesn't mean victory."

"You figured that out on your own?" Ron said angrily.

"Hey, don't attack her!" Blaise warned. Ron's face began to redden with anger and he stood menacingly.

"Who the hell asked you, snake!"

"ENOUGH!" Harry said rising to his own feet and coming between the two boys. "Is this how you're changing, Ron? Fighting amongst ourselves isn't going to solve any of our problems."

Harry looked at the rest of them in turn, eyes blazing with anger. He caught Neville's eye. The young man looked a little irritated at Harry.

"You got something to say, Neville?"

To everyone surprise, Neville rose and stared at Harry for a long moment.

It felt as if the temperature dropped dramatically.

"Secrets don't help us either, Harry." Neville said icily. "For the past two months you've been meeting with Snape. Every Friday night you see him, and every Saturday we come and find you in the Hospital Wing. What's going on in there. Is he torturing you? Are you learning some great spell that is weakening you to the point of exhaustion? You get headaches all the time now, we've all noticed it."

"Neville." Hermione tried but the boy wasn't listening. Tracey stood up

and took his arm, trying to calm him, but Neville shook her off. Harry just stared at his friend with a mixture of disappointment and awe.

Neville had never stood up to anyone unless he was backing someone else. The boy had come a long way in a year. He was fiercely loyal to his friends, and exuded confidence now. Harry felt proud to call Neville Longbottom his friend, and that's why it hurt to not be able to share his secret.

"Harry?" Daphne said softly. "Maybe it's time they know. They deserve to know what they're fighting against, and what's at stake here. Otherwise it's all pointless, isn't it?"

She watched his shoulders slump and he slowly sat back to the floor, face in his hands. The burden he'd been carrying for the last three months had never felt so heavy as it did then.

"I'll understand if you don't want to be around me any longer." He said softly. Neville came forward, sitting in front of his friend, waiting patiently. One by one the others gather in front of their leader. He looked at them pitifully, his eyes shining with pain and fear.

"Dumbledore figured it out a while ago, and told me during the summer. He told me what this really is." Harry pointed to his scar. "He told me why I'm a Parselmouth, and why I feel Voldemort's thoughts and emotions.

"In order to keep himself alive, Voldemort created something called a Horcrux."

No one registered any sign of recognition at the word. Harry sighed. This was going to be a long confession.

"Basically, it's a artifact in which you hide a piece of your soul, anchoring it here in this world. So long as it exists, you can never truly die."

"How did he make it?" Hermione asked, her natural curiosity getting the

better of her.

"Murder." Harry answered easily. "When you murder someone, it tears your soul apart. Voldemort took a piece of his soul and placed it inside something that meant something to him, and then hid it. Every time he did this, it affected him physically. That's why he looks like he does.

"He made seven of these wretched things, one of which I destroyed in second year."

Hermione gasped, while the others just looked on with rapt attention.

Harry looked to Daphne, who smiled her encouragement, her eyes shining with unshed tears.

"The night he came to kill me he made one, but he didn't know it. When he cast the killing curse, it rebounded off me and destroyed his body.

What was left was a fragmented soul. Part of that soul attached itself to me." Again, Harry tapped his lightning bolt scar. "That's how I got some of his abilities, and why I can see into his mind. I'm part of him."

"I'm sorry, Harry." Neville said sadly. He was suddenly ashamed of himself.

"Blimey, mate." Ron muttered.

"Can it be removed?" Blaise asked. Harry shook his head.

"While I was growing up with my relatives." Harry began, shaking a little as he continued. "I was miserable. They saw me as less than dirt. I was punished for everything, if I was responsible or not. Barely given enough food to live off of, and kept in a cramped dirty cupboard. This thing fed off my misery and became very strong. If they tried to remove it, it would kill me. We've been trying to weaken it. That's what we've been doing with Snape."

"Guys," Daphne said, taking the attention from her boyfriend. "We had no choice but to keep this secret. If Voldemort learns about it, he'll stop at

nothing to kill Harry. He'll keep Harry alive, but only so he can continue living. He'll let Death Eaters torture him, and Merlin knows what else."

Tears had begun to fall from all the girls, and even Neville and Blaise were rubbing their eyes furiously. Ron had turned away from them, his anger at what had been done to his friend was boiling over.

"Harry, what do you need from us?" He asked. "How can we help you get rid of it?"

"Snape believes that it's being weakened with all my positive emotions. He thinks my love for Daphne is the key. He's right, I think, but it hurts. It's like my skull is getting cracked into every time we attempt it. That's why I end up in the Hospital Wing."

"What do you mean, your love for Daphne?" Hermione asked.

"When we fight it, Daphne sits there holding my head, and looking me in the eyes. She whispers to me, and I think about how much I love her. I remember things and let those memories fill me."

"Like a Patronus charm?" Hermione asked.

"Similar, I guess." Harry nodded, never thinking on the similarities before.

"She just holds your head?" Tracey asked.

"Yes." Daphne nodded.

"Have you tried anything else?" The blonde girl asked.

"Like what?" Daphne eyed her friend warily.

"Try snogging." Blaise said simply. Everyone looked incredulous. "Follow me on this. How do we show love? With our affections, right?"

Susan intertwined her fingers with the dark skinned boy, and he raised their interlaced fingers and kissed her hand.

"We show our emotions through our actions." Blaise continued. "When we smile, or touch, but when we love, we kiss, and embrace and any manner

of ways. Some of us even get spanked."

"Keep it up, boy." Hermione growled.

"The point is, Harry, you can't tell me when you're staring into Daphne's eyes you don't think about times you've kissed her, right?"

"As weird as this is, it makes sense." Hermione smiled.

"See, not just some overly hormonal teenager." Blaise grinned, and Susan kissed him on the cheek.

"At least not right now." She grinned.

"We'll have to try it tomorrow." Daphne suggested.

"I don't know if I like the idea of Snape and Dumbledore watching us snog." Harry admitted.

"I hadn't thought of that." Daphne admitted.

"Just think it over." Blaise said. Everyone seemed to agree with Blaise's idea, but both Harry and Daphne were embarrassed. None of the rest of them would have to make out in front of the professors.

They finally hauled themselves up and headed back to their respective dormitories. Harry's mind was still on the things Blaise had said, when it hit him, that none of his friends had abandoned him. They had listened and understood what he was suffering through, and none of them had turned their backs. They had tried to help him. Harry had underestimated them all. He had believed the worst of them and he began to feel bad.

They were back in their dorms, and Harry turned to Neville and Ron, who were getting ready for bed. They all felt exhausted by their defeat by Flitwick.

"Guys, I'm sorry. I didn't tell you all that stuff because, for some reason, I thought you'd leave. You'd not want to be a part of all this, and I'd be alone."

"Harry, we all make mistakes. Some of us lose our way even." Ron smiled

wryly. "But if we had left, it wouldn't have been because we hated you, or were afraid of you. Sometimes we just need time to process. I'm with you."

"As am I." Neville added. "I didn't mean to push, but I couldn't stand seeing you suffering. I needed to know, because I wanted to help."

"Thanks. I mean it. I feel better now that you know. And I am sorry I didn't tell you before."

The three boys nodded, and nothing more was said. Harry knew that no matter the odds, both Neville and Ron would be with him. In the morning he would apologize to his other friends. He knew that he was not alone, and he would never be alone. That thought emboldened him, and he reaffirmed himself to the utter defeat of the Dark Lord.

"Your potions are no longer working, Severus!" Voldemort spat as he tortured the Potions master. "I am still weakening."

Snape writhed in agony, biting the insides of his cheeks to keep from screaming out. The Dark Lord released the Cruciatus spell, and Snape crawled to his knees.

"I have doubled its potency, my Lord. I can do no more." He gasped.

"Then you must find another potion to help me. Look at me!" Voldemort demanded. His skin was nearly translucent now, and the burn scars had grown more angry looking. The Dark Lord suffered another great fit of coughing, and spat onto the stone floor.

"I will give it my best efforts." Snape bowed painfully. Voldemort dismissed him with a wave of his skeletal hand. Snape swept from the hall leaving the Dark Lord to suffer another long fit of hacking coughs. His anger was reaching new heights. Any Death Eater who came with any news suffered his ire.

In fact, the only one who was immune from it all was Draco Malfoy. The

boy was hardly away from the Dark Lord anymore, and he seemed to be changing. Draco's once gray eyes were taking on a reddish tint now, and his arrogant swagger was gone, replaced with a malevolent stride. The boy had begun taking on many of the Dark Lord's traits, yet no one spoke of it openly.

Voldemort himself looked on Draco with open desire, as if the Dark Lord coveted the boy. Draco was happy to kneel before the powerful wizard, and taking any job given with zeal. Draco wallowed in the rewards that had oft been promised to others, but seldom received. There was jealousy, and loathing of the boy, but none dared challenge him.

His plan was working nearly perfectly. Voldemort hated the weakness he felt. He'd been unable to collect his Horcrux from the shack. There had not been an opportunity. He had to create a major diversion, not just for the Ministry, but for his Death Eaters. None of them could learn of his growing ailment. Voldemort was no longer strong enough to fight against a untied group, having most of his power bonding with the Malfoy child. The day he could have the brat's soul sucked out and take over the strong new body was coming, but not fast enough. He needed the ring to amplify his power and strengthen his decaying body for just a little longer.

In just a few days, Hogsmeade would be filled with students. Voldemort was preparing his forces to lay waste to the village, and to kill as many Muggleborns as possible. He'd given his orders that any child who bore the symbols of lesser houses, Ravenclaw, Hufflepuff, or the accursed Gryffindor should be killed. It would be the perfect moment in which to journey to Little Hangleton to retrieve his Horcrux. Just another day and he would have a temporary solution. He would no longer have to rely on Snape's growing incompetence. Just a one more day.

Harry and Daphne were enjoying the mild October weather on the grounds. They had a few minutes before they had to meet with Snape and Dumbledore and try once again to weaken the Horcrux inside Harry. They walked slowly around the grounds, hand in hand, neither speaking. Daphne rested her head on Harry's shoulder as they walked, and Harry squeezed her hand assuringly. They both had been thinking about the appointment they would have, and what might transpire.

"Harry." Daphne said, pulling him to stop. She looked into his questioning green eyes and smiled shyly. "Tomorrow is the first Hogsmeade weekend. Do you think we might go? It'd be nice to get out of the castle and away from our problems for a bit."

"Of course we'll go." Harry smiled. "Just as soon as Madam Pomfrey releases me, you and I will go into the village and have sometime alone together."

"We've had precious little of that this year. We haven't even had a proper snog since we got back to school." Daphne winked.

"Yeah, just when it was getting really good." Harry chuckled.

"Are you telling me that before I allowed you to let your hands roam, it wasn't good?"

"How did I step into this mine field?" Harry asked, eyeing his stone faced love. She kept his eye for a moment longer before bursting into giggles.

"Sometimes you're too easy." She snorted.

"You're really evil, you know." Harry shook his head. They began walking inside now.

"Sometimes I feel like this is a waste of time." Harry said softly. "I don't feel like we're making any progress."

"Harry, it's had fourteen years of misery to feed upon. It's going to take time. At least Dumbledore is helping instead of letting you do it yourself."

"I suppose. But I can think of lots of things I'd rather do with you than just stare at you. And the pain. I'm sick to death of it. I'm tired of fainting and waking up in the hospital."

"You know, it was funny when she joked about it, but now that you actually have your own bed in the Hospital Wing, it's a little depressing."

Harry laughed remembering how the school matron had finally put a plaque with his name on the head board of his bed.

"She's been threatening to do that since third year. I think she's mad that no one will tell her what's going on, and all she can do is watch over me."

"I understand her misery." Daphne smiled sadly. "All I can do is hold you and hope that you'll wake up in the morning. It's really wracking on my nerves."

"I just wish that I would wake up before you. Just once I'd like to wake up and watch you sleeping for once."

"So would I. I love sleeping next to you, but I'd like it to be for a good reason, not because of all this."

They arrived at the Defense teacher's office and knocked. They waited patiently for several moments before Snape opened the door. He looked quite rough, with dark circles under his eyes. He grimaced, yet opened the door to allow the to youngster entrance.

"I am sorry, Potter. We will not be proceeding tonight. I am in need of some rest."

"Are you alright, Professor?" Harry asked.

"Let's just say the Dark Lord is most displeased with me at the present."

"What happened?" Daphne asked, helping Snape to sit, as he almost stumbled to the ground. Harry was also there, making sure Snape didn't fall over.

"His body is weakening, and I have been making potions for him. They

are not working as well as he'd like. Forgive me, but I am quite tired. We will do this next week. Perhaps it would be best if you got with your friends and studied more. I understand that Professor Flitwick gave you all a good lesson last evening." Snape waved them out, and the two left a little reluctantly.

"Wow, a free evening." Daphne said quietly. She took Harry's hand, smiling.

"Should we find the others?" Harry asked, but Daphne shook her head swiftly and lead him to the Room of Requirement. When they went inside, Harry smiled at Daphne. The room was quite cozy, looking much like his own room at the Beacon. Harry swore he could smell the ocean, and went to the window to see the waves crashing below.

"Finally, we're alone." Daphne said turning him around. He bent down and took her sweet lips in his own and she clutched his hair in her fingers. Two months of built up tension and longing melted away as the two held each other, kissing passionately.

"I think I'd like to have a night where I'm not worried about you." Daphne said between kisses. Harry lifted her in his arms and laid her on the bed that had been provided. He smiled as he stared at her hungry look. She reached up and pulled him to her. Their lips met and she moaned softly. Their passion grew with each kiss, and their hands explored.

Harry felt Daphne's hands pulling open his shirt and her fingers touching his skin lightly. He ran his hands up her leg, trembling at the feel of her soft creamy skin under his calloused hands. She groaned deeply when his fingers slid under her skirt. She wanted to cry out when his teeth grazed her neck and he trailed kissed along her jaw.

She wanted to devour him. She pulled him tighter with every kiss, losing herself in his touches. Her body burned with passion and she relished it.

Every kiss, every touch seemed to fuel her desire for him. Her head was fogged with the thrill of his body moving next to hers, and she flipped him onto his back and climbed on top of him.

His hands ran up her back, under her shirt, his fingertips burning her flesh. She moaned in ecstasy as she nibbled his ear playfully. She moved her face so she could stare into his burning green eyes. She saw his desire for her, and she wanted to give him everything she was. She wanted to become one with him.

"Harry." She whispered. "I want you to..."

He stopped her with his lips on hers, and she knew what he knew. It was not time. Not yet. Daphne knew by his kiss that he wanted her in the same way as she wanted him, but that this was not where it would happen, and she felt relieved.

Harry loved her so much that he was unwilling to cheapen it by consummating their love in school. She tightened her embrace again and whispered that she loved him. He smiled and replied that he loved her as well. At every turn, Harry showed the immensity of his love for her, and it made her cry with joy. He was hers, body, mind and soul.

Saturday morning dawned on a overcast sky. The day was becoming colder and the promise of an early winter was heavy in the air. Hogwarts students came to the village of Hogsmeade in droves, filling the normally quiet village with laughter and shrieks of joy.

Every shop was packed with children. And the proprietors were quite happy to be receiving the business. The village was simply packed with young witches and wizards, and that pleased Draco Malfoy.

He was hidden along with the fifty Death Eaters he'd been charged with.

Their orders had been specific. Slaughter. Draco drank up the intoxicating feeling over imminent chaos. Just a few more moments and

he would signal his people to lay waste to the village.

And then a group caught his eye. He recognized every single member, and his rage boiled. There was Blaise Zabini. The bastard was walking around the village with that weakling, Bones. The mudblood Granger was there with another mudblood, from Hufflepuff. She was smiling her insipid smile at the loathsome child. Longbottom walked with Davis. She was laughing that annoying cackle she often gave when she found something hysterical. It made his fingers clench his wand tightly.

There was the Weasel King, with that crazy blonde from Ravenclaw.

Draco was seeing red as his eyes fell on the boy who was the cause of all his ire. His black hair stood up in all directions, and his face was serene as he clutched the woman who was supposed to be Draco's. There was a surge of something inside of Draco, and he closed his eyes, letting it fill him. He knew what his master wanted.

Draco turned to the robed figure on his left. "Potter lives. The Dark Lord wants him unharmed. Do whatever you must and get him to our master, or I will personally rip you apart."

Draco pointed his wand in the air and fired sparks. At the signal, the happy little village exploded into a nightmare. Death Eaters poured into the streets, and spells blasted everywhere. Screams of terror pierced the air and schoolchildren ran in every direction.

Harry and his friends did not run. They all wielded their wands and fought valiantly to protect those who were unable.

Harry led the group to the middle of the village where the battle was the worst. He stunned several Death Eaters who had been dragging a pretty seventh year girl into an alley. Harry shuddered to think what they had in mind.

Neville found himself dueling a Death Eater who continually taunted him

about his parents. The Death Eater never thought that his words might be fueling Neville's strength until he found himself blasted through the air by a very strong Bludgeoning hex that crushed the man's ribs. Neville was quick enough to cast a Shield charm over Tracey who had been unaware of a dark robed figure coming up behind her.

Blaise and Ron were fighting off three large men, moving together as if they'd been fighting at one another's sides for years. The pair was an unstoppable team. They fought their three opponents back until the Death Eaters had no choice but to retreat and find another way to attack. Ron had sent Luna away to get help. The quirky blonde had wanted to protest, but his fierce blue eyes told her how important it was to him that she get away to safety and get them help. She decided that this was not the time for this kind of argument. But when it was done, she would be having words with her boyfriend. She ran off to the nearest shop and closed the door behind her, narrowly missing a killing curse.

Draco waded through the chaos, his face a mask of concentration. He wanted to personally kill Potter's associates. He moved swiftly up the main street to where the interlopers stood together. He whipped his wand out and cut a hole through the frantically running students.

"POTTER!" He cried out. He saw Harry turn and a burning rage erupted inside of him. He struck out but the boy was quick. Draco snarled as his spell contacted Potter's shield. His friends were engaged in other battles, so he had no help at the moment.

Draco fired several nasty curses which, Potter dodged and countered.

Draco waved them off as if they were nothing more bothersome than insects. He felt his power surging through his entire being and this made him become more confident. He chanced a glance at Greengrass who was hiding behind a building to avoid several spells.

His momentary lapse nearly cost him, as Harry fired a strong Piercing hex at him. Draco was able to duck in time, and he cursed himself.

Harry fired a flurry of spells at the lone Death Eater. The robed figure was quick, and dodge every spell with ease. He fired spells back at the Boy-Who-Lived, which Harry tried to shield himself from. He heard a scream near him at the same time he felt himself flying through the air. One of the Death Eater's spells had connected, and Harry landed hard in the street. As he rolled onto his feet, he saw Blaise and Ron try to distract the hooded figure. They fired off stunners and blasters with ease, but the Death Eater warded them off easily.

Harry was on his feet and running back towards his friends who were becoming increasingly outnumbered by more Death Eaters. Harry watched as Blaise was stunned from behind, falling to the dirt heavily. "Diffindo!" Harry cried, using the cutting hex on the back of one of the Death Eaters. There was a gruff cry of pain and the man fell to his knees. Harry drop kicked the man as he turned to face the boy.

Ron was thrown aside by a Banishment charm, and hit his back against the hard stone wall of The Three Broomsticks. His anger rose and he struggled to his feet. He saw the short Death Eater stalking towards Harry, who was fighting two other robed men. Ron shot off two stunners, hitting one man, but missing the second. Ron began moving in closer when he felt something hit him in the back. He looked down and saw blood staining the front of his robes. He turned to see a squat, heavy set Death Eater come out of the shadows.

"Ah, Mr. Weasley. I simply can not allow you to interfere." Came the high girlish voice.

"Umbridge?" Ron gasped. He fell to the ground clutching at the gaping hole in his chest.

"Mister Potter has an appointment he simply must keep." the woman giggled. She sauntered past Ron towards the fray. Ron wanted to cry out, but his breath was weak, and his vision was growing dimmer.

Hermione saw Ron fall, and the small robed figure coming towards them. She aimed her wand with careful precision and was about to fire off a Severing hex when someone grabbed her bodily by the throat.

"Hello, girl. I want to hear you scream." The man was extremely large, and Hermione could smell his awful breath through his mask. She flailed and kicked, but the man held her firmly. He shoved her head hard into the ground, and her vision went dark and there were little bursts of lights.

"Don't pass out on me now." the Death Eater cooed. "We've got so much to explore together."

"I don't think so." Hermione gasped out. She fought to get free of the man's grip, but he held her firmly, using his weight to pin her down. She could feel his wand under her chin, and here his foul laughter as he bent lower.

"Get off of her!"

The Death Eater turned to see a shaking Justin Finch-Fletchley aiming his wand threateningly.

"You have three seconds, Mudblood. Then I get mean."

Justin didn't hesitate. He snapped his wand and sent a Severing hex that cut the man's arm off. The man howled with pain and Justin lunged at the man, knocking him off of Hermione, who sat up, throwing away the severed arm. She plucked up her wand and Stunned the man.

"Are you alright?" Justin asked coming to her side. She coughed but nodded. She indicated to where Ron had fallen, and Justin helped her to her feet so they could go find the fallen redhead.

"You're coming with us, Potter." Draco said coldly.

"Only if I'm dead." Harry said sending another Disarming spell at the Death Eater.

Draco threw up a Protego and fired several Cutting hexes at Harry.

Neville came out of nowhere at that moment and leapt onto Draco, knocking him to the ground. Draco struggled under the bigger boy, trying to get his wand into a good position. Draco was becoming more and more irritated by the clumsy oaf. He brought his knee up and Neville doubled over, but not before he tore at Draco's mask.

"Malfoy?" Harry said, seeing Draco stand up. Draco sneered at his nemesis, eyebrows arched.

"Surprised, Potter?" Draco fired a Stunner, which caught the Gryffindor Golden Boy by surprise. Harry went flying and crashed through the window of the bookstore. Draco waved for several of his people to collect the boy and take him to their master.

"You bastard!" Daphne screamed. Before she could get her wand up, Draco summoned her to him. She found herself face to face with the boy she'd loathed her entire time at Hogwarts. He clutched a fistful of her hair and bent his face to hers, staring into her dark brown eyes.

"I gave you a chance, bitch." He snarled. "Now you learn who your betters are."

Daphne shoved her knee into Malfoy's groin. The boy bent over, and Daphne raised her wand to strike when she got struck with a Cutting hex.

"That sort of behavior is not to be tolerated." Umbridge simpered. "I think you owe Mister Malfoy an apology."

"Rot in hell!" Daphne screamed as she sent off a Reducto at the squat woman. Umbridge gave a small gasp before she was blasted into messy pieces. Draco ran forward and kicked Daphne in the face. she felt her

nose break, and heard the sickening crunch. Tears stung her eyes, and she whimpered. Draco bent down again and clutched her hair.

"I'm going to enjoy tearing into Potter before the Dark Lord kills him." He smiled viciously and slammed the girl's head into the cold ground.

There were dozens of pops as Aurors began apparating into the village.

Draco fired off another set of sparks and the Death Eaters began vanishing. Daphne was able to turn her head and see two Death Eaters hauling the limp form of Harry out of the book store and Apparating away with him.

Daphne's anguished screams echoed off every building in the village.

16. Chapter 16

"Hermione?" Justin asked softly. The bushy haired Gryffindor looked up from the hospital bed she lied in at the concerned face of Justin Finch-Fletchly. "How are you feeling?"

"I'm ok." Hermione said softly, her voice was raspy and hoarse. Her throat still hurt from being choked by that big Death Eater.

"Is there anything I can do for you?" He asked. Hermione shook her head slowly. Tears had not stopped falling since she watched Harry being taken away. Her heart had broken with the pop of the Death Eaters Apparation. Hermione tried to look over to where Daphne was still sleeping. The dark haired girl had passed out not long after Harry was taken away. Hermione had no doubt the girl's throat would be raw after that horrific scream, which still echoed in Hermione's heart.

"I'll come back later." Justin started to say, but Hermione reached out quickly and took his hand.

"Please, just stay. I just need you to stay." She said, a hint of pleading in her voice. Justin nodded and sat back down. Hermione had not released his hand, but she stared at Daphne's bed. She felt his fingers lace with

hers and she felt a sense of comfort. She was glad for it. Justin had not pushed himself on her. He was kind and understanding. They had been enjoying each other's company during the day, and Justin was getting along well with all her friends. Hermione couldn't have asked for better. Then it had all fallen apart.

Hermione had overheard bits of conversation and had learned that twenty students had been killed along with twelve adults. She hadn't learned the identities yet, and she hadn't heard if Ron had been one of them. The redhead had looked very bad when she had reached him in the village. He'd been hit with a modified Piercing hex and his chest was blasted open. Hermione did what she could, but had been afraid it wasn't going to help.

"Hermione." Tracey said softly as she sat on the bed. Her eyes were red and puffy, and she was sniffing. "Neville's ok. He just got Stunned. Blaise is ok, too. I feel so stupid. I should have been there."

"No. You saved a lot of kids out there. You and Susan both. That was smart, what you did." Hermione said as gently as she could. Tracey and Susan Bones had helped many of the younger students into a shop where they might be safe for a little while. Once the Death Eaters caught sight of Harry, they forgot about others and seemed to concentrate on him and his friends.

"I should have been with you guys. Maybe Harry would..." Tracey sniffled.

"You can't blame yourself. It's not going to do anyone any good. Daphne's going to need us."

"Was it really Draco?"

Hermione nodded and Tracey slumped. Her face was in her hands. She took several long breaths before looking at Hermione again.

"We should have killed the little ferret last year. We should have beaten him until he couldn't walk."

"Tracey. Please. We can't do anything about the past. We have to figure out what we do moving forward."

"He was so strong." Justin whispered. "Half of the stuff he used, I've never heard of. How can he be so strong?"

"He's always been strong. You never reveal your true power to your enemies. Make them underestimate you." Tracey answered. "I have no doubt his father taught him loads of dark magic."

"He was leading them." Hermione said, coughing furiously. "They followed his orders. That doesn't make sense."

"I don't understand it either." Tracey said. "I'm going to go see Neville. He's really angry about everything. I'll check on you later."

Hermione waved to the blonde girl as she left and turned her eyes to Justin who was staring intently at their intertwined hands. She gave a tiny smile at him, and squeezed her fingers around his hand gently.

"This isn't what I imagined for a date." She said quietly.

"So...this was a date?" Justin's eyes came up to look into hers. She smiled a little bigger.

"Sort of. I didn't want to say anything. I was having a really nice time with you."

"I was, too."

"Thank you." She said gently. "What you did was nothing short of amazing. I know that you must have been scared."

"I was terrified. But I wasn't about to let anything to happen to you." Justin admitted.

"That's terribly sweet. Thank you." Hermione pulled their hands to her face and rested her cheek against his hand. Justin smiled shyly and

brushed some of her hair from her face with his free hand. Hermione closed her eyes and sighed. She was ever so tired, and having Justin there was somehow soothing, She fell asleep in moments.

Luna Lovegood was being held by Ginny Weasley. The two girls had been crying for hours now, and they had still not heard of Ron's progress. Luna was still cursing herself for abandoning her boyfriend. Ron had all but begged her to get help, and she had finally acquiesced to his pleas. She had run into Scrivenshafts and used the floo to call to Dumbledore.

The Headmaster had pulled her through his floo and then gone about getting help. He had called the Ministry and members of the Order and commanded them all to Hogsmeade immediately. He then left the office in a flurry. Luna had followed him, intent on returning to Hogsmeade.

She had been angry when the old man had reached through the floo and pulled her into his office. Her place was next to Ron, and because of it, her boyfriend might be dying.

As she and Ginny tried to comfort each other, Luna couldn't help think of how Ron had treated her. So sweet and kind. He had even apologized for the night before school had started.

"Ron, if I hadn't wanted us to make love, I would have stopped it." Luna had said simply. She had to laugh at his expression. He looked like a fish out of water, his mouth agape and moving furiously with no sound. She had found him so endearing.

Luna had known that she was destined for Ron, he just needed to have his eyes opened, which had finally happened this past summer. She had given every fiber of her being to him, and he had accepted her for who she was, at last.

There was no more confusion in his eyes when she looked at him, there was only love, though he'd not yet found the words to express it. Luna

was patient though. She could wait. She'd waited for him since she was ten years old.

The doors to the Hospital Wing opened finally, and Professor McGonagall stepped out and greeted the two fifth years.

"Madam Pomfrey has done all she could. Mister Weasley is resting. We believe he will recover. You may go look in on him, but do not stay long. There are still others who need help." The normally stern Professor said sadly, tears welling in her eyes.

Luna ran ahead of Ginny and found the sleeping redhead. Luna took his hand gently and held it against her cheek, tears falling freely now. He looked sickeningly pale and his breathing was labored. She brushed her fingers through his hair, feeling how cold the boy was.

"Ron, I want you to listen to me." Luna whispered very softly. "It's not your time yet. You haven't fulfilled your destiny yet. You and I have so much more we need to do together before you can leave. So you fight, Ron. You fight and you come back to me."

Tears fell freely from her bright blue eyes. She wiped out them furiously, and sniffled. She glanced around at the many other beds and the many students and others who were being treated. So much pain had been wrought this day, and Luna knew that she wasn't the only one watching over a loved one. Teachers were moving all around helping Madam Pomfrey and Healers brought in from St. Mungo's.

Luna spotted Hermione asleep with Justin Finch-Fletchly holding her hand, watching her with a shy smile on his face. Neville and Blaise had been released already, having suffered only minor cuts and stunners.

It was then that Luna noticed something that made her shiver. Daphne Greengrass lying in a bed with no one watching over her. She looked all over the infirmary and there was no sight of the messy black hair.

"Ginny," Luna looked up at her redheaded friend, who had been staring at her brother worriedly. "Where's Harry?"

Sirius couldn't stop pacing. His fury was just barely being contained.

There were others gathered as well who were mirroring his anxiety. He was in the dining room of number twelve Grimmauld Place along with Remus Lupin, Alastor Moody, Arthur Weasley, and many more members of the Order of the Phoenix. They had all come at the summons of Dumbledore who had just finished giving a report on the Hogsmeade attack. The focus of the meeting was now on the rescue of Sirius' godson.

"How do we get Harry back?" He growled.

"Sirius, you must calm yourself. Your anger will not help young Harry."

Dumbledore tried to soothe the man.

"We don't know where his headquarters are." Remus tried.

"We've got people following known Death Eaters." Moody added. "I've not heard from any of them."

Sirius pounded his fists on the walls of his former home. Remus shook his head slowly, running his hands over his head.

"What about our man inside?" Arthur asked.

"I do not believe that Severus will be able to rescue Harry on his own.

Our best hope is that he can give us the location of Voldemort's base of operation." Dumbledore said gently.

"What good is having a spy who can't report?" Sirius nearly screamed.

"Voldemort is using the Fidelius, and Snape is not the secret keeper. All he'll be able to tell us is if Harry is alive or not."

"Then we must hope that Lord Voldemort wishes to make Harry's death a public spectacle. He will want to crush the hopes of the wizarding world by killing Harry where many can witness it." Dumbledore said thoughtfully.

"He'll tell all his Death Eaters and we can try and get there and stop it."

Remus said firmly.

"We're not going to let the boy die at the hands of that monster." Moody said confidently.

Sirius nodded his thanks to everyone. Inside he was raging. He should have been there. He had been at the Ministry talking with Rufus Scrimgeour about coming back to the Auror force. Moody had hounded Rufus about offering Sirius a position. Sirius had been one of the top Aurors before his incarceration.

Since Harry had been back at school, Sirius had found himself becoming bored, and so had jumped at the chance to do something good. The Auror force was dangerously low of people, and the Death Eaters continued to thin their numbers. Sirius felt honor bound to help not only protect his life, but being out there hunting Death Eaters was a good way to help his godson in the eventual defeat of Voldemort.

Yet, here he was. Harry had been taken and no one had any idea on where to look for him or how to help. The only bit of good news was that Moody had found Harry's wand in the ruined bookstore. The Death Eaters had been too hurried to try and collect it.

"He's going to be ok." Remus said, grabbing his oldest friend's shoulder.

"We're going to get him back."

Sirius looked into the hopeful eyes of his friend.

"I hope so."

Daphne awoke in the Hospital Wing of Hogwarts. It was dark now, and she had no idea of how she'd arrived there. Her body ached, and she had a pounding headache. She rubbed her aching head trying to siphon through the jumble of thoughts in her cranium. In a rush, the memories of what had happened came to her. She sat up quickly and her head

swooned.

"Harry!"

"Calm down." Came a familiar voice.

"Tracey?"

"Yeah. It's me. I got permission to sit with you for a while." The blonde Slytherin girl said gently.

"What time is it?"

"Close to midnight." Tracey sniffed. "You've been out since...well..."

"Harry." Daphne whispered the name, tears filling her eyes. "He's gone. They took him."

Tracey enveloped her friend and allowed her to cry. Her heart broke at her friend's anguish. She rubbed Daphne's back and held her friend tightly. She had no words that could help. Tracey felt truly helpless. It was a feeling she was becoming accustomed to.

Neville had been so angry earlier. She had tried to calm her boyfriend down but all he wanted to do was to find Harry. He finally asked her to leave him alone. He told her he didn't want to say anything to her he would regret.

Tracey had let him be, but she had really needed him. She had cried in the bathroom for an hour before calming down. Ever since she had been next to her best friend. Blaise had come to check on them a few hours ago, but he had nothing to offer in the way of comfort.

"We'll get him back. He's been doing this kind of thing since first year."

Tracey tried.

"But he's had help. He's had Ron and Hermione with him. He's alone now." Daphne sobbed. Tracey held her friend tightly. She knew that Harry was in deeper than he'd ever been, but she couldn't let her best friend lose faith. She would need to believe that Harry could make it, and

come back to her.

"Daphne, listen. Harry loves you, and I can't believe he would just lay down. You need to believe that he's going to do everything in his power to come back to you. He's going to be alright."

"And what if he's not?" Daphne asked tearily. "What if that bastard kills him?"

"You can not think like that. Harry needs your strength. You need to send him all of your love and support. Give him everything you have so he can come back to you." Tracey tried. "We all need to give him all our prayers and strength. He's going to be alright"

Daphne looked into her friends eyes and nodded slowly. She fell into Tracey's arms, crying softly, her mind searching for her lost love, praying for him to come home to her.

He saw a broken down shack hidden in a grove of trees. He pressed on the door with a thin skeletal hand. The door opened easily, and he stepped inside of the dark hut. He waved his wand, and the air shimmered for several moments. There was a faint odor of burning flesh before the air cleared.

He felt satisfaction that his plan had worked. He now had what he needed to ward off his ailment while his plan came to fruition. Soon he would have a new more powerful body, and then he would finally conquer Britain.

He knelt down in the center of the floor and lifted a small trap door. He felt a sudden surge of rage when his eyes fell upon an empty hole. He pawed at the dirt, even digging a bit with his long white fingers, but there was nothing. It was gone. His ring was gone. His Horcrux had been taken.

Harry sat up screaming in agony. His hands were tearing at his scar, blood trickled between his fingers. He turned over and vomited onto the stone floor. He remained there for several minutes, heaving and gasping until his stomach settled. He'd not felt Voldemort's anger in a long time,

and had since forgotten the effects.

He sat up and looked about the tiny cell. There were no windows, and only one door. Harry stood and went to inspect the iron bars. They were very rusty and several were missing, but Harry saw four Death Eaters looking back at him from just beyond. They weren't taking any chances with him escaping.

Harry's heart sank into his stomach. He had no wand, no means of escape, and he was sure no one knew where he was. Harry sank against the far wall, staring at the door. All he could think of were his friends. He wondered if they were ok. He had no idea what happened to them or to Daphne, after Draco had stunned him.

"Draco." Harry whispered angrily. The former Slytherin had suckered him. Harry replayed their fight in his mind. Something had changed.

Harry had known that Draco had significant power, but preferred to strut about the castle making people fear his name rather than himself. That was no longer the case.

Harry shook his head, angry at himself for letting his guard down. It had been such a surprise to see he was fighting Malfoy. Draco had been able to get the upper hand in that second of recognition. Harry felt a feeling of disgust at being bested by the arrogant ponce.

Yet, Draco had used some very powerful spells in their fight. Harry figured he'd learned them all from his father and all their Death Eater friends. But that wasn't all. Draco was different somehow. There were no taunts. There was no posturing, just ruthless dueling. This was a different Draco, a scary one.

The cell door opened and two guards stepped in, followed by the pointed faced blonde boy.

"On your feet, Potter. The Dark Lord wishes to have a word with you."

Draco sneered.

"So this is where you ended up." Harry shook his head. "For all your arrogance, I always thought you'd kill Voldemort and take over."

Draco lunged forward and kicked Harry in the chest. Harry's head cracked on the stone wall.

"If I were permitted, I'd show you what it means to serve him. Instead, I'll show your friends. I have something very special in mind for Greengrass. I intend to make her a woman." Draco sneered.

Harry was on his feet and lunging for Draco, but was caught by the two bigger Death Eaters. Draco punched Harry in the eye and kicked him in the stomach driving all the wind out of Harry's lungs. The Death Eaters dropped him to the floor.

"After all this time, Saint Potter is going to get what he deserves. You're going to pay for all your insults, and your lack of respect."

"Respect for who, Malfoy?" Harry coughed, rising to his feet again. "You? If you ever did anything to earn my respect, you'd have had it. Instead you acted like a prancing peacock. You've always been pathetic, Malfoy. You always will be."

Draco's grey eyes burned red with rage and the former Prince of Slytherin House stepped forward, brandishing his wand like a knife. His face a mask of rage that began slowly melting into a confident smile.

"We mustn't keep our Lord waiting." Draco chuckled. "I'm going to enjoy watching you die, Potter."

Harry was grabbed roughly by the two guards and hauled out of the cell and up long winding stairs and into a long hall that had long ago been a splendid throne room for a great king.

At the far end of the hall sat a raised dais with a tall high backed chair in which sat a cloaked, stooped figure. Harry felt his head begin to pulse

with a searing headache. He looked all about for a means of escape, but without a wand it was looking grim. He doubted he could outrun fifty Death Eaters shooting spells at him.

A sudden gripping fear overcame Harry, as he was dragged closer to the hooded cloak figure. He would be facing Voldemort, and he, Harry, was defenseless. The Dark Lord still had all his Horcruxes, and Harry had nothing.

"Bring him to me." Voldemort called. The two guards drug Harry down the long room and tossed him roughly before the Dark Lord's feet. Harry climbed to his knees and faced the robed husk of a man, masking his own fear behind a stone faced mask.

"Once again, Potter, you have been brought before me. I am pleased to look into your eyes and see fear. Yes, you try to hide it, but it is plain for me to see. Perhaps you know that this time there is no escape. You are surrounded, and there is no portkey to save you. Yet I am not unmerciful, I give you the chance to request where your body will lie."

"What?" Harry asked, confused.

"When I kill you, Harry. Where would you like me to send your body? To the Ministry? Or to your muggle relations, perhaps. To your friends? I can have my Death Eaters tear you apart and give a piece of you to each one. Would that not be satisfactory?"

Harry's head felt like it was going to explode, and his stomach rolled with nausea. He stared into the shadowed face of the Dark Lord, and something struck him. An idea.

"You still don't know the prophecy, do you?" Harry smiled.

"It is of no consequence." Voldemort waved off Harry's words.

"But it is. You can't kill me. If you do, you will die."

Voldemort stood slowly and stepped closer to Harry who was still on his

knees. Harry rose to his own feet, staring the Dark Lord down. He was playing the most dangerous game he'd ever played in this moment.

Harry knew that he was going to die. There was no way out of it now. He knew that Dumbledore was collecting all of Voldemort's Horcruxes, and that Harry was one as well. Harry knew that the Horcrux had to be destroyed. And the words of the prophecy echoed in his mind over and over. This had to be what it meant. Harry had to die in order for Voldemort to be destroyed.

Yet, Harry thought he might be able to buy some time. If he could make Voldemort believe that his existence was tied to Harry's it might give him some time in which he could seek escape.

"Explain."

"You bloody fool. You could have been free of this curse, but you chose to believe some old fraud's ramblings. When you gave me this," Harry said pointing to his scar. "You tied me to you. If I die, I take you with me, and nothing you've done will stop it."

"You are quite mistaken, boy. I am immortal. Your lies will gain you nothing." Voldemort sneered. But Harry heard it in his voice. The faintest hint of belief, of fear. Harry began to concentrate on Daphne. He needed to make the Horcrux inside him fight against him. Silently he prayed that when Voldemort killed him, it would destroy the Horcrux as well.

"Why do you weep, Harry? Do you not believe Dumbledore when he tells you that death is not the end?" Voldemort jeered. Harry heard the chuckles of the Death Eaters.

"No. I weep for you." Harry said, facing the rising anger of the Dark Lord.

"For your continued blindness and stupidity. I have warned you.

Dumbledore has warned you. You are such a fool, Tom Riddle.

"You dare use that foul name?"

"I dare." Harry shouted. "You're pure blood agenda is a lie, just as you are."

Harry turned to the hall and the Death Eaters crowded around to watch the demise of the Chosen One. He saw there was a wave of confusion. Everywhere he looked, Death Eaters were whispering to one another, questioning what they had just heard.

"Your lord, your great pureblood master is a half blood. His father was a muggle. You worship a false idol."

"You lie!" Bellatrix Lestrange screamed surging forward. Harry held up his right hand, flashing his scarred fist.

"I never lie, Bellatrix. He's no more pureblood than I am."

"ENOUGH!" Voldemort shouted, and the murmuring that had begun ceased. Harry turned to stared at the heaving robed figure. Harry could just make out the red eyes burning with rage.

"End it, Tom. Kill me and fulfill the Prophecy." Harry said calmly. Again he concentrated on the face of his beloved Daphne, silently praying that he was right, that his death would help in the destruction of the Dark Lord at last, and those he left behind would finally know true peace. He held his head high and stared into the eyes of the man who had hunted him for years, as Voldemort raised his wand.

Out of the corner of his eye, Harry saw someone move forward a bit, but Harry focused his attention on the images of Daphne, her beautiful face, dark brown eyes that shined with love when she looked at him, her full lips which tasted so sweet when he kissed them.

Life slowed to a crawl as Harry saw the Dark Lord draw his wand from beneath his robes and bring it to bear on him. Harry took a long slow breath, releasing it along with all of his fear and trepidations. His mother and father would be there awaiting him. He would be at peace. There

would be no pain, no suffering. It would be over in an instant. He closed his eyes and he saw her face smiling gently back at him.

"I love you, Daphne." He said softly.

"AVADA KEDAVRA!"

17. Chapter 17

The poisonous green spell flew at Harry and burst into his chest, sending him flying through the air and crashing in front of several Death Eaters. But no one seemed to care, for at the very same moment, Voldemort himself was blasted into the air by his own spell and sent crashing into the stone wall behind him.

There was a deathly silence as Death Eaters waited. Heads continually swiveled to look between the two bodies as if uncertain what should be done. No one moved. They barely breathed. Suddenly from beneath the dark robes, Voldemort began to scream in furious agony.

He'd never known such pain. His blood was boiling and burning him from the inside. At the same time, his skin was shedding, and falling away in great dry pieces, not unlike that of a snake's. He stood shakily on his feet, tearing at his robes trying to free his head. He felt as if he were suffocating beneath the heavy dark cloak and he tore it from his frail body.

Gulping great breaths, Voldemort stared at the body of his rival, the one person who had been the bane of existence over the past fifteen years, and he began laughing maniacally. Voldemort fell to his knees, laughing triumphantly, and painfully. He had won. At last, the Potter brat was no longer in his way and Voldemort's ultimate victory was at hand.

He began another furious coughing fit and he tried to stand but found his legs shaky. Blood came up with each violent cough. He spit onto the stone dais, seething at his body's weakening state. At once, all his

gathered faithful threw themselves forward to be the first to help their master. Each one of them wished to be looked on favorably by their master. Like Pettigrew before them, they wished to be their master's confidant and lord it above the others.

It was of course Bellatrix LeStrange who reached her beloved master first, fawning over him in a loving manner.

"Allow me to help you my Lord." She pleaded.

"Away woman!. I need no assistance." Voldemort snapped. He finally stood and yelled at the faithful to clear the way. He wanted to gloat over the body of his fallen enemy. To revel in his great victory. What he saw when they cleared made him shiver with uncontainable anger. The boy was gone.

In the ensuing chaos of Voldemort's fall, no one noticed one dark robed figure scoop up the body of Harry Potter and Apparate away.

Severus Snape fell to his knees as he appeared before the great iron gates of Hogwarts. Tears of anger and sadness streaked his face. In his arms was the body of Harry James Potter, the son of his greatest rival and his greatest love. Struck dead by the man he had been prophesized to kill.

The very boy who he had sworn to protect.

"Expecto Patronum." He called sending his shinning silver doe to fetch help. He clutched the young man to him. He had failed again. He had not stepped in, he had not jumped in front of the spell. Snape had done nothing to stop it, just like the last time, so many years ago. He had failed Lilly Evans again. Snape held the boy tightly to him. It seemed that the heavens shared his greif, for at that moment the skies opened up and it began to rain.

Snape heard the thudding footsteps of Hagrid splashing in mud as he approached, and Snape stood slowly. Hagrid opened the gates and stared

agape at the professor.

"Professor? Is everything alright? Is tha?" The great half giant asked, his beetle black eyes overflowing with tears at the sight. His great shaggy head began to shake in disbelief. Great drops of rain were flung from the half giant's head as he shook it more and more violently. Hagrid could not believe his eyes.

"Please take him, Hagrid. Take him to the infirmary." Snape said sadly, releasing his hold of Harry's body to the gamekeeper. "His friends will want to see him one last time." Hagrid sniffled hard and stared down at the broken body of his friend.

"Not Harry. No, please, not yeh, Harry." Great tears fell from Hagrid's eyes, mixing with the rain.

It was very faint, and both men stopped themselves suddenly at the sound. A sound that filled them with a spark of hope. At first they both believed it to be wind, it had been so faint, but Hagrid held Harry's head close to his ear and he heard it. The faintest whisper of breath.

"Professor?" Hagrid began, but Snape stopped him.

"Take him to Pomfrey as fast as you can, Hagrid. Go, NOW!" Snape shouted. Hagrid sprinted all the way to the Hospital Wing. He kicked open the door, awaking many of the sleeping patients. He began shouting for help as he lay the body down on the first empty bed he found.

Madam Pomfrey came from her office looking quite angry at the gamekeeper's shouting until she saw the body of the young man lying on the bed. Her heart nearly stopped in her chest.

"Move aside." She ordered. Pomfrey moved with an urgency that she'd never had before. Never once had she been faced with a situation been this dire. Accidental spell damage, potion mishaps, or children messing with magic beyond them were her normal specialties. This was going to

test her true limits. She began waving her wand in intricate patterns, reading the magical signatures, and finally gasping in horror.

"How can this be?" She asked no one. She ran off to fetch potions, herbs, and whatever else she could in order to work. Hagrid stood guard, watching carefully as the matron worked. A few moments later, Dumbledore strode into the infirmary and joined them.

"May I offer assistance, Poppy?" he asked. His voice was calm, but his face was determined. The aged Headmaster moved swiftly to the bed, his wand already out.

"Please, Albus. I'm going to lose him, I fear." The matron said. Her voice was unsettled. "I don't know how, but it didn't kill him straight away."

"Wha didn't kill him?" Hagrid asked.

"Excuse me, Hagrid." Dumbledore said, moving past the half giant and beginning his own diagnosis. Dumbledore waved his own wand over the still form of Harry Potter, grimacing as he read the patterns. "By Merlin, he's done it." The old man whispered.

From somewhere down the infirmary, a small voice spoke up. "Harry?" Dumbledore's head shot up and his brilliant blue eyes sought out the speaker. She was kneeling on her bed, hands clasped tightly on her chest, and even in the dark, Dumbledore could see the dread on her young beautiful face.

"Miss Greengrass, are you well enough to join us, please?" Dumbledore called. "Hagrid, if you would help our young friend?"

Hagrid neatly bounded down the rows and scooped Daphne up bringing her back to the gathered in short order.

"Albus?" Pomfrey began to ask, but Dumbledore waved her off.

Hagrid set the girl in a chair near the bed. She scooped up his freezing hand in hers and began rubbing it, trying to warm it.

"Talk to him." Dumbledore said. "He needs you to help him back to us."

He continued his work along with Madam Pomfrey. Daphne bent her head low, her lips close to the boy's ear.

"Harry." She said softly. She couldn't stop the tears as she continued.

"Harry, my love. I need you to listen to me. I need you to come back to me. Concentrate on my voice, Harry. Come back to my arms, Harry. I love you. Please, just fight."

Dumbledore waved an intricate pattern above Harry's head that glowed a sinister shade of red. It was pulsing ever so slowly, and Dumbledore felt his old eyes burn with tears. He refused to let Harry pass on. The old man knew it was not the young man's time, and he refused to let him slip into the abyss.

"More, Miss Greengrass. Keep at it."

"Harry, love. Come on now, you need to come back to me. I can't be without you. We've so much left between us, and you promised to never leave me. You have to keep your promise." Daphne said weakly. She pressed his hand to her chest as she continued speaking in the boy's ear.

"You made me a promise, do you remember? You said you would never leave me, and you have to keep that promise, love."

The pattern began to change color. Dumbledore kept up his encouragement of the young woman while he and Madam Pomfrey did their best to counter the Killing Curse. Dumbledore had never known the curse to work so slowly, though he had a vague idea of why it was reacting this way.

"You promised me, Harry." Daphne was sobbing, clutching at the icy hand of the raven haired boy. "You promised to never leave me, and you're breaking that promise. You have to fight, Harry, you have to come back to me. You promised me!"

Dumbledore looked on the intricate weave of light above the youth's head as it begun getting brighter. It's color faded from red to a deep purple. The Headmaster ordered the matron to find a Strengthening draught and the little woman bustled off.

Everyone was awake now and watching as Daphne Greengrass begged for the return of her boyfriend, and Albus Dumbledore cast increasingly complex spells over the prone body of the savior of the wizarding world.

Each person watching in silent vigil, willing the youth to wake.

The floating weave began lightening again.

"He's fighting. You almost have him, Miss Greengrass." Dumbledore shouted.

"That's it, Harry. Fight it. Come back to me. I love you and I need you with me." Daphne shouted now. She gripped his hand tightly in hers willing all of her energy and magic into Harry.

"Come on, Harry." Hermione shouted from her bed.

"Fight, Harry!" A fourth year Ravenclaw shouted. One by one every single person in the infirmary began calling out to the young man who was fighting for his life. If Dumbledore wasn't so focused on the young man lying before him, he would have been filled with hope and the smile would have been legendary.

"Come on, 'Arry. Yeh're strong, lad. Fight it."

"It is not yet you're time." Dumbledore whispered.

The magical weave above Harry's head burst a bright blue and faded into nothingness. There was a great gasp as Harry's body surged upward. A great scream of tragic suffering, which terrified everyone, poured from Harry's lips. His body fell back into the bed and silence fell like a giant weight.

"Please, Harry." Daphne whispered, holding his hand against her cheek,

tears streaking her soft cheeks. He dark eyes watched for a sign.

After what seemed an eternity, she saw and heard it. His chest rising as he took a slow rasping breath.

"Poppy, the potion, now!" Dumbledore shouted. The old man lifted Harry carefully as the matron poured the potion down his throat. When it was gone, they laid him back carefully, and Dumbledore began another magical weave above Harry's head.

"I've got it." Snape said as he entered the infirmary. Once again Dumbledore lifted Harry up a little, and Snape opened a little vial which he poured into Harry's open mouth.

"I am very sorry, Miss Greengrass." Snape said when Harry was lying back down. "But given the situation, I felt Harry might benefit from this more than you."

He handed the girl a tiny vial which she recognized as the vial that had contained her prize of Felix Felicis potion.

"I will make you a replacement, but it will take about six months." Snape sighed, looking back at the young man lying silently in the hospital bed.

"If it helps him, Professor, you can forget it." She sniffled. She had not released his hand, and kept it close to her cheek, kissing it every so often, not daring to take her eyes off of him.

Harry's breathing began to steady out and become even, and as it did so, there seemed to be a wave of relief throughout the Hospital Wing. One by one, every one let out sighs, and fell back into their beds. Daphne bent forward and kissed the boy's cold lips tenderly.

"I love you, Harry." She whispered to him.

"He is doing better." Dumbledore said softly. It was very late a week after the boy's return, and two men were keeping vigil over the still sleeping form of Harry Potter. There had been many people rotating to watch over

the young man.

Daphne had been the primary guardian, but when she had been forced to return to classes, the duty had been split between herself and Sirius Black. Several of Harry's other friends had also come by and stayed by the boy's bedside.

On this night, Sirius had been talking with Severus Snape, when Dumbledore had joined them. Over the last month the two men had been talking more and more often. It seemed that they had moved past their childhood differences. It hadn't been over night. But it had begun, and neither man would admit it to the other, but there was an understanding between them now. A truce.

"It was very wise to give him the Luck potion, Severus. I think it really helped him." Dumbledore smiled gently.

"Why did it not kill him?" Snape asked. "How did he survive again?"

"I believe you've already worked it out, but I will gladly give you an explanation. I must warn you, I am only guessing, but given our evidence, I believe it to be correct. It was the Horcrux. It confused the Killing Curse. Two souls in one body was one too many. Both souls were fighting for dominance, as well. If you had not brought Harry to us as fast as you did, I fear that he would have perished, and there would be two Voldemorts."

"The Horcrux was winning?" Sirius asked.

"It was the stronger of the two." Dumbledore nodded. "However, when I had Young Miss Greengrass begin talking to him, Harry utilized what he had been in our sessions. He focused on his love for her, and was able to push the curse towards the Horcrux."

Dumbledore conjured a comfortable chintz chair and sat with the two men. He folded his hands neatly in his lap and stared at the young man

who lay so still. He knew that Harry had been through something unheard of until now, and there was a lot of healing still needed, but Dumbledore had been very surprised when he came to see Harry the morning after his near demise and found that Harry's magical core was already becoming more powerful. Dumbledore likened it to a giant stretching out after a long sleep.

"When will he wake?" Sirius asked.

"When he is ready. Though I would guess it to be soon, especially if Miss Greengrass has anything to say on the matter. Gentlemen, we have a decision to make here. So far as we know, Voldemort believes Harry to be dead. I think it wise that we perpetuate this and allow Voldemort to make his move."

"But everyone in the school knows he's alive." Snape said.

"They know he's alive, yes, but they also believe he's still fighting. If we tell the students Harry has lost the fight and has passed on..."

"Then the public will believe it." Sirius nodded. "But, what of his friends. We can't do that to them."

"No, we can not. But I believe we can trust them with this secret. Harry will need to be taken someplace safe, where he can be trained."

"You still think it's going to come down to Harry and Voldemort?" Sirius asked. He was still watching his godson sleep. He found comfort in seeing the boy's chest rise and fall with steady breathing.

"Unfortunately, I do. I believe the prophecy has been fulfilled, thanks to Harry's sacrifice. I am very thankful that he came through it all, but in the end, it will come down to the two of them." Dumbledore said sadly.

"I have blown my cover by recovering Harry. If any Death Eaters sees me now, it will be my death." Snape said quietly.

"I think we're thankful for your choice Sev." Sirius remarked.

"Indeed." Dumbledore concurred. "I do not believe your services has a spy would have been helpful much longer anyway. You will teach defense to all our students, and I would ask that you assist me in training Harry and his friends.

"I will do my best." Snape promised.

"For now, I think it would be wise to gather Harry's most trusted friends and inform them of our plans. I should like to make the announcement at dinner this evening.

"But, Albus, it's one in the morning." Sirius said. "Shouldn't we let them sleep?"

"No, I think not. If we are to keep our rouse then it would do to collect them now. We have much to discuss." Dumbledore said, rising to his feet. "I will return in half an hour. When the children arrive, please do not tell them anything until I return."

When Snape and Sirius nodded the understanding, Dumbledore left them alone again. Both men watched him go, neither speaking for a long time.

"What do you think?" Sirius asked. He turned to Snape who had stood and was folding his arms over his chest.

"I think this war is going to be shorter than we all expected." He said, looking at the peacefully resting boy between them.

BOY WHO LIVED KILLED

Albus Dumbledore, Headmaster of Hogwarts, announced yesterday evening that Harry Potter died as a result of the killing curse cast by He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. Potter, sixteen had been kidnapped by Death Eaters during an attack on the village of Hogsmeade last weekend.

The body of Harry Potter was recovered by a spy in Voldemort's ranks and brought to Hogwarts where Dumbledore and the school matron, Poppy Pomfrey worked furiously to save the boy. After a week, Potter's body gave

out and he died early yesterday morning.

Until recently, it was widely rumored that young Harry was destined to be the savior of our world. This reporter wonders now if any can stand against the tyranny of You-Know-Who. Can our Ministry pull it together and stop this terrorist before more people die? Or are we destined to succumb to this monster's new world order?

The air was warm and the sun shone brightly. He could smell the ocean, and hear the waves crashing against the shore line. It was incredibly peaceful here. He looked left and right and there was no one but himself on the beach. He sat up and stretched, feeling tension and aches melt away. Perhaps a nice swim was in order. The sea was calling his name and he couldn't think of any reason not to take a splash.

He stood and took in a deep refreshing breath. He walked slowly towards the crashing waves, enjoying the feeling of warmth the sand had on his feet. The water was warm and clear. He dove forward and submerged himself in the salty sea thrusting his arms out and propelling him forward.

He surfaced and whipped his hair out of his face and wiped at his eyes. It was paradise. Only one thing could make this better.

And there she was. Her midnight black hair was pulled into a ponytail, and her eyes watched him from the shore. She was average height and slim. She had nice curves, and a slight saunter as she walked. She raised her hand and waved at him. She was everything to him, and she was here alone with him.

And she was in a very slinky bikini.

He ran back to the shore to be with her. He had missed her terribly while he'd been there, but she was here now waving him to her, and he was racing to her side. He collapsed on to his blanket and heard the sweet tinkling laughter of the woman he'd missed.

"I've missed you." She said smiling. It was such a beautiful smile. She brushed

some stray wisps of hair behind her ear.

"I've missed you too." He grinned.

"It's time to come back now." She smiled softly. She lowered her head and leaned closer to him. He could smell the peppermint in her breath.

"Come back?" He questioned.

"Yes. Harry. You've been here far too long. It's time to come back."

"But it's not nice here." He protested.

"You need to wake up now. You've been here long enough and I need you, love." She whispered.

She began to fade. The ocean got softer, and he sat up, trying to reach out to her. "Daphne?"

"Come back to me, Harry."

"Daphne?"

"No, but just as good looking." Sirius chuckled.

Harry opened his eyes, blinking furiously. It was bright where he was, but he couldn't see anything clearly.

"Here you are. This will help." Sirius grinned as he handed Harry his glasses. He looked all around and was surprised to see his room at the Beacon. He was home.

"Am I dead?" He asked tentatively. Sirius threw his head back and barked with laughter.

"No, I think it's safe to say you're quite alive, pup." Sirius smirked. His face went stony for a moment. "You gave us quite a scare for a while though."

"What happened?" Harry asked, rubbing his temples.

"That's a very long story. But, it can wait. There is someone who would kill me if I didn't inform her you were awake."

"Daphne?"

"Right in one." Sirius stood. "Don't go anywhere." He grinned. He left Harry alone as he went to get Daphne. Harry threw off his blankets and stretched. He felt a little weak, but he also felt full of energy, like he'd never felt before. He stood on shaky legs and tried to stretch his muscles, getting the blood flowing again.

"Harry!"

He had no time to register more than a blur of movement before he was on the floor with a girl on top of him. He felt her pressing her lips to his face.

"You've had me so worried." Daphne said between kisses. "I was so scared."

"I missed you." Harry said holding his girlfriend tightly. "How long was I out? And what happened to me?"

"You tried getting yourself killed." Daphne said, helping him to a sitting position. "And it's for this reason I'm not beating you to death."

"Ok. Slow down here." Harry said. "Let's start at the beginning. I'll fill you in on all the missing pieces and you do the same for me. First, how long was I out and how did I get home, and why are you here?"

"You've been asleep for three weeks. I've been here everyday talking to you, trying to get you to wake up. We brought you here about a week after Snape brought you back to Hogwarts. He said that Voldemort used the killing curse on you, but it didn't work. No one knows how, but Dumbledore said it had something to do with the Horcrux." Daphne said in a rush.

"I remember that. I thought I was going to die. I thought I was dead. I heard you talking to me sometimes. At least I think I did. It was all very confusing. Why are we here?"

"Because you're dead." Daphne said simply. Harry looked at her quite

confused. Daphne began giggling.

"Obviously you're not dead, but as far as the world is concerned, you are."

"I don't get it." Harry shook his head.

"Dumbledore thinks that Voldemort will stop hiding and they might be able to stop him if he thinks you're dead. So he got Sirius to bring you home. We'll be training and getting private lessons here."

"I don't think he'll stop hiding." Harry shook his head. He was trying to remember something important. He was still foggy from his long sleep. "I can't remember exactly, but something important happened before he killed me. I actually felt him through my scar. I haven't felt him there since the Ministry."

"Harry." Daphne said softly. Harry looked into her eyes. "I thought I had lost you. When Hagrid brought your body into the infirmary, I couldn't breathe. I was so worried when they took you, and when I saw your body..."

"I'm so sorry, Daphne. My last thought before the curse hit me was of you." Harry said. He pulled her into his arms and they sat embracing for a long time. Harry breathed in the scent of his girlfriend, committing this moment to memory. His heart was bursting with happiness and he felt tears stinging his eyes.

Daphne held onto the man she loved. The past three weeks had been a very trying ordeal. She had been at his side every moment she'd been allowed, and when Dumbledore explained his plan, she had been the first to ask to be allowed to join Harry. Now he was finally awake and back in her arms. She kissed him soundly until she needed air. Both teens sat staring into each others eyes, kissing lightly and just enjoying being reunited.

After a few hours in which the reunited lovers sat holding each other as if

they might disappear if the other let go, Sirius poked his head in and asked that Harry get dressed and they come to the dining room. After a quick shower and fresh clothes, Harry came down and joined Daphne and Sirius, and got another surprise.

"HARRY!"

Harry couldn't help smile at the sight of all his friends awaiting him. He was overcome with joy as nearly everyone he held dear stood before him.

"Neville!"

"Good to see you up again, mate." Neville smiled, clapping Harry on the shoulder.

"Tracey."

The blonde Slytherin girl embraced her friend warmly. "Never again." She said. "you hear me? I don't ever want to see her like that again."

"Hermione."

"It's about time. I'm so happy to see you up and about." The bushy haired girl grinned, tears falling from her happy brown eyes.

"Ron, Luna."

"Hey Harry." Ron said. He looked pale, but he smiled happily. Luna embraced Harry warmly.

"We're so glad you're alright." She smiled dreamily.

Remus Lupin shook Harry's hand, and Mad-Eye Moody clapped his shoulder. Sirius stood watching everyone and Daphne held on to Harry's arm as he greeted everyone in turn.

"Alright, everyone." Sirius called out. "Let's get some food on the table and we can fill in the boy on what's been going on while he's been so lazy." He grinned.

Lord Voldemort had never experienced such rage. He stared into the empty basin, clutching its marble side with his long skeletal fingers.

"Three. Three are gone." He spoke venomously to no one. He let out a howl of animalistic rage that echoed loudly off the cave walls.

He had finally been able to seek out another of his Horcruxes to find it too had been stolen. He now only had three left. One was safely hidden inside Hogwarts right under Dumbledore's nose, the next was inside Gringott's, within his loyal disciple, Bellatrix's own vault.

The past weeks had been a very intense. First the discovery of the theft of his Ring, then the killing of Harry Potter and the strangeness that followed. The revelation of Severus Snape as a traitor, and Potter's body being stolen.

But that hadn't been the most intriguing. No, what had astonished the Dark Lord was what had happened when he cast the killing curse. He had been blasted into the wall, and it felt as his blood had been on fire.

After the chaos had settled and he had sent his Death Eaters away, Voldemort made a discovery. His skin had been falling away and beneath it was new, unscarred skin. He was shedding, much like a snake did. His scars were now gone, and his coughing was no more.

Not that it mattered. He still wished to possess the Malfoy boy's body and had continued bonding his own magic to the boy's. He was closer to his goal now. He was angry at his gradually weakening state, but he no longer had to hide his face.

He was only hiding his lack of magical energy anymore. Soon, even that wouldn't matter.

But the loss of his precious Horcruxes was very problematic. He would have to collect the others. With the death of Harry Potter, The wizarding world was ready to fall. They had all foolishly put their hopes on the boy, and now that he was dead, they had nothing left to believe in. they would be like sheep to him.

Collecting the Cup would be easy. He would send Bellatrix to Gringott's and have her collect it. The Diadem would be the biggest problem.

Voldemort thought of his nemesis, Albus Dumbledore. His fingers curled around the empty basin and a faint smile came to his lipless mouth.

Perhaps it was time to take his birthright back. Perhaps he had waited long enough to begin his conquest. A low chuckle began in his throat.

"I will take Hogwarts for myself." the Dark Lord chuckled. "I will collect my armies and take the great school. And then, I will kill Albus Dumbledore myself."

His high cold cackle echoed throughout the deserted cave.

18. Chapter 18

Draco Malfoy sat staring out the window of his private room. He was flexing his fingers convulsively, feeling the magic course through his fingertips. He was angry. His ire had been growing ever since Potter's death.

Lord Voldemort had kept Draco close to his side. Draco had not been allowed to venture out with other Death Eaters, and it was really starting to irritate him. It was as if he were being sheltered, chained to the Dark Lord like a lap dog.

His power had been growing exponentially over the past month. He no longer felt exhausted whenever he received a boost of magic from his master. The power didn't fade as it used to. All Draco wanted now was to unleash his power on anyone who crossed him.

Draco still had a list of people he wanted to punish. With Potter gone now, that left Weasley, the Mudblood. They had to suffer for the years of humiliation he had been subjected to. Longbottom would feel his wrath just for being a fat slob and a blood traitor. That left the traitors. Davis, Zabini, and Greengrass.

They had betrayed their great house, and taken up with the Gryffindor Golden Boy. Now, they had to die for their crimes. Draco felt his magic pulsing within him as he thought of the pain he wanted to cause.

Draco thought of Greengrass. She was meant to be his, and now she had to die. He had longed for her since second year. Every year he had approached her, offering himself, and every year she had made a mockery of his advances. And then she had taken up with Potter.

He smiled softly to himself. He had born witness to Potter's death. He had never felt more satisfaction than when Potter was hit with the Killing curse. Draco had felt this strange sort of justice. The only way it could have been better is if he had done it himself. He was disappointed the he had been unable to play with Potter, but he still had Potter's followers.

That was of course if the Dark Lord ever let him out again. Draco couldn't explain it, but it seemed as if ever since Potter's death, The Dark Lord had kept an increasingly tight leash on his young follower. Draco wanted to lead the Death Eaters into battle, to hurt those who stood against his master. No matter how much he begged, Voldemort kept the young man at his side.

Draco began to wonder if it was for his master's protection. After Potter's death, the Dark Lord's body seemed to be healing, but his magic was almost non-existent. Draco wondered if there might have been something to what Potter had said before he was killed. Could the Dark Lord really be dying?

A thought began taking shape in Draco's mind. An idea. A wonderful, amazing idea. If the Dark Lord died, he, Draco, could step up and lead. His power was unmatched among the Death Eaters. It was as if he had twin cores of magic within him. His knowledge of Dark Magics had grown substantially and there was no one who could best him in a duel

anymore, The Dark Lord had seen to that.

"Perhaps it's time for a regime change." Draco smiled softly out his window.

He would be patient. He would begin laying the seeds of his eventual rise, and watch for an opportunity to speed up the process. Voldemort was old, and his power was waning. Draco was young, strong, and determined to shape this world in his master's image, but that image was his own now. Draco flexed his fingers, feeling his magic tingling in his fingertips. Let Voldemort continue forward with his war. When Draco had the advantage, he would take his master's throne for himself.

Harry felt more than a little irate. He was once again panting heavily as he stared at the ceiling of the training gym at his home. All around him were his friends, similarly splayed out, all out of breath and just as angry.

"That really was not fair." Ron sputtered.

"There is no fair in war, boy." Moody growled.

"I take it you were going easy on us, too?" Tracey remarked, finally sitting up, and dragging Neville up with her.

"Actually," Tonks chuckled. "We were. You haven't proven you can handle a full force attack."

"You're all sloppy." Moody snarled. "How you all survived Hogsmeade is beyond me."

"In case you don't recall," Harry said, as he got to his feet. "I didn't" His stern gaze made Moody smile a bit.

"That's right, Potter. You got yourself killed. Weasley nearly joined you. Unless you want to repeat that, but permanent, you all better step up." Moody grinned.

"Ok." Harry nodded. "You want us to step up, you got it."

"Oh no." Sirius groaned before the gym erupted in spells again. Unlike

other times, Harry and his friends began moving together. As two of them cast defensive shields, the others would fire various offensive spells. They were only fighting three people, but if they had learned anything from their defeat by Flitwick, it was that numbers counted for nothing. Harry concentrated on Moody, wanting to prove to the old Auror that he was indeed ready to fight for real. What Moody lacked in speed, he made up for in power. The old Auror's spells came in quick blasts, keeping Harry on his toes, but Harry was beginning to identify a weakness in the old Auror's style. His overconfidence in his years as a Dark Wizard catcher were beginning to get the better of him. All Harry had to do was find the chink in Moody's armor.

"You move fast boy." Moody snarled. "But fast isn't necessarily better."

"But it helps." Harry said as he rolled to his right as one of Moody's spells barely missed him. Harry smiled as he got to his feet and blasted Moody full in the chest with a Bludgeoning spell.

Anyone else would have been celebrating pulling one over on the Auror, but Harry had been subjected to far too many similar training sessions. Before Moody could get to his feet, Harry disarmed the man and bound him in magical bonds. He then turned his attention to his overly smug godfather.

Daphne, Hermione and Blaise were locked in battle with the newly reinstated Auror, Sirius Black. The man moved like lightning. He was quick, agile and seemingly a step ahead of the trio fighting him. Even Hermione, who was becoming very adept at using nonverbal spells, couldn't seem to get a drop on the man. To make matters worse, he kept taunting them.

"If you could get your mind off snogging my godson, you might be able to hit something." He grinned at Daphne, who was growing angrier. She

fired a series of jinxes, hoping to catch the Auror off guard, but Sirius simply side stepped them. He was nearly giddy from the exercise, until he saw Harry join the fray.

As Hermione and Blaise assaulted Sirius with a battery Confringos, Harry slipped a Confundus charm in which hit Sirius. Daphne finished hit the smug man with a full body bind, to which she added insult by hitting the man with a Bat-Bogey Hex.

Harry and the others turned to see that Tonks had been taken care of by Tracey, Ron, Neville, Luna and Susan.

"Well, I guess that's practice for today?" Harry grinned. From where he lay, still bound, Mad-Eye Moody began laughing.

"Finally they get it. From now on, that's how you fight. No going easy. It's all out, or nothing."

The students reluctantly released their teachers from their bonds. Sirius clapped Harry on the shoulder.

"Interesting choice of spells. A Confundus?"

"A confused opponent is easier to take down." Harry shrugged.

"Good one Potter. But there's something I'd like to ask you." Moody

lurched toward the younger man. "I've noticed you favor more destructive spells. I can't remember the last time you disarmed or even stunned."

Harry face went hard as he turned to watch his friends gathering, each one smiling and congratulating one another.

"Death Eaters show no mercy. They've taken so much, and we all know that the Ministry will just lock them up where Voldemort can break them out again. We agreed," Harry said, motioning to his friends. "To show no mercy when we have to face them."

"Aye, You do that boy, and we may actually win this damn war." Moody

gave a rare smile. "Now, get over there and say goodbye to that lady friend of yours."

"But she's not leaving until tomorrow."

"I know."

Realization dawned on Harry's face and he was gone, dragging a confused looking, but still smiling Daphne behind him. Moody watched him go, a powerful sense of pride in him. Moody was beginning to understand what others had always told him about the boy. It was true that the boy was selfless. But he inspired. He radiated confidence, even when it was evident he was lacking in it himself.

He fought with a fire that Moody himself had known when he was a much younger man, but Harry wasn't fighting for the same reasons as Moody had begun fighting. Harry fought for peace. Not just for the wizarding world, but for himself. Voldemort had haunted the young man for all his life, and it seemed to Moody and others, Harry now believed he could have a happy life. Thanks to Harry's friends, the boy was fighting for his chance for a happily ever after.

Moody nodded solemnly at the door the youngsters had left through.

Voldemort had no idea what he had gotten into.

"Severus. Severus, here. I believe it is here." Dumbledore shouted through the Room of Requirement. He stared with a sort of hypnotic awe at the old bust, wearing the dusty wig. Upon the matted, gray thing sat a glittering silver crown, with tiny silver ravens engraved in it.

It was not much more than spun silver rings braided together to form the most delicate of crowns. Its greatness now tainted by the evil that was pulsing off of it in waves.

"Albus?" Asked Severus Snape as he joined the headmaster, who was still staring at the lost diadem.

"I never once thought it would be this. How he found it..." Dumbledore trailed off.

"We must destroy them. We can not wait to find them all." Snape said.

"You are referring to Harry's warning that Voldemort is now aware someone is after his Horcruxes. I agree. We shall destroy all the ones we have tomorrow night."

"Christmas eve?" Snape looked strangely at the headmaster. "Strange choice."

"It will be the soonest I can collect the other two that I have hidden. Once they are vanquished we can focus on the snake. Then we must locate the cup of Hufflepuff. It will be the last of his accursed artifacts and we can then be rid of Voldemort at last." Dumbledore said softly.

The elder man reached up and reverently removed the Diadem from the broken sculpture and conjured a box in which he placed the tainted artifact. He closed the magical box and handed it to his defense teacher.

"Tonight, I think we shall enjoy a nice brandy in my office."

The two colleagues walked in silence through the castle back to the headmaster's office where Dumbledore poured two large glasses of Brandy, handing one to his companion.

"How do you plan to destroy them?" Snape asked, taking a sip of the fragrant liquid.

"Basilisk venom. We have collected quite a bit of it from the Chamber, and given it's effect on the diary, it does stand to reason that it will affect the others in the same manner."

"How can you be sure?" Snape asked, quirking an eyebrow. Dumbledore smiled, his light blue eyes gleaming with mirth.

"I suppose it would ease your mind if we tested it?" Dumbledore chuckled. He got up from his chair and opened a nearby cabinet, pulling

a small vial from it. He walked back to his desk where the Diadem sat locked in the magical box he'd conjured. With a flick of his wand, the box lid opened, and both men were overcome with a sense of dread.

"Strange." Dumbledore said softly.

"It's like it knows what's coming." Snape commented.

"Indeed. I think we should proceed with haste. This may become very...

Hmm... interesting." Dumbledore said as he uncorked the vial. The diadem began to shake violently in the box, clanking against the sides. A strange sound could be heard almost like a distant pleading cry.

"Quickly." Snape urged. Dumbledore tipped the vial of venom onto the glittering silver crown. There was a sizzling sound, followed by a resounding crack. The Headmaster's office was filled with a terrible gut wrenching scream of pain, and then silence. The air was filled with a acrid burnt flower odor. For a few moments there was nothing, not a sound, and then one by one, the portraits began questioning what they had just witnessed.

"Enough." Dumbledore said finally, silencing all the questions. "I believe we have just destroyed our first Horcrux." He said as he eased himself back into his seat.

"It seems so." Snape replied, still stunned. He stared at the open box where a now cracked and blacked diadem sat. There was no more negative energy coming off of it. It was no more frightening than a paper weight.

"I will collect the others and we shall destroy them tomorrow evening, together if you are willing." Dumbledore smiled.

"I will be present. I wish to see this through to the end." Snape nodded, finishing his brandy in one swallow. He stood swiftly and nodded curtly, leaving the headmaster in a swish of black cloak.

"I hate that you can't come home with me." Daphne said breathing softly as she watched her fingers lace with Harry's.

"As do I. But you heard Dumbledore. I'm supposed to be dead. Soon it'll be over and we can be free of all this subterfuge and just be normal."

"Not soon enough for me." Daphne smiled, tilting her head back and kissing his cheek.

Once again they were up in the lighthouse watching the night sky, and the falling snow. They snuck up here as often as they could. It was their special place, where they could be alone and undisturbed by anyone.

Moments like this had been precious few since Harry had awoken.

Dumbledore had put them into intense training and study. There sometimes felt like there was no time to even sleep. Sirius moody and Tonks had become very strict task masters, but the group had been making strides in their performance.

Now, on the eve of the holiday, Harry felt sad that his friends would be gone for a few weeks. He would have Sirius and Remus of course, but he wouldn't be able to join any of his friends. The world believed him dead, and it gave the Order an advantage over Voldemort, and it was one Dumbledore felt would be the deciding factor in the war's end.

"I can't even write you." Daphne complained.

"We've been apart before." Harry shrugged.

"I've never liked it. I miss you." She sat up, pulling away from him so she could see his face. He had an easy smile tonight, his green eyes sparkling even in the dim light of the night.

"What's wrong?" He asked.

"I haven't been sleeping well. I've got this strange feeling that bad things are going to happen."

"You really should have taken Divination." Harry smiled.

"It's not funny."

"I wasn't making light of it. I trust your instinct, and if you say something bad is going to happen, then I am going to be extra careful." Harry assured her. He drew her back into his arms and she sighed.

"I want to be with you. When you're alone, you get hurt."

"that's not true. Not always." Harry chuckled, wrapping her tightly in his arms.

"No not always, but if you get hurt, It's usually when I'm not around." She said, looking up at him. He seemed to think about it, and a small smile broke out.

"I've got Sirius and Remus to watch my back. I promise you, I won't do anything to get myself hurt. I'll even let Dobby open my presents so I can't even get a paper cut."

"You're being ridiculous, now." Daphne said, swatting his arm.

"I'm trying to ease your mind. I don't want trouble, and I'm not going to look for it. I'm safe here. I'm more worried about all of you guys. I know you can all take care of yourselves, but I'd feel better if I was with you. Besides, I really feel bad for not coming with you. I promised your father I'd be there for Christmas."

"I think he'll forgive you when it's all over."

"We were supposed to have a long talk." Harry said softly. Daphne perked up.

"About what?"

"My intentions." Harry said as he began stroking the girl's silky hair. He stared into her deep brown eyes, losing himself in their soft, loving stare.

"What are your intentions, Harry?" She asked a bit shyly. Her hands, which were resting comfortably on his hard chest began to ball up, clutching the front of his shirt tightly. She watched him smile, feeling

her pulse quicken.

"I want you with me, for life. I want to finish school and then I want to see the world. I want you by my side the entire way. I want to figure out what I want to do with my career, and then I want to marry you. I want a big house and kids, maybe even a dog. A real dog, one that doesn't become a dopey looking godfather."

Daphne had soft tears falling down her face. She pulled herself up and kissed the boy soundly.

"That sounds nice." She smiled.

"It's not a proposal. I want to do it right. Really romantic. But, now you know my intentions. When this is all over, all I want is to spend the rest of my life with you at my side." Harry smiled, kissing the dark haired girl soundly.

Daphne curled up into a small ball against Harry. She couldn't stop thinking about what he'd just admitted. He wanted her, for the rest of his life. She knew it wasn't a proposal, but it may as well have been as far as she was concerned. The picture he'd painted with his words had been so wonderful. She closed her teary eyes and let out a long contented sigh. She had no idea what was on the horizon, or if she was even going to survive the coming reckoning, but she had the greatest reason to fight. Harry and Daphne were going to fight for the dream they both shared of a life together.

"Well, Hermione, Are you nervous?" Tracey asked her friend, who was doing some last minute packing.

"Nervous?" She asked, shrugging slightly.

"You are going to be seeing Justin for the first time since we all were taken out of Hogwarts. I know you've been writing him, but it's not the same. You guys haven't had a chance to build up that physical repaire."

"I know, but I'm not terribly concerned. It's been nice getting to know each other through letters. It worked for Harry and Daphne, maybe Lightning can strike twice."

"But you're not Daphne or Harry. You can't believe that things will work out for you and Justin, just because it did for Harry and Daphne."

"I know that." Hermione countered angrily. "But I can hope. The truth is, I don't have a lot of luck with boys. Justin is so great. He's patient, and sweet, and funny, and he's perfect for me. I don't want to mess things up. It's difficult enough with how things are right now. I'm lying to him about where I am and Harry and everything."

"I'm sure when it's over he'll understand." Tracey smiled gently. "I want you to be happy, Hermione, I do."

"So what am I supposed to do?" The bushy haired girl asked.

"Be your self. Follow your heart. Let it tell you what to do. When you see him, do what feels right, and don't question it, or try and reason through it."

"Is that how you and Neville are?" Hermione smirked playfully.

"Somewhat. I think Neville is still trying to reason out why I chose him."

"Thanks, Tracey." Hermione smiled. "I've been really nervous about seeing him."

"I know. Just remember, you're a fantastic witch and an extremely beautiful woman. He's lucky to have you." Tracey grinned. "Maybe you'll be really lucky and you won't have to ask him to spank you, he'll just do it."

"ARRGH!" Hermione screamed hurling her pillow at Tracey, who was laughing hard.

Remus Lupin was staring out the window of his bedroom. There was a fresh layer of snow on the ground, and the ocean could be heard crashing

against the shore. His face was fixed in concentration and his nostrils flared with every breath. He was sniffing at the air.

"Remus?" Tonks asked, coming to his side. The young Auror had convinced the older man that they could weather anything so long as they were together. Sirius had helped the woman's side of the argument by pointing out that Remus deserved to be happy, and Harry might have something to say about it.

Not wanting the young man to be aware of his romantic situation, Remus gave in and had not regretted it since. Tonks was a wonderful woman, she never stopped making him smile. She was witty, and sassy, and kept him on his toes. But she had a very kind side to her. She was almost empathic. She could read his moods easily, such as now.

"What is it?" She asked, wrapping her long, loving arms around him from behind. He could smell her soap, and the dampness of her freshly washed skinned.

"Something is coming. I can smell it on the wind." Remus said, not turning away from the window.

"What?"

"I don't know. But it won't be good. Separating them now seems like a bad idea."

"Remus, they need to see their families." Tonks said kindly. She moved herself in front of him, and he couldn't help but smile. She wore only a towel from her shower, and a very playful expression.

"Would you have us lock them away until we needed them? Seems kind of manipulative."

"Isn't that what we're doing anyway? Training them for slaughter?"

Remus countered. Tonks face fell.

"You're in another one of your moods." She sighed. "I had hoped..."

"I know what you hoped, and it's possible. I just have this feeling, Dora."

He looked at her, lifting her chin to look into her eyes. She had assumed her natural look. She had soft brown eyes, and shoulder length mousy brown hair. It was not a look she liked, but he adored it. Remus knew why she hid herself behind a virtual forest of glamours and alterations. Tonks had never liked what she looked like, and had always enjoyed being able to change her appearance at will. Never once had she let down her guard so completely, and he wasn't going to let her regret it.

"I know their stronger together, and I just have this feeling their going to be tested."

"They are strong together, but they're strong together because they are strong individually. We don't give them enough credit. They can only learn so much hidden here with us. Until they really fight, where they know there's no time out, or safety wards in place, they're never going to truly understand."

"But they have fought like that. At Hogsmeade."

"You see, My point is proven. They are strong." Tonks winked. "How many fully qualified wizards do you know that could have fought, and protected the village until help arrived like that? They saved so many lives that day. Now there better prepared. We have to let them go or we're no better than the dark wizards we're teaching them to fight against. They need to be reminded what they're fighting for."

Remus sighed, kissed Tonks gently, caressing her soft cheek.

"You are so right. I am truly blessed to have you by my side, Dora." He smiled sweetly.

"Why don't you show me how lucky you are?" Tonks smiled coyly as she unwrapped her towel. "oops." She grinned.

With a feral growl, Remus swept Tonks into his arms and carried her to

their bed, kissing her passionately the whole way.

19. Chapter 19

Ron tried to steady his breathing. He was panting hard, and his stomach pulsed with pain from where the Death Eater had kicked him. Ron spit blood onto the fresh snow, raising his head finally to once again stare coldly at the red eyes of Draco Malfoy.

Ron again wondered at the change in his former schoolmate. He was still thin, hair still sleek and well styled, but his eyes were no longer steel gray. They had become a sickly looking red, not unlike the color of the blood he had just spit onto the ground.

"Had enough yet, Weasel King?" Draco sneered at the young man before him.

"Ron, I'm begging you to stay quiet." Molly Weasley begged her youngest son. Ron nodded slowly. He realized he wasn't going to help his family escape by mouthing off to his captors. He needed to think this through.

"Damn." Malfoy said sarcastically. "I was hoping to beat you some more."

"Why are you doing this?" Arthur Weasley asked. He and his family were being held on their knees at wand point. There were two Death Eaters per Weasley member. Draco was taking no chances with this. He had been granted a special privilege, and he intended to see it through, as it was dear to his heart, taking out the blood traitor family.

Ron watched as Malfoy paced in front of him and his family. He looked at his parents, who were a mix of cold fear and defiance against their captors. Ginny who looked as if she were barely controlling her rage. Fred and George looked as if they were just waiting for an opening. Their eyes were searching, calculating. Bill was trying to soothe his fiancée, Fleur Delacour, who Ron was still surprised to see. And then there was Percy.

Percy had arrived early that morning, bearing gifts and apologies. He was a broken man when he had arrived. He had seen the error of his ways, blaming his pride and his ambition for his actions. After an hour of threats, a few punches, and a lot of crying, Percy was welcomed home. Throughout the day, Ron kept thinking how far Percy would have to go for true forgiveness, but even he could see that the once pompous boy was truly trying to make amends. He had not had much time in which to talk with his brother, but Ron knew that he and Percy would eventually have a long talk about things, and Ron was happy to wait. He more than anyone knew that change didn't happen overnight.

And so, Christmas day had gone on, with the Weasley's sharing gifts, and laughs. Molly had out done herself with dinner, and the entire family had been sitting together around the fire, when the first explosion had shaken the house.

Bill had been the first out, shouting for the family to get out, to get to safety. Of course, none had listened. They weren't about to abandon their home. That had been their mistake. It seemed for every Death Eater they took down, two more appeared. Finally, they had all been disarmed, and dragged before a very happy Draco Malfoy.

Ron had begun taunting the boy, only to be beaten savagely for his comments. Ron's anger was growing with each and every blow he suffered, but he had finally been able to contain his mouth.

"Well, well, little Weaslette." Draco smiled as he caressed Ginny's cheek. The youngest Weasley child looked ready to be sick at the attention.

"You've turned into quite a beautiful young woman. Perhaps this family isn't so worthless after all. I think I might spare you for a while so I might enjoy you."

"I would rather be boiled in stink sap." Ginny replied malevolently.

Draco's face contorted with rage. He clutched her face hard, the two Death Eaters behind her held her struggling arms tightly. Draco reached out and touched a cold index finger to her cheek, sliding it down slowly. Ginny felt as if Draco were dragging a red hot blade along her cheek. She could smell her own flesh burning, and feel hot blood on her face. She bite her lip to keep from screaming, but Draco smiled as he heard her whimper. She looked up and saw Draco lift a thin strip of flesh from her face and place it in a pouch on his belt.

"This could have been easy for you." He said, bending low to whisper in her ear. "It could have been nice, but you had to open your big fat mouth. Now, I'm going to cause you such pain, you'll be begging me for death. When I'm finished with you, I'll hand you over to others to do as they please, and I assure you they will not be as pleasant as I."

"You're pathetic, Malfoy." Bill said angrily. "You're nothing without your bodyguards."

"Excuse me?" Draco looked up. "Do you think the Dark Lord would trust me if I were truly pathetic, as you say?" Draco rushed over to the curse breaker, kicking him hard.

"Let's find out what your woman says when I finish with her, shall we?"

"You're proving my point. You couldn't best any of us in a fair fight, so you come here with an army, and for what? There's no glory to be gained, no power. You're just as weak as your father had been. You'll end up in prison, or dead." Bill said, as he spat at Malfoy's feet.

"You believe I couldn't best you?" Malfoy asked, arching an eyebrow menacingly. "Give him his wand." Draco screamed. "Let him face me. Let's find out who is the better man."

Bill began to stand, reaching for his wand being offered by the largest of the Death Eaters.

"AVADA KEDAVRA!" Draco shouted, firing off the killing curse at Bill Weasley, who fell to the ground, stone dead.

"NOOO!" Both Fleur and Molly Weasley shouted, while Draco laughed maniacally.

"You bastard!" Ginny glared hard, tears streaking from her eyes.

"He obviously wasn't fast enough to fight me." Draco laughed. "Who's next?"

Ron shot forward. He tackled Malfoy to the ground, punching, scratching, and kicking at every piece of Malfoy he could reach. Fred and George, taking advantage of the distraction, had thrown a bag onto the ground which exploded in a cloud of black. Fred took hold of Fleur, while George took hold of Ginny and Molly. Percy launched himself into the big man who held the wands, taking hold of the precious sticks as he got to his feet.

Ron saw red as he continued pounding into Draco's soft flesh, never letting up until he felt himself pulled away. Percy had taken hold of him and was dragging him bodily towards the black cloud. Ron heard Fred and George calling to them, but all he wanted was to continue beating Draco into pulp.

"Take him." Percy called to his brothers. He shoved the family's wands into Ron's pocket, keeping his own. Ron heard his father making a portkey, and he felt George and Fred taking his arms.

There were several bright green flashes, and then everything began to spin away.

Ron felt himself hit the ground, and rolled onto his feet ready to fight some more. He looked around to see the familiar iron gates of his school.

He turned to see Ginny, blood pouring from her face and tears falling from her eyes. His sister was being comforted by his mother, who was

grieving herself.

Fred and George were holding up their father, who looked white as a sheet. Fleur was sitting in the snow, sobbing uncontrollably.

"Where's Percy?" Ron asked. He saw his father look up, and for the first time in his life, he saw his father begin to cry.

"He...He stayed behind. I think he was hit just before the Portkey activated. He's dead."

Ron felt himself fall to the ground. His heart felt as if it had stopped beating. A matter of minutes was all it had taken to destroy what had been the best Christmas he'd ever known. His family had been whole, and he had truly realized how blessed he was, seeing his family together.

Now it was gone. Bill and Percy had fallen, and Ron hung his head, trying to remain strong, but his eyes filled with hot tears, and his rage built to a furious pique, until Ron threw his head back and loosed a primal scream of agony. His family looked on, each feeling his pain, and suffering in their own way.

Not one of them noticed the arrival of Severus Snape.

She had never in her life felt as she did at this moment. She had read it in many books, but not once had she experienced it herself. Yet, here, in his arms, with his lips pressed against her own, Hermione Granger finally understood what poets, songwriters, authors, and even her dorm mates had tried to put into words. She was in love.

It had started innocently enough. Justin's mother had hung Mistletoe all over the house, and sure enough, Justin unwittingly found himself under it. Hermione had not been able to resist the opportunity, and surprised herself, and Justin, when she kissed him. But what was really a surprise was when he kissed her back.

She had seen fireworks, and felt electricity in her veins. She couldn't

break away from him, and had deepened the kiss. He held her close, losing himself in her, as she lost herself in him.

Finally, Hermione pulled back, and they both took deep gulps of air, all while staring into each other's eyes.

"Whoa, mama!" Justin finally exclaimed. This statement broke them into giggles. Hermione rested her head on his shoulder as she laughed.

"Well, had I but known..." She began. Justin simply nodded his agreement. They made their way to the sofa, where they sat together in comfortable silence. Ever since she'd arrived, there had been this strange sort of tension between them, which had evaporated when she had kissed him. Justin held her to him as they sat, staring into the fire.

"I've wanted to kiss you for a long time." he finally said softly.

"I don't know what came over me, but it seemed like the right thing to do." She reasoned.

"I'm glad you did. I don't know if I would have been able to pluck up my courage."

Hermione giggled softly, nestling against him. "I've really missed you this past month. I know we've written, but it's not the same."

"I know you said you couldn't tell me anything, but if I can help..."

Hermione turned to him, a small smile on her lips. "If you can help, I will ask you to help. I promise. Things have been tough, but I will be fine. I promise."

"When are you coming back to school?" Justin asked.

"I don't know. When Dumbledore feels we're ready, I guess." Hermione knew what Justin was going to ask. She was sure that Hogwarts had talked of little more than Harry's death and where she and the others had disappeared to.

Hermione was torn. She wanted to tell him everything. Explain that

Harry was alive and well, and that she and her friends were being trained for war. But she couldn't. Telling Justin put herself and her friends at risk, including this boy whom she was falling for.

"Can we not talk about any of this?" She asked. Justin smiled and nodded.

Hermione kissed him softly, and settled against him once again.

"What are you going to do when school is over?" She asked.

"Oh, I have an idea." Justin smiled. "I talked with my parents about it not long ago and they think it's a great idea. I'm going to go to medical school after Hogwarts. I'm going to combine the wizarding world and the muggle world, and become a holistic healer."

Hermione looked up, a bit surprised. Justin was smiling brightly back.

"Really?"

"Yes." Justin nodded. "I was thinking about it one day, and I got to wondering why wizards don't help muggles more. I know about the statute for secrecy and all that, but I thought that if I go to muggle medical school, and then set up my own practice as a holistic healer, I can use everything I know in magic to help sick people. I'll have to be very careful, obviously, but I don't want to abandon my muggle roots."

"That actually makes a lot of sense." Hermione nodded. "Muggles will think you're kooky, but they won't question it when your methods make them feel better."

"I was talking to a few people and they all said that we muggleborns pretty much abandon our roots when we leave school. I don't know why we don't take what we've learned to better both worlds." Justin shrugged.

Hermione began thinking to herself. She had been leaning towards a career in the ministry, hoping to affect change for magical creatures, such as werewolves and house elves, but now, Justin had made sense. Why couldn't she try to help muggleborns who couldn't get a fair shake in the

wizarding world. There needed to be an end to all the pure blood mania that had ruled the wizarding world for so long.

"I'd like to help, if I can." Hermione said. Justin gave her a squeeze.

"It's kind of up to me." He said. "I have to reintegrate myself into muggle school, and do my best to keep magic hidden. I'm actually looking forward to it."

"Sounds like fun."

"What about you?" Justin asked. "What are your plans?"

"Magical law. There are too many cracks in our system that wicked people exploit. It's how people like Malfoy got away with so much. Even us muggleborns don't get a fair shake in the magical world. I want to make things better for us, more equal."

"Well, if anyone can do that, it'll be you."

"I'll have help, I'm sure."

They sat together on the sofa for another hour. It was one of the nicest times Hermione had ever had. She had often enjoyed herself at the Weasleys, and really learned a lot while staying with Daphne, but she felt accepted here. She was just Hermione with Justin's family.

Justin's family came from a long line of ship builders. Justin's great great grandfather had started a ship building company that had remained one of the very best in all the world to this day. It was traditional for the firstborn male to take over the company, but given Justin's unique situation, his younger brother would be taking the reigns. It had been tense for awhile, Justin had told her, but eventually, Justin's father and mother understood, and accepted his decision.

Hermione had loved Justin's parents. They were not too different from her own parents, and Hermione looked forward to introducing them all at some point. She had seen her parents for two days when the holiday

began, and then had come to see Justin, while her parents had gone to France to ski. Hermione had never cared much for skiing, and had not regretted her decision. In fact, the moment she saw Justin's warm, smiling face, she had known she had made the right choice.

As Hermione sat down to Christmas dinner with the Finch-Fletchleys, Death Eaters surrounded the empty Granger house and proceeded to burn it to the ground.

Tracey Davis was filled with a strange mixture of humility and pride. She was standing next to Neville Longbottom, a man whom she had fallen in love with over the past year. A man whom she had grown with and experienced so much happiness. Before her lay the parents of her truest love.

Neville had asked her to join him for his annual visit to St. Mungo's to visit with his mother and father. She had not hesitated in saying yes. So now she stood in the Permanent Spell Damage ward as Neville introduced her to his parents, who both were staring off into space. She could feel Neville's sadness, and his despair as he talked to his parents. She knew that he loved his parents, but always felt a sense of loss. He still had his parents, but they may as well have been dead.

Neville had even admitted once that he wished they were, only so they wouldn't be suffering anymore. He had told her it was selfish to feel like that, but he felt it would be better for them.

Tracey had agreed. They were missing everything in life, trapped inside their own minds without the ability to function to do even the simplest tasks. Still, she had to applaud his devotion to his parents. He came every holiday, without fail, to visit his parents. Tracey found it strange when Mrs. Longbottom handed several empty bubblegum wrappers to Neville, who smiled gratefully and shoved them in his pocket.

Neville explained that he had kept every gum wrapper she had ever given him, because it was the only thing he ever got from her. He felt a strange sort of gratitude that she could even give him something so trivial.

Tracey now understood why Neville had been so shy and withdrawn for so many years. Tracey had spent part of the summer with Neville and his grandmother, and had witnessed how Augusta Longbottom had more or less chastised him at every turn. The woman put the weight of the world on Neville's shoulders, and gave him no praise when he did good work. When Neville had received his OWLs, his grandmother had berated him for not doing better, even though he had received Outstanding in several topics that had been very difficult for him. Tracey wondered how Neville had survived long enough to actually attend Hogwarts, without joining his parents.

"Thank you for coming to see them with me." Neville said softly, breaking Tracey out of her reverie.

"Of course. I'm glad you asked." She smiled. She clutched his hand in both of hers, and he gave a small smile.

"I always feel sad when I leave here. I wish I could talk to them, and have them actually respond. Sometimes I think that I can see that they're aware of me. Like they want to speak, but somehow they just can't."

"There's nothing wrong with that. You're still hopeful they'll come out of it."

"It's a dream. I know it'll never happen. But somehow, I can't let go of it." he said, as he gave his mother's hand a light squeeze. The woman didn't even notice. Neville heaved a heavy sigh, and Tracey wrapped her arms tightly around him. She had never felt as helpless as she did listening to him now. She had always been able to make him smile, no matter the circumstances. Even when Harry was missing, she had been able to get

Neville to smile, even if for just a moment. But here, in front of Neville's greatest heartache, she didn't even attempt to try. This was part of his life, and she wanted to experience it all with him, because she loved him. "We should get back." Neville said. He bent forward and kissed his mother's cheek. He turned to say goodbye to his father when Tracey saw it. Neville's mother's eyes focused on Tracey, and there was the barest hint of a smile on her lips. Tracey could feel something. It was as if Mrs. Longbottom had just given her approval of Tracey and Neville. Tracey reached out and took Mrs. Longbottom's hand and gave a grateful squeeze. Before Neville could see, Tracey let go and waited for her boyfriend to finish his goodbyes. She was overwhelmed by what she had witnessed, or believed she had witnessed. Neville's mother giving her blessing of the young woman and her son being together, and a feeling of gratefulness that Tracey was there for Neville. But perhaps there had been nothing, and Tracey was only imagining it.

Tracey couldn't think of any reason that dream could be bad.

Daphne Greengrass stared out the window of her bedroom. She had truly enjoyed her Christmas with her family. She had received many truly nice gifts, but there had been the looks from her mother and father, and even her sister. Pity.

Her family still believed that Harry had died, and Daphne could not tell them the truth. So she had to play the sad young woman, which wasn't that hard. She did miss Harry. He was supposed to be there with her, but his "untimely death" now prevented it.

Dinner had been a subdued event, as hardly anyone spoke. Daphne couldn't remember a quieter dinner. Astoria had tried to start conversation, but their parents always stopped it.

After dinner, Daphne had excused her self to her room where she could

be alone. Now she stared out at the fresh blanket of snow, wondering how her other friends were, and how Harry's holiday was. She still had another week before she would see him again. She couldn't even write to him, in case the letter was intercepted.

"Daphne?"

Daphne turned to see her younger sister in the doorway.

"Yeah, Tori?"

"Are you alright? I mean, I know that you lost Harry, and all, and no one's expecting you to bounce back, but, are you ok?"

"I'm a little confused. If you're asking how I am, I don't really have an answer. I still feel numb." Daphne lied. Astoria stepped inside the bedroom.

"I didn't know Harry that well. In fact, I didn't know him at all. But I've watched him with you, and it seems to me that he'd be a little angry with you."

"What do you mean?" Daphne asked curiously.

"Harry seemed like the type that would be upset that you're mourning him. Like he'd want you to get on and try and find some kind of happiness. I don't think he'd expect you to be as happy as you were with him, but a different type of happiness, you know?"

"I think so. You think Harry would want me to stop being sad, and get on with my life?"

"Exactly. I'm sure he'd understand you taking time, but eventually, he'd be screaming at you to let it go. I know you loved him, and I think we all did in a way. Me, Mom and Dad didn't get the chance to know him like you did, but he was always nice, and he made dad embarrass himself, so I loved him. But he's gone now, and we can't do anything to bring him back. I've really missed you and Tracey, and I want you to come back to

school."

Daphne felt tears in her eyes. She had missed her sister as well, but she couldn't come back to school, not yet. She and the others were training to end the war, and she couldn't tell anyone.

"I can't come back. Not yet. I still have some things to work out, Tori. But hopefully soon. I promise."

"Will you think about what I said?" Astoria asked, her face was concerned, and worried over her older sister.

"I will, everyday. You're right. I do need to be happy, and Harry would be upset if I didn't try."

"Good. I'll leave you be, but I just want you to know that I love you."

"I love you, too." Daphne smiled as her sister left. She had forgotten how sweet Astoria could sometimes be. She felt bad that she was missing her sister growing up at school. She wasn't there to help her out when Astoria needed her. Daphne tried to comfort herself by remembering that she was training to fight so that Astoria and everyone else could finally know peace.

Daphne turned back to the window, staring out at the snow. She wanted to run down and tell her parents that Harry was alive and well, and she was with him, and she was safe. But she had sworn secrecy. No one could know.

As she stared out the window, she saw something that chilled her. A group of dark robed people moving closer to her house. She picked up her wand and ran down the stairs calling for her family.

"What is it?" Her father asked coming out of his study.

"Death Eaters, coming up the walk." Daphne said hurriedly.

"How did they find us?" Daphne's mother asked, looking to her husband.

"I don't know, but we need to get out of here. Now."

Daphne ran back up the stairs, and grabbing her sister, returning back to the study where her mother and father were waiting.

"We can't go back to our house in London. They know where that is."

Cyrus said frantically.

"Should we go to the cottage?" Aurora asked, wrapping a scarf around her neck. "We'll be out of the country."

There was a loud crash followed by howls of laughter and the shrieking voice of a woman calling for Daphne. All the Greengrass' turned to Daphne who looked quite puzzled.

"We have to go, now." Aurora said. Daphne lunged towards the fireplace and through a fistful of floo powder into the flames. She grabbed her sister and shoved her into the fireplace, telling her where to go. In a flash of green flame, Astoria disappeared.

The shouts and taunts were growing closer, and Daphne pushed her mother toward the fireplace, repeating the destination to her mother. Her father followed. Daphne stepped into the fireplace screaming out "The Beacon!"

Just before she felt herself engulfed in magical flame, she saw the unmistakable countenance of Bellatrix LeStrange burst into the study, firing a spell at the fireplace.

Daphne spilled out onto the hardwood floor of the dining room of her boyfriend's home, where her mother, father and sister, were still trying to right themselves. She was on her feet quickly, and began calling for help. She was unsurprised to see Sirius enter the dining hall, asking what had happened.

"Our home was attacked." Aurora explained as she and her husband finally got to their feet.

"They found us. I don't know how, but they found us." Cyrus said angrily.

"Did they hear where you flooded to?" Sirius asked, pulling his wand.

"I don't think so." Daphne said, helping Astoria sit down. The younger girl looked quite scared.

"Damn." Sirius said, waving his wand at the fireplace, closing off the floo.

"I'll be back. I've got to make sure all the fireplaces are closed.

"What's going on here?" Remus Lupin asked as he entered the dining hall.

"Daphne?"

"Death Eaters." She said softly.

"Daphne?"

The dark haired girl launched herself out of her chair and into the waiting arms of the messy haired boy. She felt whole once again now that his arms were around her.

"This can't be..." Cyrus Greengrass stammered.

"You can't be real. Is this a trap?" Aurora questioned.

"I knew it." Astoria grinned.

Daphne stepped aside and the boy who she'd greeted so warmly, smiled brightly.

"You can't always believe what you read." Harry Potter said smugly.

20. Chapter 20

"You two have some explaining." Cyrus Greengrass sputtered.

"You're supposed to be dead. The paper said you died, and we got letters from the girls." Aurora Greengrass said. Her hands were covering her mouth and she had tears in her eyes.

"Maybe you should sit down." Harry urged. "this is kind of a long story."

"Perhaps I'll make some tea." Remus smiled, bustling off to the kitchen.

"I came very close to dying." Harry began, "I am very lucky to be alive. I can't explain it, partly because I don't understand it myself. Suffice to say that Voldemort made a mistake when he originally tried to kill me. He

unwittingly corrected that mistake when he tried again."

"How did you survive?" Astoria asked curiously.

"I don't know if I can explain it properly. Part of Voldemort's soul got trapped in me the first time he tried to kill me. It's how I was able to see in his head sometimes, and how he got me to the Department of Mysteries last year. When he cast the killing curse it killed the soul fragment in me. That's how I survived."

"But the papers, and the letters?" Aurora began.

"Dumbledore thought it wise to pretend Harry was dead. It was supposed to make Voldemort braver and come out into the open." Daphne said. "I think Dumbledore was going to confront him, but he's been very quiet, until tonight at least."

"I want to know how they found us. That house isn't listed in any records." Cyrus ranted.

"Perhaps a trace on Astoria." Sirius said joining the group.

"I don't believe you all have actually met." Harry grinned. "Sirius Black, meet Cyrus and Aurora Greengrass."

"It is indeed a pleasure." Sirius bowed. He turned to Harry. "Dumbledore won't be coming. There was an incident at the Weasley's. He said to stay here unless we get attacked, but he seemed confident we'd be okay."

"You said a trace?" Cyrus asked. "Are you talking about the trace?"

"Yes. We had Daphne's removed along with several others, so they might practice and learn while they were here. But Astoria still has it on her. Death Eaters have infiltrated the Ministry, though we're unsure who and where. Obviously they got into the DMLE so they could track down certain people. We've actually been waiting for this."

"We knew Voldemort would want to take out Harry's friends, as they might still pose a threat to him. They could rally people around Harry's

memory, making him a martyr."

"Why all this secrecy?" Cyrus asked.

"Dad, We're training to fight him." Daphne said gently.

"You're what?" Cyrus roared. He stood up, glaring at Harry. "What have you gotten us into?"

"Dad. It was my choice." Daphne tried.

"You were supposed to protect her, and keep her out of all this." Cyrus raged.

"Mr. Greengrass." Harry said forcefully. Cyrus turned to stare at the young man. "You know as well as I do, there is no stopping Daphne when she makes up her mind. She chose to come with me to the department of mysteries last year. She chose to stand up and fight for what she believes in. All I could do is make her aware of what she would be facing. She knows the risks. All I can do now is to make sure she knows enough to fight well, and protect herself."

"Mom, Dad," Daphne said gently. "You raised me to make my choices knowing all the consequences. I have weighed my decision carefully. This is the right thing to do. I want to be by Harry's side when the time comes."

Cyrus sat down heavily, he rubbed his face frantically before speaking again.

"You've grown up right before my eyes, yet I still see my little girl." he sighed deeply.

"I'll always be your little girl." Daphne smiled softly, embracing her father. "But I am growing up, and part of that is making choices and following through. I know what might happen, and I know what we're fighting for. No matter what happens, I don't regret my choice."

There was a long silence before anyone spoke again. Daphne's mother

had watched the entire scene with proud tears in her eyes. She got to her feet and wrapped her arms around her daughter and husband, whispering how proud she was of Daphne.

"If you all would excuse us, I would like to speak with Harry, alone."

Cyrus said quietly.

"I'll show them to the library." Sirius said. Daphne and her mother and sister followed the tall former fugitive out of the dining hall, leaving Cyrus and a slightly nervous Harry.

"You have really shaken up my family dynamic, young Potter." Cyrus began. "Both of my daughters have changed dramatically since you came into their lives."

"It was never my intention, sir."

"It never is. Love makes us do strange things. You promised me a conversation, and given the circumstances, I believe we are past do for that conversation."

"Oh, yes." Harry felt himself going red. "The conversation."

"I assume you've though more on the topic?"

Harry noticed that Cyrus seemed to have aged another twenty years right before his eyes. The stress of the situation had really affected the man.

Harry felt sorry that anyone would have to be put through not only the deceptions, but the war at all.

"I have. Every time I look at Daphne I think about it. I want to finish school, sir. I want to find a career, and I want to get married and have a family. Maybe I'm to young to think about that sort of thing, especially since I'm still a marked man, but there it is."

"It's not a bad thing. To want a future, a family. You have seen things and done things that have made you wise beyond your years. It's not terrible to think of your future."

"I'd like Daphne to be a part of it. I'd like to marry her one day."

"I've been waiting for you to say that. I saw it in your eyes that last time we spoke. It was the same look I had when I realized I wanted to marry Aurora."

"I don't want to rush things. I want to finish school, and Voldemort."

"Very wise to eliminate your obstacles first. I expect that when you are ready, you will come ask my permission first." Cyrus eyed Harry carefully. Harry nodded, and reached out his hand. Cyrus shook it and Harry suggested they join the others.

Harry couldn't help feeling happy. He had all but gained Cyrus' permission to marry Daphne one day. Harry thought how nice this Christmas was turning out to be.

Molly Weasley had to be put to sleep. She had been hysterical with grief. Her husband sat by her side, holding her hand, watching his children, who were gathered around Ginny's bed. She was sleeping fitfully, a bandage over her cheek. Madam Pomfrey had tried to heal her cheek, but the spell Draco had used made it difficult. She had been able to stop the bleeding, but Ginny would have a scar for the rest of her life.

Fred and George sat on either side of her bed in silent vigil. Neither boy spoke. They simply watched their sleeping sister with anger etched on their faces. In a bed next to Ginny's, Fleur Delacour was resting fitfully. Arthur Weasley watched the girl with sad empathy. The young woman had been engaged to his first born and watched the boy killed in front of her. Arthur sighed sadly. His family had finally suffered loss to this war. Ron had left the infirmary and gone up to Gryffindor tower. He got there and realized he didn't know the password, and took to wandering the castle. He found himself on top of the astronomy tower. He stared out over the grounds thinking of all that had happened.

First there was Percy's return, and how good it felt to have nearly his whole family together again. They had joked and teased each other just like when he was younger.

And then he had witnessed his oldest brother murdered by his greatest school rival. Draco Malfoy had killed Bill with no remorse or pity. Bill hadn't even taken back his wand to duel the lying rat.

Ron felt tears burning his eyes, but he tried to fight them. He hadn't cried since he was very little. His brothers had toughened him by teasing him. He had forced himself not to cry because he had felt his brother had won every time he cried.

But tonight, looking over the school grounds, with the memories of Bill being killed, and Percy dead as well, so soon after he had rejoined the family, he couldn't stop it. Anger boiled in him hotter and hotter with every tear that escaped his blue eyes.

Ron gripped the wall of the tower, trying to control his breathing, but it was useless. With a deep intake of breathe, Ron let out a deep primal scream of pain. Ron fell to his knees, tears falling freely.

"I wish I had words of comfort for you." Severus Snape said softly, coming from the shadows. Ron wiped at his eyes furiously.

"Do not be ashamed of your grief." Snape said, kneeling beside Ron. "Use it. Turn it into something you can use. Keep it locked away until you face those responsible, and then unleash it."

Ron looked up at the sallow face of his defense professor. He saw what Harry had often told him was there, hidden beneath the mask of the loathsome professor. In those black eyes of the most hated professor in Hogwarts entire history, was a deep sadness. Snape truly understood what Ron felt, because he too had experienced a great loss.

Ron stood, as did Snape. Ron heaved a sigh and wiped his eyes again.

"You should be with the rest of your family, they need your strength."

Snape said and turned to leave. Ron took several deep breaths to calm himself. Snape made sense, Ron decided. He would harness his anger and his hatred and save it for when he needed it. He would focus it into the coming fight, and he would avenge his brothers, even if he died trying. He hoped that he would have the chance to face Draco himself. Then he would show that prancing ferret once and for all who was the better man.

Susan Bones sat wrapped in Blaise's arms in front of a roaring fire. Blaise had come that afternoon for Christmas dinner at Susan's parents invitation. The young lovers had excused themselves after dinner while the adults continued their discussions. Susan wanted to have a normal evening with her boyfriend. They had been training hard for weeks now, and this was the first time they had to just be a couple of young lovers.

"Thank you for the necklace." Susan said sweetly.

"I wanted to get you something as beautiful as you. Something that you could look at and know how I felt about you."

"You did a good job." Susan giggled. She kissed him softly on his lips, sighing contentedly.

"I try." Blaise grinned. He ran his fingers through her hair, lost in the feel of its silkiness. He watched as she closed her eyes and melted into his chest.

"You're amazing." Susan grinned. "You always surprise me."

"You'd be bored with me if I didn't keep surprising you." Blaise smiled.

"Do you ever think about what we might do after school?" she asked softly.

"You mean besides get married?"

Susan looked up, eyes wide. "I just meant..." She stammered. Blaise smile

was mischievous. Susan slapped his arm playfully.

"Don't do that to me." She nearly screamed. Blaise was laughing hard as Susan fell back against him.

"I'm sorry. What do you think about?" Blaise said, still chuckling.

"I've thought about us together, you know." Susan said in a huff. "What our life could be like."

"I have to." Blaise said honestly. "I've thought a lot about it."

"Really?" Susan looked up hopefully. Blaise brushed a few strands of hair out of her face and kissed her gently.

"Yeah really. I think a lot about it. I'm going to get a job at Gringott's and I'm going to spend my life with you."

"See? This is what I mean about surprising me. You joke about marrying me, and then you tell me you think seriously about it."

"Would you have me any other way?"

Susan kissed her dark skinned beau firmly, running her hands through his hair. She broke the kiss and stared into his eyes. "No."

"Get up!" Susan's aunt rushed into the room. "Get up now. We're being attacked."

Susan felt the house shake suddenly. Blaise was up, pulling Susan with him. He pulled his wand out, and Susan followed his example.

"We need to get you all out of here." Amelia Bones said, watching the hallway.

"I thought you had Aurors outside?" Susan asked as they were joined by her mother and father.

"I do. I got an early warning from them. We don't have much time. We'll be going to a secret safe house. Keep your wands ready." Madam Bones said sternly.

"Madam Bones?" Called a voice.

"Fletcher. In here." Madam Bones called back.

"There were at least twenty. Auror Tonks sent me in here with a portkey to the safe house."

"Alright. Everyone touch the..."

The wall exploded, tossing everyone about the room. Blaise was first to recover, firing blasting hexes at the dark figures in the smoky haze. He hit two Death Eaters in the chest, and felt satisfaction when he heard their screams of pain.

Susan came to Blaise's side, covering her boyfriend with a shield spell. Susan screamed for the Auror to help get her parents to safety. Susan fired off several bludgeoning curses into the smoke and debris. Several red spells came out of the haze, just missing the two teens.

"Susan!" Mrs. Bones called out.

"Confringo!" Blaise screamed, blasting another Death Eater in the face. There was stillness. Blaise tried to see through the dust and smoke for more Death Eaters. When he felt they were clear he turned to his girlfriend who looked frightened and determined.

Susan suddenly felt herself being pulled away from Blaise by her father. She struggled against her father's efforts. She calmed down when she heard her aunt calling the young man.

"Blaise!" Madam Bones called. Blaise turned his attention to the new Minister of Magic, who was beckoning him towards the waiting Portkey. Blaise lunged forward, taking Susan by the arm. A spell blasted a crater where Blaise had just been. He reached forward and touched the pocket watch along with Susan and her family.

Blaise and Susan and the rest of her family fell in a heap in the middle an empty room. Susan helped pull Blaise up.

"Is everyone here? Is everyone ok?" The dark skinned Slytherin asked.

"No one got hurt." Madam Bones said softly. She stood up, brushing off her robes.

"You-Know-Who's really out to get you to surrender the ministry, isn't he?" Susan Mother asked her sister-in-law.

"Yes. I thought he might try, so I had Aurors posted all over your property. I do hope their ok, but I must ask Mr. Zabini where he learned to defend himself so well."

"Harry Potter taught us." Blaise shrugged.

"I should have guessed. You were both involved in the Hogsmeade attack, correct?" Amelia asked of the two teens.

"Yes, Ma'am. Susan was helping our friend Tracey in getting younger students to safety. I was there when Harry was taken." Blaise responded.

"I am sorry for the loss of your friend. We all hoped he would be the one to stop this mad man." Amelia said a little sadly.

"He believed in you aunty." Susan said. "He felt you would be the one to do something about the Death Eaters."

"I wish that I could. I wish that I could just find them all and take them in. It's like they know everything we're going to do before we do. I'm sure there are operatives within the Ministry, but I have no idea how to weed them out."

"Could you make it mandatory for everyone to undergo questioning under truth serum? It's for security, so they really couldn't argue it, could they?" Blaise asked.

"It makes sense." Susan's father added.

"It does, but the Wizengamont might make an argument about it invading a person's right to privacy." Madam Bones said wearily.

"This is a time of war, Minister." Blaise said sternly. "No one has a right to privacy now, especially if they work in our government. The safety of our

world rests on your shoulders. Dumbledore will back you, and so many people look up to him. We need to have our leaders safe, so they can help protect us. We can't be afraid of hurting people's feelings when there is a war happening and people are dying."

"You make a very good point young man." Amelia nodded. "Very well. We shall begin questioning everyone. I will contact Dumbledore right away and get his help on this." Amelia stood and went to the fire place. She turned back to look on her family.

"You'll be safe here for tonight. There are plenty of rooms for you to rest in. I'll be back in the morning to check on you all."

In a flash of green flame she was gone.

"That was a brilliant idea about making everyone submit to questioning under truth serum." Susan said in her boyfriend's ear.

"It wasn't mine. I stole it from Harry. He and Hermione were arguing about it not to long ago. She had a similar argument about people's privacy. She wasn't wrong, but neither was Harry. During a time of conflict, no one, including the minister is above suspicion."

"Ah, you're back." Augusta Longbottom smiled at her grandson and his girlfriend as they emerged from the fireplace. "How did they look?"

"Good. Still strong." Neville said softly.

"Tracey, There was a floo call for you a little while ago. It was your mother, and she sounded frantic. Perhaps you should call her and make sure everything is ok." Augusta smiled.

Tracey smiled back, and Neville followed his grandmother into the sitting room.

"Neville, there's something I feel I need to tell you. I've been very hard on you. I've pushed you and held you to a very high standard. I've compared you to your father, and it was wrong of me. I've seen you become a great

man over the last year, and I believe it is due to the presence of that young woman and your friendship with Harry Potter, Merlin rest him."

"Gran? Are you feeling ok?" Neville asked. Never once had his Grandmother spoken to him as an equal.

"Maybe it's the news in the paper, or the fact that I've seen you grow up this past year, but I wanted you to know that I am very proud of who you've become, and I hope that you continue to follow this path you've set upon."

"I will, Gran. I have to see these things through to the end. I promised myself I would."

"Neville?" Tracey called running into the sitting room. "There's nobody at my home. It looked like there had been a fight."

"Madam Longbottom?" Came a high squeaky voice.

"Yes Gerty, What is it?" Augusta looked down at the tiny house elf.

"The wards are being tripped, Madam. There is danger."

Before the little elf finished the front door exploded inwards. Neville clutched at Tracey's hand.

"Find the Longbottom brat, and bring him to me!" Cried a deep scratchy voice. Neville waved his wand at the door, shutting it tightly.

"Gran, we need to get out of here." Neville said quickly. The old woman moved with a speed Neville had never seen in his life.

"Gerty, see to it that all of the family heirlooms make it into our vault at Gringott's. I'll not have these bastards looting our family's treasures."

"Gran, It's just stuff. Let's get out of here."

There was a pounding on the door, and Tracey gripped her wand tightly.

Neville pulled her away from the door, closer to the back wall.

"Gran can you make a portkey, or apparate us out of here?" Neville asked.

His grandmother began looking about the nearly bare room for

something she might use. For the first time in her life she was angry at her house elf for being so good at cleaning away clutter.

The door cracked and Neville saw a face of a Death Eater.

"Confringo!" Tracey cried. The door was blasted outward, taking the Death Eater with it.. "oops." She said softly.

"Well, at least we're not trapped in here any longer. Let's try to get to the fireplace." Augusta said. The old woman led the way, Neville trailed behind, leading Tracey who watched behind them for more Death Eaters.

"Quietly now." Augusta Longbottom said softly as they entered the living room. There was one Death Eater standing guard, his back turned to them.

"Stupefy." Augusta said as she emerged into the room. Neville and Tracey came around her quickly, Neville taking a fistful of floo powder and flinging it into the fire.

"Go to the three broomsticks." he told Tracey who scrambled into the fire. In a flash she was gone.

"Come on Gran!" Neville called to his grandmother who was still watching for approaching Death Eaters. The old woman spun around, and Neville's world slowed to a crawl. There was terror in his guardian's eyes. She took a step forward, and was engulfed in sickly green light.

Neville cried out as the woman who had cared for him fell to the floor in a crumpled heap. Neville raised his wand and shot a blasting hex down the hallway catching two Death Eaters with the hex.

Neville bent down and gathered up his Grandmother's body, and lumbered to the fireplace. Hot tears streaked his face as he pulled her body along with him to the floor.

"I've found him!" came a voice behind him. Neville ducked and spun as a spell struck the fireplace mantle. Neville let go of his grandmother's body

and rolled behind a sofa. He shot up and loosed a cutting hex which cut across the death Eater's torso. Neville stumbled back to his Grandmother, reaching out to grasp her arm, when he heard footsteps coming closer. He made a choice, and threw more floo powder into the fire, stepping into the flames quickly. He uttered his destination and watched his home, and his grandmother disappear.

Neville fell heavily on the floor of the Three Broomsticks. Tracey helped him to his feet, brushing soot off of him.

"Where's your grandmother?" She asked, fearfully. She looked into his face and knew at once what had happened.

"Oh, no. Neville, I'm so sorry."

"We have to get to Hogwarts. Dumbledore needs to know what's happened." He said thickly. Neville took Tracey's hand and lead her quickly up to the school. He replayed the memory in his mind. His grandmother had told him she was proud of him, like she knew death was coming for her, and she wanted him to know before she no longer could tell him.

When they reached the iron gates, Neville collapsed and sobbed for the loss of his Grandmother, the only family he truly had. Tracey wrapped him in her arms, whispering that she was there for him, and that his grandmother loved him. For the second time that day, Tracey felt completely helpless.

The two boxes trembled of their own accord as Albus Dumbledore set two vials of Basilisk venom upon his desk. He had ventured to his summer cottage to retrieve the two dark artifacts.

Snape was taking care of the Weasley family who had shown up a few hours ago, when they had first begun to destroy Voldemort's Horcruxes. They had been drawn away to take care of the family and find out what

had happened to them. More reports had come in about attacks on the Davis family home, the Greengrass home, and the Bones family.

Dumbledore was determined more than ever to destroy the soul anchors.

He opened a vial and then the first box. Inside the ring of Slytherin shook violently. Dumbledore heard a voice begging him to drop the venom, and return the ring to its hiding place. There was a chill in the office as Dumbledore tipped the vial and poured the venom onto the ring.

There was a scream of pain and the acrid smell of flesh burning. There was a snapping noise and the scream faded away. Dumbledore peered into the box, waving away the smoke to see the black stone of the ring had cracked.

"One down..." He said as he opened the second box. Again he heard the sinister voice. This one threatened the aged headmaster. Dumbledore uncorked a second vial of venom, and hovered it over the dark locket.

"This will not save the boy." Said the voice. "You will die before the end, old man."

"If it is my destiny to do so." Dumbledore said softly, tipping the vial into the box.

More smoke filled the office and again came the familiar agonized scream. There was a loud snapping and then everything became still.

Dumbledore sat heavily in his chair and waved the smoke away. He felt every bit his age at that moment. He was tired. Tired of war and death and evil. He wanted to finish it and go somewhere warm and spend his remaining days lost in a book, or perhaps he could write his memoirs.

But he couldn't think on that right now. Voldemort was at last, almost mortal once again. There still remained the cup of Hufflepuff, but

Dumbledore had a feeling the cup would not remain hidden much longer.

The reckoning was coming, and soon, the war would be at last over.

Dumbledore was looking forward to a nice long rest.

21. Chapter 21

Neville Longbottom stood alone, head held high, mouth tight, hot tears falling from his darkened eyes. He had not fully cried since he'd crumbled in front of the gates of Hogwarts, Christmas evening. His eyes had been perpetually misty, but he had not cried. Now he stood alone in front of his Grandmother's grave, trying desperately to hold his emotions in check, and failing miserably.

The funeral had finished more than an hour ago, and many people had shaken his hand, offering condolences. He was utterly amazed at the turnout. He'd always known his grandmother had been an important person in the wizarding world, but he had never truly known exactly how important. To him, she had always been Gran. The always critical, overbearing, seemingly perpetually disappointed woman who tried desperately to push the young man to be worthy of his name. But on this day, Neville learned that Augusta Longbottom was almost saintly to most of the world. She had been a tireless philanthropist, working for the betterment of wizard kind, and constantly fighting against blood purist ideals in government. Meeting so many well known witches and wizards who had come to give their condolences had been very eye opening. These meetings had made him angry at himself. Angry that he had been unable to express to his Grandmother sixteen years of unresolved emotions. Angry that he had not been informed of his duties as a head of house. Sad that he would never be able to get advice on anything from someone so knowledgeable.

"You knew." He said softly, his voice thick from grief. "You knew that it was going to happen. That's why you said those things to me. It's why you told me you were proud of me, but that wasn't all you wanted to say,

was it?"

Neville fought to keep himself together, but he was quickly losing the battle. He clutched his fists and began hitting his legs, trying to maintain control.

"What do I do? Where do I go? I'm not ready for this, Gran." He said tearfully. "I'm not ready to become the head of our family. I can't do this alone. I have no idea what I'm supposed to do about anything."

"Then I'll help you figure it out." Came a soft confident voice. Neville turned to see Tracey standing there. Her overcoat was fastened tightly against the cold, and her dark blonde hair was done in a simple ponytail. Her eyes looked red and puffy as if she had been crying. Neville and Tracey hadn't seen much of each other since Christmas. Tracey had been taken to see her family who had only just escaped from an attack by Death Eaters. The Davis family was now safely hidden away in Australia. They had tried desperately to convince Tracey to join them. Tracey had been tempted, but her love for Neville, and her loyalty to her friends had made her decision clear from the start.

"I'm not going to let you face this alone. Ever since I got back from seeing my family, you've tried pushing me away, and I understand that you're hurting. But I'm here for you, and I'm not going to let you face all of this on your own."

"I'm sorry." Neville whispered. Tracey came forward, slipping her soft hand into his. He couldn't even look at her. He was ashamed of how he'd acted towards her over the past two weeks. He had screamed at her, and said things just to make her angry. It wasn't just her, either. Neville had attacked anyone who'd tried to speak to him.

"I know this is tough, and I know it hurts. But you never have to face anything alone." Tracey smiled softly. She lifted his chin in her hand so

he could look into her eyes. "I love you."

Neville broke. He began sobbing hard, and Tracey took him in her arms and rubbed his back soothingly. It broke her heart to know that this was all she could give him at the moment. There were no words or spells to take away his suffering. She felt almost useless, except that she knew he needed her right there, at that moment to just hold him as he grieved for the one constant in his life.

Eventually, Neville got himself under control again, and heaved a great sigh. He clutched her hand tightly as he turned back to the grave of his grandmother.

"She was always so hard on me, but I understand why now. She was trying to prepare me, just as Harry and you have done. She was overbearing, and critical of everything I did. Sometimes she just made me so miserable, and I'm going to miss her so much."

"She loved you in her way." Tracey spoke softly. "She may not have expressed it often enough, but she did love you. I saw it in her eyes when she thought no one was looking. She was a good, strong woman."

"Thank you Gran, for all that you did." Neville said, and with Tracey on his arm, he turned and they walked silently out of the cemetery.

It was a very cold afternoon. All around him, people stood, many crying over the loss of two lives at the hands of such brutality. Yet Ron felt nothing.

He had become numb to the pain of loss. Night after night he had seen his Mother weeping, and his father was at a loss for words of comfort for anyone. Fred and George had tried to lift spirit's the best way they knew how, but more often than not, it was wasted effort.

Ron had been uplifted when his brother Charlie had arrived a few days ago. The two had gone out flying, just the two of them, and Charlie had

gotten Ron to open up a little about how he felt. The older Weasley had been astonished by the amount of anger in his younger brother's voice. He hadn't said anything, but the tone of his voice told Charlie all he needed to know. Ron had been truly hurt by the event of his Bill and Percy's murder. Charlie had tried to tell Ron that it was not a bad thing to grieve, it was a good thing to mourn the loss. Ron had simply shrugged it off. He needed to keep all that emotion. He would need it one day soon.

Ron was very worried about Ginny. She had changed since being released from the infirmary. Ginny had never been too girly, having been blessed with a natural beauty, but now, she didn't even look in mirrors without bursting into tears. She had not only been scarred physically, but emotionally. Ron hoped that she might one day find her smile again.

Ron stood with his family now, watching as two coffins were lowered into the ground, as Dumbledore spoke philosophical words of comfort. Ron didn't hear a word that was said. He simply stared at the two boxes intently. Clenching and unclenching his fists. All he felt was emptiness. He was hopelessly lost now. He had heeded Snape's words to keep his anger, but Ron hadn't really understood what the Defense professor had tried to tell the boy, and now Ron was drowning in his own hate.

When Dumbledore finished speaking, he waved his wand and Ron's brothers, Percy and Bill were covered by cold, dark earth.

Ron's head fell limp against his chest, and a single tear burned its way down his icy cheek. One by one, people who had come to give their condolences stepped up to shake his hand. Ron didn't hear what anyone said to him, nor would he remember anything of that day, save the sensation of being led away from the gravesites and the melodious voice of Luna telling him that it would all be alright in time.

The Weasley family had been able to return to their house after Dumbledore and several others had built new wards around the property. The house had been damaged, but the family had banded together, and been repairing it as best they could. Fred and George had put up a lot of money for repairs, and been there almost everyday.

That evening, the Burrow was bursting with friends and family, all there to support the Weasley clan in their time of need. Ron wanted nothing to do with it, however. He had snuck off to his bedroom, where he now sat staring blankly at the wall. His mind was buzzing with so many thoughts, and Ron couldn't seem to focus on anything.

"I thought I might find you here." Luna said, slipping into her boyfriend's room. "May I sit with you?"

Ron nodded slowly. He had wanted to be alone, but Luna was never pushy, nor did she force him to talk if he didn't want to. She was really a comforting presence.

"Ron, I'd like to say something to you, and then I'll say no more on the subject." Luna said. Her voice had lost its normal dreamy like allure. Her eyes were focused on his. He looked up into her beautiful face and saw his pain reflected in her eyes. He took a breath and nodded for her to continue. Luna didn't often drop her loony mask, not even for him, but when she did, Ron knew to listen.

"I know you're angry, and I know that you're bottling it all up in order to use it against whoever is responsible for this, but I beg you to let it go."

"What?" He asked softly. There was confusion on his face.

"Don't hold on to your anger. I know you want to make people pay for what happened to Bill and Percy, but it's going to eat you up. You've started pushing people away. You've barely said five words to me. I don't want to lose you to your own anger."

"That won't happen."

"It already is, Ron. You're barely here with us. I see the way you walk around, hands shoved in your pockets. You look lost in your own skin. You can't keep all your feelings bottled up."

"I don't know how to let it go." Ron flared up. "Luna you know I've never been good expressing my feelings, no matter what they are. Every time I close my eyes I see it happen over and over again. I see that little ferret smiling as he killed Bill. I see Percy lying in the snow, his eyes wide open. All I want is to get my hands on him, to squeeze the life out of him."

Ron clutched his head with his hands and tried to breathe steadily. He didn't want to be angry at Luna. He knew she was worried about him, but He couldn't let it go. Ron always kept his feelings close. He didn't know any other way to be.

"You have expressed your feelings. You've talked to me about how you feel. You told me how you felt about Hermione and Harry. How you were afraid to lose their friendships because of your jealousy, remember? You told me how you looked up to Bill, and how you felt sorry for Percy for his nearsightedness. And you told me how you feel about me."

Luna reached out and took his hand. She watched him tenderly as he stared at their hands.

"I don't know if I can this time. I can't clear my head to think about anything" Ron said quietly. He shut his eyes tightly. They stung, and he knew there were tears.

"Everything's mixed up." Luna said gently.

"Big time. The only way I've been able to function is to bottle everything up."

"You've got to face it. You don't have to do it all at once, but you can't

hold on to it all."

"I just want to see Draco dead for what he did."

"Oh, Ron." Luna shook her head and pulled Ron into her arms. Ron laid his head on her shoulder and closed his eyes. He was silent for a long time, and then she felt him begin to shake. Luna softly stroked his neck, rocking him gently as Ron Weasley began to finally release some of the pain he'd bottled away.

"It hurts so much." Ron choked out. Luna nodded and continued to rock with him. Ron had years of pain he'd hidden away. He had been trying hard to change his way of thinking. He had made great strides in becoming the man he wanted to be, but he still had so much left to work through, more than even he knew.

Luna had to smile a bit. Ron had turned a big corner in the past couple of moments. She kissed the side of his head tenderly, letting him cleanse himself of his hate. She knew how Ron felt about boys crying, no doubt the product of years of torment at the hands of Fred and George. But while they were alone, safely locked in his room, Ron could let his pain out, knowing she wouldn't think any less of him.

Luna closed her eyes and breathed deeply. There was so much that could change their fates, but Luna hoped with all of her being that she and Ron might find real happiness when this war was over.

"I should be there!" Harry ranted to Sirius, who looked just as upset as his godson.

"I know, but you can't. If you are recognized, or word gets out, everything falls apart." Sirius tried.

"I am sick of being here. Ron needs me. Neville needs me, and I'm locked in this cage."

"It's a home until you're forced to stay inside of it." Sirius remarked. "If

anyone knows what you're feeling it's me."

"That's why I came to you." Harry seemed to deflate as he flopped into a chair. "I hate this feeling of being helpless. My friends are going through difficult things, and all I want is to be there to offer my support. I can't fix things, but being trapped here, when all I want is to tell my friends that I'll be there...it's just frustrating is all."

Sirius nodded slowly, watching his godson, who was running his hands through his unruly black hair. Sirius took another long sip of his tea and regarded the young man.

"I spoke with Dumbledore this morning. Tracey and Neville will be back tonight. Perhaps you could talk to him then. As far as Ron goes, well I don't know. It's clear that Voldemort was targeting your friends. We're fortunate that everyone was scattered, or away from home."

"When is Hermione coming back?"

"Tomorrow evening. Daphne's parents are leaving for France tomorrow morning. Astoria will stay here until term begins again."

"Is she going to be obliviated?"

"I don't know pup." Sirius shook his head. "I wouldn't put it past the old man. In this case I'm not sure I would disagree with it. This is one of the precious few advantages we have right now."

"I understand, but I don't like it." Harry huffed. "I want to finish this so everyone's lives can go back to normal."

"So you could have a normal existence?"

"That would be ideal, but I doubt it'll ever happen. I'm the chosen one, the boy who lived. No matter what happens, I won't be able to walk down a street without people staring. Especially when I turn up alive again."

Sirius barked with laughter. Harry eyed him fiercely. Sirius shook his

head cheerily.

"I had never thought about what would happen when you show up quite alive. Ol' Voldemort might just drop dead from shock. That's twice he's used the killing curse on you and it hasn't worked."

"Wouldn't it be nice if it were that simple." Harry chuckled. "My life has never been that simple."

"Harry, do you have any thoughts on what might happen when this is over?" Sirius asked. He had been thinking a lot himself on the subject. He had new dreams of what he might do with his life when it was over.

Perhaps he could find some nice woman to share his life with. He was a free man after all.

"Everyday. My greatest hope is that once it's over, I'll get some peace. No more nightmares, no more visions, just peace and quiet." Harry said wistfully.

"Do you really think you'll avoid the press? The politicians?"

"That's what you and Remus are for. I'm still an underage wizard. You guys get to keep those leeches off of me."

"Anything else? Something with your lovely lady friend?"

"You're getting awfully nosey." Harry joked. "I want to finish school. After that, the only thing I'm certain of is staying with Daphne. I love her."

"Nothing to be ashamed of. I've watched you change over the past few years. You've become a strong, upstanding man. Your parents would be proud. Extremely proud, Harry. I know I am. I know you want this war to end, but we have to be patient. We have to let Voldemort tire out, and make the mistakes."

"I know. It's just infuriating that when he does strike, we suffer. I'm going to go wait for Neville. He and Tracey should be here in a little while."

Sirius watched his godson leave the study. The boy was becoming more

and more like he had felt just last year. Like a caged animal. Sirius had been able to leave the country. He had to avoid authorities, but he had been able to move about. Harry didn't have that luxury. To the wide world, Harry was dead. Sirius would have to speak to Dumbledore soon. Harry would need to get out soon, or something might happen, and the Order couldn't afford any mistakes.

"Madam LeStrange, it has been a very long time since you have visited Gringott's." the goblin bowed low in front of the frightening looking witch. She was intent on her mission. She asked to be taken to her vault, and the goblin led her to the carts.

Bellatrix had never enjoyed the cart rides. She always felt nauseous for hours after visiting the bank, but her master had been very adamant that she must retrieve the cup from her vault and bring it to him.

The cart came to a sudden lurching halt, deep underground, and Bellatrix stumbled out of the cart. The goblin who had escorted her lead the way to the great vault. Bellatrix could smell the stench of brimstone. She knew that a dragon rested nearby, but in all her years, she had never seen the beast, which she was fine with.

"Key, please." the goblin asked. Bellatrix handed the loathsome creature her key, and the goblin opened the vault door and stepped aside.

Bellatrix stepped inside her the LeStrange family vault. Her husband had died and she was the last living LeStrange. She had never cared for her husband. Bellatrix had always been attracted to power. It made her quite randy, to be blunt. Rudolphus had been very wealthy, and his family garnered much respect, but it was nothing compared to her master.

Even her nephew Draco had a strange mystique about him lately.

Bellatrix had been unable to stop herself from following the young man around like a lost puppy. She found herself thinking un-family like

thoughts about the stunning young man. She had puzzled over this complex puzzle, and the previous night had realized what had been happening.

Her master was preparing Draco. The Dark Lord was going to possess Draco's body. Her attraction to Draco was the exact same as it was for The Dark Lord. Perhaps with a younger body, Bellatrix might finally be able to show her master how loyal she was.

Now as she walked into her family vault, Bellatrix was anxious to find the cup, as she was sure it would speed up the process and she would finally be rewarded for her loyalty.

It was exactly where she had placed it seventeen years ago. Sitting on top of an ancient chest. Bellatrix picked up the cup reverently, pressing it to her chest and nearly falling to her knees in ecstasy. Just as when she had brought it here, the cup radiated intense power. It was her master's power she felt, she knew the signature well.

She wrapped the cup in a silk scarf, and placed it in her handbag.

"Will there be anything else?" the Goblin asked. Bellatrix glared at the creature and responded negatively.

"I only wish to get back to the surface without becoming ill." She remarked coldly.

The sinister witch did not get her wish, however, and felt like retching when the cart finally came to a stop at the surface. She stormed out of the bank without a thank you, or even a dirty look and walked right out side and into the middle of an Auror squad.

"Good Afternoon." The lead Auror stepped forward, wand leveled at Bellatrix. He flourished his wand and Bellatrix's wand flew into his waiting hand. "You're under arrest." the Auror smiled at the ease of the capture.

"Avada Kedavra!"

In a flash of green, the lead Auror fell dead on the marble steps of Gringott's bank. Bellatrix shot forward collecting her wand, and killing a second Auror before the wizarding law enforcement officers ever thought of moving.

Antonin Dolohov stepped out of a nearby alley, firing spells at the now retreating Aurors. He was followed by Goyle Senior. From the other side of Diagon Alley, Amycus Carrow and Yaxley rushed into the open, firing at the Aurors.

Bellatrix Cackled madly as she kept the remaining Aurors retreating further and further. She had known when Voldemort had sent her to retrieve the cup that someone would have reported her to the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. She had prepared carefully for this inevitability. She had brought several Death Eaters with her to cover her escape. Thinning the Auror's numbers was just a bonus for her.

"Bellatrix, We need to leave." Dolohov shouted. "the Master awaits."

Bellatrix screamed maniacally, killing another Auror, and turning to face Dolohov. She grinned her most sinister smile, and with a loud thunder like crack, she apparate away, followed by Dolohov, Goyle, Yaxley and Carrow.

"Well done." Bellatrix chuckled when they had all appeared in front of the ruined castle which was Voldemort's new base of operations. "The master will be pleased."

With a sneer, she turned and left the four men to enter the great hall where her master awaited the report of her triumph. She approached confidently, bowing low. Her heart pounded in her chest as her lust for the godlike man before her rose inside of her.

"Master." She sighed. She kept her dark eyes on the floor before her and

waited until he beckoned her forward. She slipped her hand into her bag and plucked out the shining golden cup, marked by the badger crest. It radiated in her fingers with raw angry power.

"Very good, Bellatrix. Very good. For your loyalty, I shall allow you to lead my army into battle. Begin preparations. By month's end, we will take Hogwarts, and then the wizarding world will bow before me. Now, leave me."

Bellatrix clutched at her heaving bosom. She nodded gratefully and slowly left her master alone. When the door finally shut, Voldemort held up the cup, smiling to himself. He had only held the Horcrux for barely a minute, but he already felt his power replenishing. He had been right. Voldemort tossed his head back cackling madly. His plans were coming together so well, and there was no one who could stand in his way.

Potter was dead, Dumbledore was but a mere formality waiting to be eliminated. His magical core was bonding easily with the Malfoy boy's core, and soon he would let the dementors suck out the boy's soul, and the Dark Lord would finally possess a young strong body in which he rule over Wizarding Britain.

Voldemort clutched the cup tighter, feeling his strength returning. Now that he possessed his Horcrux, he could begin his preparations to take back his birthright. Hogwarts would fall to him by month's end.

22. Chapter 22

"How many more people have to die?" Harry nearly yelled. His fists were clenched and his face was burning with anger. Behind him stood Neville and Ron, both looking just as angry as their friend.

They had all read the Daily Prophet's article on the botched attempt to capture Bellatrix LeStrange and the four Aurors that were killed. Harry had immediately demanded to speak with Dumbledore.

The Hogwarts Headmaster had arrived just after dinner, and Harry had begun interrogating the ancient Headmaster about what the Order was doing.

"This is supposed to be a war. In war, one side does not roll over and allow the other side to diminish its numbers. Not unless they intend on losing. We are losing to Voldemort." Harry ranted.

"It is not as simple as all that." Dumbledore tried to calm the young man.

"No? Ron and Neville lost family. They could have been killed themselves. Hermione's home was burned to the ground. Tracey's family, Daphne's family, and Susan's family were all attacked." Harry pounded his fists. "And here we sit, doing nothing in return. Yesterday, Bellatrix LeStrange saunters out of Gringott's and kills four Aurors. Seems pretty simple to them. What's making it so complicated for us?"

"We are not prepared to fight Voldemort yet. We have destroyed several of his Horcruxes, it is true, but two still remain." Dumbledore tired.

"Destroying Voldemort while even one of his soul anchors remains means we may be repeating all of this again. Do you not wish for this war to be truly over?"

"His damn followers don't have Horcruxes!" Harry screamed at the aged headmaster. "Draco, and Bellatrix. Why can't we do something about them?"

"What would you have us do?" Dumbledore asked, thinking it would finally end the conversation.

"Kill them." Neville spoke softly.

Dumbledore looked up, his face was impassive, but his eyes gave away his surprise.

"We are at war, Headmaster." Neville said, standing a bit taller. "And while I don't relish the thought of taking anyone's life, it is a simple fact

that people die in war. The Death Eaters obviously realize this. If we lock them away, Voldemort just breaks them out. We need to thin out their numbers, just as they are doing to us."

"Do you truly think we should sink to that level?" Dumbledore asked of the younger man before him. Neville shrugged.

"What would you have us do, Professor?" Ron spoke up. "How many more people have to die because of our inactivity. I don't like the thought of running headlong into danger, but I'm sick of hearing about people being killed. I don't want to bury anymore of my family. We need to act. We need to find and eliminate as many of his followers as we can. Otherwise, it's checkmate."

Dumbledore shook his head sadly. He looked into the eyes of the three men before him. There was so much pain in the eyes of both Ron and Neville, but Harry's eyes held something far more heart wrenching to the old man. Hopelessness.

"Perhaps you are right. Perhaps we have been on the defensive for too long. I will call a meeting of the Order tonight, and we will figure a way to even the field. In the mean time, you all should keep up with your studies. I have a feeling that very soon, we will find ourselves in need of you, and we want you at your best."

The old man rose and gave a half hearted smile. Dumbledore's heart was heavy with sadness. Sadness that the children he and others were supposed to shield from the violence and pain of the world, were the ones who were suffering the most.

"I will contact you tomorrow with news." He said before sweeping out of the library.

The three boys sat quietly, each seething with Dumbledore's apparent indifference regarding the war. It was Neville who spoke first.

"He's not going to do anything at all, is he?" Neville said quietly. He looked to Ron and Harry, who were watching him. Harry shook his head slowly.

"No, no. He's going to patronize us and tell us things are in motion. He doesn't know anymore than we do." Harry stood and began pacing.

"Sirius said that the Auror force is becoming more and more depleted."

"Why didn't they bring more Aurors to take down Bellatrix?" Neville asked angrily. "Didn't they realize she's bloody mad?"

Harry knew that Neville had a serious grudge against the witch. She had been at his mercy last year, but Tracey had stopped him from taking the woman's life. Neville had been thankful that he had not crossed the line, but regret was beginning to creep up on him.

"The more that I hear that Aurors get killed, and are so out matched by Death Eaters, the less I want to be one." Ron spit out.

"Why do they keep getting slaughtered? They supposed to be trained for this kind of thing." Neville commented.

"I think we should ask some Aurors about this. Come on." Harry waved to his friends.

The group trudged down to the dining hall where Sirius and Remus were having a conversation. Harry led the boys into the hall, and asked the question that Neville posed in the study.

"A very interesting question." Sirius said, leaning back in his chair and taking a long drink from his butterbeer.

"Indeed. Perhaps we should get Moody and Tonks in here." Remus added.

Twenty minutes later, Mad-Eye Moody and Nymphadora Tonks sat with Sirius, Remus, Harry and his friends. The boys had collected the rest of their friends who were all about the Beacon, and told them to join them in the dining hall.

Dobby had provided tea and butterbeer for everyone, and when they were all settled, Harry once again posed the question.

"I was wondering when you might ask that." Moody smiled his crooked smile. "Why are the Aurors so outmatched? Bad leadership. Bad training. Overconfidence. So many things have led to us getting our arses handed to us."

"What do you mean?" Daphne asked respectfully.

"Twenty years ago," Moody began. "Aurors were subjected to a sort of training that was damn near brutal. We were taught all sorts of dark magic, to know what we would be facing. Training lasted five years, and it was all day everyday. Instructors would attack us in our beds to build up our reflexes, and keep us alert at all times. Only the strongest graduated and joined the elite. The standards were very high for applicants, and even higher for the graduates. Then the first war began."

Moody took another long swig from his bottle and sighed.

"Voldemort decimated our forces. He killed a lot of Aurors himself. We had never faced anyone like him. The reason he killed off so many was simple. Most Aurors would never use Unforgivables. The Killing Curse is his favorite, and he loved to cut down every Auror he met. We weren't allowed to use them ourselves. Policy, you know. And so, only a precious few of us survived the first war, and that was due to some luck, and that some of us, myself included, ignored policy to save our own necks."

"You used Unforgivables?" Tracey asked, a little tremble in her voice.

"Aye. Hated to do it, each and every time, but when you're staring down death, you'd be surprised what you'd do to save yourself, or someone you care about." Moody nodded, not looking at any of them. Even his magical eye seemed unfocused and far away.

"When the war was over, we had a new minister, and new policies. Fudge

didn't think replenishing the Auror force was all that important, as there was no more danger. Money that should have gone to help build back up our forces were put into other things. Any new candidates were not given the same training, as Tonks can attest to. If I hadn't helped her, I don't know that she'd be standing here with us tonight."

"It's true. After I graduated the new shorter course, Moody asked me if they still taught certain things. When I told him no, he took me under his wing. I was amazed how little training I had received." Tonks nodded.

"Fudge's overconfidence, and his interest in pleasing the masses rather than protecting them cost us greatly. There aren't many of us old school Aurors left that remember the proper training regiment. It's why the younger ones get killed. They're unprepared."

"Fudge's legacy lives on." Harry sagged. "So how can we turn this around?"

"The same problem that plagues our forces, plagues his. Overconfidence. Sooner or later, Old Snake Face is going to commit himself to a battle plan, thinking he's got the edge. The smart money's on Hogwarts. He's got a real soft spot for his old school. I personally think he wants to rule from the castle. So, we're putting new early warning wards around the school. All our group will have emergency portkeys set to take them inside the castle when Voldemort makes his move."

"How can you all be so sure he'll go for the school?" Blaise asked, a little surprised at the assumption.

"Hogwarts is a symbol of the future." Harry said softly. "Almost every witch or wizard passes through it's gates. If he ruled it, he could make the world he wants. He'd have basically unlimited power." Harry sighed.

"No one would allow that." Tracey protested.

"What choice would they have?" Ron replied. "Hogwarts is the only

magical school in Britain. Most families wouldn't be able to afford to send their kids to Beauxbatons or Durmstrang or anywhere else."

"With all those young minds to mold, Muggleborns would never be allowed in, and within a generation, Voldemort would have legions of followers." Harry concluded.

"What do we do then?" Neville asked. "Do we sit around and wait for him to make his move?"

"What would you have us do?" Moody grunted.

"Track down and incapacitate his followers." Harry nearly screamed.

Daphne reached out and stroked his back. She had watched his frustration building over the past few weeks, ever since Christmas. The article regarding Bellatrix had really upset him.

"We don't even know who all his followers are." Tonks tried. "Nor do we know where his headquarters is now. We are literally blind to his movements until he strikes. Other than the Ministry or Hogwarts, we have no idea where he might strike."

"Kind of makes you wish you still had that connection thing, huh, Harry?" Ron said sarcastically.

"Even with the connection, I only saw what he wanted me to see." Harry pounded his fists on the table idly.

"Once again we're powerless to do anything." Neville groaned. Tracey bent forward and took his hand in hers, rubbing her thumb along the back of his hand.

"Calm down, Baby. Getting angry isn't going to help us." She said soothingly. She glanced at Daphne who was still rubbing Harry's back.

"If he's going to attack Hogwarts, we need to prepare ourselves. We have the Maurauder's map, so we can learn the layout, memorize it. We can prepare traps, weapons we can use to slow Death Eaters." Harry began,

thinking out loud. "We'll get the twins involved. No doubt they have loads of ideas, and they can get us what we need."

"Now you're thinking, Potter." Moody complimented. "Being proactive doesn't always mean chasing down Death Eaters. I've got some things that may help you. I've got to go. Dumbledore's called a meeting, probably about your request, Potter. I'll check in with you all tomorrow." The old Auror hobbled out of the dining hall to leave. Remus and Tonks also went to the meeting. Sirius shook his head angrily.

"I know he's only looking out for us all, but he's falling into the same trap he always does." Sirius said. When the teens asked him what he was talking about, Sirius explained that as wise and noble as Dumbledore was, he always seemed to forget the people who made up the world he was trying to protect.

"It's why he never leveled with you, Harry. He's a grand chess master, and he moves his pieces carefully, but he forgets that those pieces are people, and have wills of their own. His intentions are good, do not mistake that, but sometimes he gets a little arrogant in his desire to save the world."

"He's a master at the art of deflection. It's like he wants to defeat Voldemort on his own so no one else has to do it." Harry agreed.

"Exactly. He doesn't want the credit for it. He just doesn't want anyone else to bear that responsibility. Like I said, noble."

"But it's not his responsibility, is it?" Daphne asked. "Voldemort saw to that fifteen years ago."

"That's right." Sirius nodded, looking proudly at his godson.

"Wait, are you all saying that it's going to be Harry who brings down this maniac?" Susan asked incredulously. She had been uncharacteristically quiet through all the conversation. Blaise wrapped his arm around her comfortingly.

"We've been training so Harry has to face Voldemort? We're what?

Escorting him to be slaughtered?"

"Nothing like that." Harry smiled. He looked at Sirius who nodded his consent. Harry took a deep breath and unloaded his secrets. He explained about Voldemort's Horcruxes and Dumbledore's quest to destroy them all to make the dark wizard mortal. Harry even told them about the Horcrux that he had carried unknowingly for years.

"That's how you survived." Blaise said, the first to figure it out. "The Killing Curse destroyed the piece of Voldemort's soul."

"Yes, but it nearly got me as well." Harry nodded.

"But, if he hits you with another Killing Curse...?" Susan asked. Silence rang throughout the dining hall.

Not much more was said. The hour was late, and Hermione was due to arrive the next morning. So far as they knew, Hermione had no idea what had happened. Members of the Order of the Phoenix had tried to find her when her house was burned down, but the Finch-Fletchly family had left the country for part of the holiday. Harry had received a letter from Hermione telling him that the family had taken her to Switzerland and that she would be home soon. Harry and the others knew she was going to have a very rough homecoming.

At just past eight the next morning, The fire flared green and out of the flames stumbled a very welcome sight.

"Luna!" Ron shouted as he embraced his girlfriend tightly. "I've missed you."

"As I have missed you." The blonde girl smiled, as she snuggled deeper into Ron's arms. He didn't often show this much affection, especially not in front of his friends, but she knew that Ron's eyes had been opened again. The loss of family helped reinforce things he was already feeling.

"How is your father?"

"He's well. He sends his condolences." She smiled brightly.

Ron noticed that Luna didn't look normal. Her eyes were focused, and her smile wasn't the strange dreamy one she normally wore. Ron was looking at the real Luna, and he smiled. He kissed her sweetly, causing his friends to wolf whistle and catcall. Ron simply ignored it all. His Luna was there with him.

When they broke their kiss, the rest of the group greeted Luna with warm hugs. Luna finally sat at the table with the others, and was hounded by questions.

"How was the hunt?" Harry asked.

"We didn't go hunting this year." She smiled. "We stayed home. Father had a lot of new articles to edit and print. We saw the Burrow get attacked that night, but by the time we got there, there was no one. Even the Death Eaters were gone. No one knows where my house is, or they don't care, because we didn't get attacked."

"Perhaps the Death Eaters think you're a waste of time for them to come after." Blaise offered.

"A big mistake to underestimate our Luna." Tracey grinned. "Her blasting hex can smash marble walls."

"It's a big mistake to underestimate any of us." Harry said. Everyone around the table nodded their agreement.

"Has anyone heard from Hermione?" Luna asked looking around.

"She's due back anytime." Harry said. "She disappeared with Justin's family and hasn't really been heard..."

At that moment, there came a knocking from the front door. Harry and the others pulled their wands and raced for the entry way, where Sirius was answering the door.

A wave of relief and joy swept over them all as their intelligent, bushy haired, smiling friend entered.

"Oh, hello, everyone." Hermione smiled brightly.

She suddenly found herself in the center of a massive group hug.

"While I'm happy to see all of you, I do need AIR!" Hermione screamed.

She swore that she heard her ribs crack. When she was finally released she looked at everyone in turn and saw relief on their faces.

"Alright, what happened?" She could tell that something bad had happened over the holiday. She had been terribly out of touch while in Switzerland, but she had never minded really. Justin had kept her mind occupied nearly the whole time.

"Perhaps you should sit down." Sirius offered.

An hour later, the group wrapped up the story of the attacks and the resulting fallout. Hermione had hugged Ron and Neville tightly, shedding tears for their losses and her absence in their time of need. Both boys forgave her immediately, but Hermione refused to be let off so easily. Both boys simply shook their heads, refusing to get drawn into a long argument over her lack of support in their time of grief.

Then, Hermione received the news about her home. The shock nearly caused her to faint. Questions ensued, and Sirius answered as best as he could.

"Your parents are safe, and are getting a new home as we speak. The house will be warded and have a guard nearby, and they will be given emergency portkeys in case they are attacked again."

"You're sure they're safe?" Hermione asked quite frightened.

"Yes. And they are being compensated for their loss. Myself and Harry chipped in to help them and you in getting a new home. Unfortunately, there is no replacing personal items, or memories."

"So long as my mother and father are safe, there is nothing that can't be replaced." Hermione sighed with relief.

After lunch and more discussions on what had been transpiring, Tracey, Susan, and Daphne gathered Hermione and stole her away to their bedroom, where the kidnapped witch was placed in a chair and surrounded by the other three.

"Alright, you've gotten all the news of the world, now it's time for you to spill it." Tracey ordered.

"What are you talking about?" Hermione looked irritated.

"Oh, come on, Hermione. You walk in here with that goofy smile, and those dreamy looking eyes, and you expect us to believe that nothing special happened with Justin?" Susan nearly shouted.

"I see. You want to hear all the details about my stay with Justin."

"Yes." The three girls chorused.

"So, you're all dying to know that when I saw him my heart nearly burst from my chest? How he took me in his arms and we kissed passionately, like star crossed lovers finally reunited?"

"Keep going." Tracey grinned.

"How everyday was like paradise, and he was so wonderful. How his parents left us alone, and we were able to do whatever we pleased. How I never had to lift a finger because Justin lived to serve me and my every whim?"

"Ok, now you're just being condescending." Daphne folded her arms across her chest.

"I suppose you'd like to know about the night we made love?" Hermione smiled shyly, looking away as her face reddened.

"WHAT?!" The three girls shouted.

"No way." Susan said.

"Did he spank you?" Tracey asked softly.

"You're lying." Daphne accused.

"OF COURSE I'M LYING, YOU TWITS!" Hermione screamed. "Like I'm going to be one of those giggly, gossipy girls and tell you every little detail about my stay, and what happened between us."

"Ok. Calm down." Daphne said. "Just answer this question. Can you honestly tell us that you are not dying to tell someone about how things went? That somewhere inside, you're not bursting with happiness and that you don't really want to share what is making you so happy?"

Hermione stopped cold. She eyed each one of her friends and then a huge smile broke across her face.

"Ok, I do. I really, really do. Sit down." She told them all. The three girls got comfortable, and stared at Hermione hungrily as she began her tale. Draco Malfoy stepped back into his family's home. It was his reward from his master. Voldemort had used his spies within the Ministry to release Malfoy Manor back to Draco, without alerting the new Minister. It had taken a while, but now, Draco was home at last.

Draco knew that the Dark Lord had his own reasons for getting the Malfoy home back. Draco also knew that his master was working to get the Malfoy vaults released again. Undoubtedly, Voldemort wanted to use the Malfoy fortune to help with their great plan. Draco had no protest against it. The Malfoy fortune was vast, and Malfoy knew there was gold to spare.

Yet, Draco had been feeling a strange sense of foreboding in the last few days. The way his master gazed upon him whenever he was in the Dark Lord's presence. It was as if his master were lusting after the younger man. It made Draco shiver involuntarily.

His Aunt Bellatrix had also become even more disturbingly interested in

him. Several times, Draco had caught the woman spying on him. She had been awaiting him in his private quarters after a shower.

So it was that Draco felt a great sense of relief at being in his home at last. Alone.

His master was busy planning his great assault on Hogwarts, and his aunt was out gathering followers for the coming battle. Draco knew it would be a great victory for his master, and Draco couldn't wait to get into the school and rip into the flesh of so many Mudbloods. He dreamed of spilling blood and dancing among the dead. His power had grown so much in the past few months, and it begged to be let go.

This both excited and made him curious. How had his magic grown with so little effort. He'd not even opened a new book in months, and yet his spell knowledge seemed limitless. He performed spells he'd never tried before with ease.

He sat in one of the many expensive leather chairs and rolled up his right sleeve, examining his Dark Mark. He had seen the Mark on other Death Eaters, Black and menacing, and always on the left fore arm. Yet his had been placed on the right.

It was also not black, but a sickeningly bloody red. It never did the things that other marks did, either. It never seemed to move. Other Dark Marks looked like they were alive, undulating on the arms of Voldemort's followers. Draco's never moved, but it did seem to glow in a strange rhythmic pulse, especially when he used his magic.

A puzzle seemed to be coming together in his mind. His power had begun to grow in leaps and bounds the moment he'd taken the mark. His rage seemed to focus his power. The Dark Lord had become increasingly adamant that Draco was near him as much as possible. He also spent significant resources and time to get the Malfoy estate freed, and was

working to get the Malfoy fortune released.

A memory came to the forefront of his mind. A night, two years ago at Hogwarts where he sat with the entire student body as well as delegates from other schools. All of them frozen in shock and wonderment when Harry Potter appeared with the body of Cedric Diggory, crying that the Dark Lord had returned.

Draco pounded his fists on the arms of the chair. He was struggling to figure out exactly what was going on. He knew he was at the center of this conspiracy, but he didn't know exactly what it might be. Nearly all of the clues were there, and yet his mind couldn't seem to put it together.

One thing kept popping up, and yet it seemed to Draco as ridiculous.

That the Dark Lord was setting Draco up to be his figure head. This was unlikely as Voldemort was not the type to share his rule. Draco would unlikely have a great deal of power in the Dark Lord's new world, of that he had no doubt.

Still, his mind couldn't let go of this mystery. The Dark Lord's reluctance to allow Draco to venture out on assignments, his creepy aunt's growing interest in him, and his growing power were all related. Draco sighed, rubbing his face. He needed to figure this puzzle out. Somehow, Draco knew his future depended on the solving of this riddle.

23. Chapter 23

"That treacherous bastard!" Draco slammed his fists hard on the large oaken table. He had just received word that Lord Voldemort would be moving his headquarters into Malfoy Manor by the week's end. So it hadn't been a reward to get his family's home back, it had been for the Dark Lord's needs as always.

Draco was finally beginning to see that there were never any rewards in serving Voldemort. Once again he examined the violent red mark on his

right fore arm. His mind churned trying to decipher the purpose in this strange mark.

Draco was torn from his thoughts by the entrance of his aunt Bellatrix.

She eyed him hungrily as she approached him, sauntering sensually.

Draco felt his throat go dry at this latest episode from his clearly mad relative.

"Ah, young Draco. There you are. I have been looking for you."

"I have no time for games, Aunt."

"Please, Call me Bella. You have killed all your relatives Draco, you have no more family."

"So you no longer wish to be related to me, I take it."

"That is a tough question. I have seen you become quite a powerful man, Draco. You are also extremely attractive. Tell me, Have you tasted the flesh of the opposite sex?"

Draco looked stunned as Bellatrix reached out to touch his cheek lovingly. She seemed to purr at the feel of his soft cheek under her fingers. Draco batted her hand away defiantly. Bellatrix smiled at the act.

"What is wrong with you?" He demanded. "You've all but thrown yourself at me these past months. Are you truly as crazy as they whisper?"

"Crazier." Bellatrix's eyes lit up with malice. "I crave the songs of pain that children scream when tortured. I live for the thrill of torture. The exquisite pleasure of driving my victims to madness. Something we have in common, though I have never taken trophies."

She tapped the satin pouch that Draco kept with him always. The same pouch that contained the strips of flesh he'd taken from his victims. Draco cocked his head as he spoke.

"So you think we are kindred?"

"More than that. I feel power radiate off of you. His power. Tell me

nephew, how did you get the Dark Lord to entrust you with his power?"

"He gave it to me. I never asked for it. I only asked for the means to avenge myself against those who had wronged me."

"And your first act was to kill my sister? Your own mother?" Bellatrix cooed softly, pressing her body to Draco's.

"No, my first act was to kill that Auror. I killed my mother when the Dark Lord ordered me to. She died so beautifully." Draco reminisced. It had been a beautiful death. She had begged until the very end for him to show mercy, to renounce the Dark Lord. When he struck her down, he had felt such a surge of power, that he had lost himself to it completely. It was like the very best drugs and a series of mind blowing orgasms. He had never known such a feeling.

"I've seen your face when you kill, Draco." Bellatrix whispered in his ear.

"You crave it now. You live only for the next victim."

She rubbed her hands up his chest and clutched his face in her hands.

Draco was frozen. His mind seemed to be stuck. Her words were making sense to him. He had embraced the power and he never thought about much more than the next kill, or how he would like to punish those he hated most. He'd come so close at Christmas.

Ron Weasley had been at his mercy, but he'd gotten arrogant, and distracted by the Weasley bitch. The youngest redhead held his thoughts a lot now. He dreamt of taking her body, licking the scar he'd given her.

She was becoming an obsession. He would have her at the coming battle.

A warm wetness brought him back to the present. Bellatrix had sensuously lick his lips.

"I can be whatever you want me to be." She sighed. "I can give you what no other can, my lord."

Draco pushed hard, sending the witch sprawling to the floor. She looked

back her face a mix of rage and sadness. Draco lunged forward, striking her hard across the face.

"I don't know what your game is, but it ends now. Leave me. NOW!"

Bellatrix stood, and the mixture of emotions that had been playing out on her face disappeared to be replaced by a confident smile.

"I will taste your flesh. You will give yourself to me willingly before we go into battle." She laughed and left him, giving her hips a bit of an extra wave as she walked away.

Draco spit onto the floor, wiping his lips with the back of his hand. He would do his very best to avoid the woman in the future.

Yet something she had said repeated it self over and over. She had called him her lord. Had she been referring to his growing power, or was there something else there. Something he'd been missing all this time.

Draco sat in front of the fire, his head pounding with frustration. He stared into the crackling flames, searching for the answer. And then it hit him. Everything the Dark Lord did was to serve himself.

He had not helped Draco's own power grow. He had been boosting Draco's power with his own. At first, Draco had been exhausted by it, because the power would leave him afterward, but slowly, that had gone away, as if the power was leaving him less and less. It was staying in him. It was bonding to him.

But what would be the purpose of the Dark Lord to allow his own magical power to bond with Draco's? He would not get it back once the bond was complete. Even if Draco were killed, The dark Lord would lose it all if the bond were complete. Perhaps, Draco thought, that he would kill Draco before the bond was complete and take Draco's core for himself. Perhaps the two cores would be so reliant on each other that Draco's would transfer with Voldemort's. Was it even possible?

This all seemed unlikely. Yet it made a strange sort of sense. The only other possibility was that the Dark Lord would take him over.

And there it was. All the puzzle pieces fell into place at once, and Draco felt faint with the epiphany.

Releasing Malfoy Manor. Getting the Goblins to allow him access to his family vaults once again. Giving Draco everything he desired, and transferring his Magical Core into Draco. The Dark Lord would possess Draco. It would be a repeat of Quirell.

No, that wasn't it. The Dark Lord would not repeat his mistakes with the cowering professor. No, Draco's body would belong to the Dark Lord, but Draco's soul would not be there. The Dark Lord would get rid of Draco's essence and then inhabit the body.

Draco stood quickly, screaming in rage.

"How could I have been so stupid?" Draco raged.

Draco shook his head angrily. He would not allow it to happen. He would take all of the Dark Lord's power. He would allow the bond to finish, and then when the Dark Lord summoned him for whatever ritual he might use to swap bodies, Draco would strike. He would not allow the Dark Lord to take his body.

He sat down heavily. This was going to be the most dangerous game he would ever play. He had to use everything in his arsenal to keep up the illusion that he was a faithful servant. He would have to be more observant and listen more carefully.

He would need an ally to help him. Someone that Voldemort trusted above all others. One who Draco could easily manipulate, and use to get information he needed. And then he shivered violently. Only one person was so close to the Dark Lord. Her words came back to him then.

"You will give yourself to me willingly before we go into battle."

Draco groaned. He hated the thought of what he was about to do, but sometimes, you had to make sacrifices in order to conquer your enemies. And sometimes those sacrifices meant allying yourself with people you'd rather avoid. Draco suddenly wished Potter were still alive. An alliance with Saint Potter would be much less disgusting than...Draco tried not to think to much about it right now.

It would be a small price to pay, though. Draco would keep his wits about him. He would look up magical bondings, and try to figure out how long it would be before the process was complete. He would strike before the Dark Lord could realize his plans.

Then, when he had conquered Lord Voldemort, the wizarding world would embrace him as a hero and he would then make the world in his image. Draco Malfoy would rule the wizarding world.

"We need to take the ministry or abandon it, My Lord." Yaxley said with finality.

Voldemort seemed to be thinking on the report he'd just been given. The New Minister of Magic, Amelia Bones was implementing mandatory questioning of all Ministry employees. She was trying to weed out all Death Eaters. This was troublesome news, but not unexpected. Voldemort knew that at some point Bones would attempt to find his spies in her midst.

He now had a choice to make.

He would need every single Death Eater in his coming campaign to take Hogwarts. He had already begun positioning groups of followers near to Hogwarts. He knew that Dumbledore's Order would have placed wards around the castle that would alert him to their presence, so he made sure his Death Eaters were far enough away from the school, but close enough to get to the ancient castle fast.

At the same time, He could use resources within the Ministry to help in his campaign. He could use the Department of Magical Transportation to open floos into the great school. He could gain access to many weapons within the Department of Mysteries.

Yet, With Hogwarts in his grasp, The ministry would roll over easily.

With so many hostages, young hostages, Minister Bones would surrender the government with no conditions.

Yes, the choice was easy to make.

"Recall all our agents and begin preparations for our assault. I want you to bring Greyback to me. We will arm his wolves with wands, so as to have more troops. The giants should be in position by the end of the week, and soon, I will lead my followers into the great castle. By the end of this month, Hogwarts will be mine, and Albus Dumbledore's blood will flow."

Yaxley bowed, and left to carry out his orders. Voldemort sat back in his throne. He rubbed his Horcrux lovingly. He felt the power pulsing out of the cup with each gentle stroke. It wouldn't be much longer now. The Dark Lord was confident that he would be able to transfer his essence into the Malfoy's body just before the start of his campaign. He would march on Hogwarts in his new body and he would squeeze the life out of Dumbledore's body with his new young hands.

"Hey you." Daphne said sweetly, approaching her boyfriend who was standing in the lighthouse tower, watching the raging sea. She felt a peace when he looked at her, a soft smile on his lips. He held out his hand for her, and she took it, allowing herself to be drawn in to his warm, comforting arms.

"So why are you hiding out up here?" She asked as he kissed her neck softly.

"Trying to gain some perspective I guess." He said.

"Perspective over what?"

"This war. What it's doing to us. None of us have taken a life yet, but it's only a matter of time. I know that it's a part of war, but I wonder if there's another way. Voldemort will never stop killing, not until he's dead. But Dumbledore and the rest of the Order are convinced that we can win without killing."

"Harry, Voldemort kills because he loves it. If and when any of us have to take a life, we'll be doing it to protect ourselves or others. I'm not saying it won't affect us, but it's different. Voldemort has no remorse for what he does. That makes him dark. We try other ways to end conflict, and when we do something that is, well...dark in nature, we have remorse. We have sorrow for what has been done. Do you see the difference?"

"I do." He nodded.

"I love that you want to protect us all from what's to come, but you have to realize that we chose to fight with you. No one is safe while the Death Eaters are out there, and the only way to stop them is to kill Voldemort. We're going to finish this, so that we can all get on with our lives, and accomplish our dreams. You and me, we have a future waiting for us. A life that's going to be filled with love and laughter and children."

Harry drew away from Daphne just enough so that he could look her in the eyes. His smile was brilliant, she thought, and she reached up to touch his cheek.

"I love you, Harry Potter. I want no one else. You're going to make it out of this whole thing, and so am I. Then you and I are going to get married."

"Are you proposing to me?" Harry chuckled.

"I guess I am. If I waited for you to do it, I might be waiting forever."

Daphne grinned.

"No. Just until we finished school." Harry kissed her. She wrapped her arms around him tightly and pressed her whole body against his. When they broke their kiss, Harry saw something in Daphne's eyes that piqued his curiosity.

"What is it?" He asked.

Daphne seemed to be thinking, trying to decide whether or not to speak her mind. Harry urged her to come clean, and her heart screamed to her that he would understand. Harry would never make fun of her for what she felt, or what she wanted.

"I just...oh, this is really embarrassing." Daphne growled at herself.

"Love, tell me."

"I know that I just said that we're going to make it through all this, but I know that things happen. I just want to give you and myself a reason to fight harder than anyone else. I want you to truly know the depth of my love for you."

"What are you saying?"

"I want to make love with you."

There was silence as Harry processed her words. He watched her face cycle through embarrassment, to fear, to anxiety and back again. He felt his heartbeat quicken when he realized what it was she was asking of him. So many dreams of him and Daphne in various states of undress and many compromising positions. Yet, his own nobility and fear stopped him.

"I don't know. I mean, I want nothing more than to be with you. I mean completely with you. But I..."

"I'm not saying now. Or tonight. But soon." Daphne quieted his ramblings.

"I've wanted to be with you for a long time, and I just...I don't know. I

just want to experience it before we have to fight."

Harry stroked her cheek lovingly. He could see her love for him in those amazing brown eyes. She still looked nervous and embarrassed. He bent forward and kissed her, pouring all his love into his kiss. She kissed him back and he could feel her passion.

"Ok." He said when they broke their kiss.

"Do you promise?" Daphne asked, tilting her head, looking for deception, knowing he would never try to give her false hope.

"I promise. Sometime soon, when there is no awkwardness of this conversation, and we're alone, and it feels right, we will make love." He smiled softly. His face showed none of the absolute fright he was feeling. Harry and Daphne had only recently begun really exploring one another. It was rare that they got time anymore. They hadn't been alone together for more than half an hour in many months, and it was grating on the both of them.

But Harry didn't think that he and Daphne were prepared for this leap. He had no experience in this, and was too embarrassed to ask Sirius or Remus about the subject, as it would only make him the target for ridicule.

Then he had an idea. He knew someone who had experience, who would not ridicule him for asking. He resolved to speak to Ron as soon as possible.

Harry relaxed, and took Daphne in his arms once again. They stood there silently watching the stormy sea, each lost in their own thoughts. Just as chaotic the ocean appeared to be, the two teens' minds were just as volatile.

Harry found Ron playing chess with Blaise an hour later. Ron and Blaise had formed a very strong friendship over the past months. Ron had been

grateful that Blaise had given the formerly prejudiced Gryffindor a second chance to get to know him. Ron often thought how close he'd come to missing a great friendship. When Ron had returned to the Beacon, after his brother's funeral, Blaise had spent hours with the redhead, getting him to open up and helping him to work through his anger, siphoning the energy into more positive outlets. Blaise had even dueled with Ron to help alleviate the excess energies.

"Ron, Do you have a few minutes?" Harry asked tentatively.

"Sure mate, what's up?"

"It's kind of private." Harry said, feeling his face redden. Ron and Blaise looked up and stared at their friend. Blaise began to smile.

"She asked you." The dark skinned boy grinned.

"What?" Harry looked like he'd been punched.

"Daphne asked you to..."

"How do you know that?" Harry demanded, closing the door behind him so no one else would hear the conversation. At that very moment, Neville came out of the bathroom.

"What's going on?" he asked when he saw Harry and the other boys.

"Daphne finally asked Harry to..." Blaise began.

"Do you all know about it?" Harry growled angrily.

"I have no idea." Ron said, looking quite puzzled. "What are you all talking about?"

"Oh geez!" Harry sighed exasperatedly as he sat on a nearby bed.

"Ok, look Harry." Blaise began. "Daphne and Tracey came to me a couple of days ago. Daphne wanted to get a male opinion on what the best way to approach a guy, or more specifically you, about making love."

"Oh, wow." Ron said softly.

"I told her that the best way was the direct way. I said guys are pretty

easy to get into bed. Just tell them you want to, and we jump." Blaise smiled.

"He's not lying." Ron nodded. "They don't even have to ask. They can just give us that look."

"So Daphne asked you to have sex?" Neville asked a little too excitedly.

"yeah." Harry nodded.

"And did you?" Blaise leaned forward. Harry looked up, his eyes dark and cold. Blaise held up his hands in submission, hoping to deflect the dark haired boy's ire.

"No. We didn't you perv. But I promised we would."

"Of course you did." Blaise smiled.

"So what do you need me for?" Ron asked very confused.

"I...I need advice. I don't...I mean, we've never..."

"Potter wants to know what it's like." Blaise chuckled.

"Merlin, are you always so blunt?" Harry asked.

He was taken aback to see not only Blaise, but Ron and Neville nodding affirmatively.

"Fine, but can we please keep this between us?" Harry pleaded.

"Harry, I would never give up your embarrassing secrets, as much as it might benefit me. I take your friendship very seriously. It's why I've never told you Greengrass' more interesting secrets. Her friendship is very valuable to me. Got it?"

Harry nodded his understanding, and turned to Ron who looked a little anxious.

"So..." Harry started.

"I don't know what I can tell you without talking about Luna in a very intimate way. I don't know that I'm comfortable with it."

"Dean and Seamus make this sound so easy to do." Neville grinned.

"It's because they have no morals." Ron shrugged.

"Ok. Maybe I should take the lead, here." Blaise said. "I'm not going to give names here, but I will share some of my exploits. If any of this gets back to Susan, I will do something very bad to you all."

He glared at the three boys who showed they understood. Blaise leaned back in his seat.

"You two can throw in when you can, just don't get too graphic." Blaise nodded to Ron and Neville.

The next three hours flew by. For the first time in his life, Harry felt like a normal teenage hormonal boy. Blaise, Ron, and surprisingly Neville were open, and sometimes, very descriptive of what being intimate was like. He was often surprised to hear his friends speak so poetically, and then get down right visceral in their conversation. Yet one factor was constant, respect. They all held the women they spoke of, and the experiences in the highest respect.

When Ron spoke it was with a strong feeling of love. He talked about how it had happened and his resulting guilt in the quickness of the event. He and Luna had barely been dating a month. Ron went on to tell them about how he had tried to apologize to Luna and make things right, only to find that Luna had more or less orchestrated it. Ron shared the fact that he and Luna tried to be together as much as they could, but it wasn't nearly as often as they'd like.

Ron then admitted he was saving to buy Luna a ring, and that he planned to propose to her. Neville, Blaise and Harry all saluted Ron's devotion to the somewhat strange, but always loyal Ravenclaw girl.

Neville gave the most shocking revelation when he admitted that he and Tracey had first made love on Christmas eve. It had been the one and only time they had been together, but that had been due to circumstances

out of their control. Neville told how Tracey's new favorite game was to tease him by writing sexy notes, or to whisper sultry things in his ear.

"It's becoming downright infuriating." Neville admitted. The other boys laughed at Neville's predicament. Even Neville gave a soft chuckle.

"What about you and Susan?" Ron asked of Blaise. The dark skinned boy shook his head.

"We're not ready. Susan is very old fashioned, and I respect that. We've fooled around, of course, but I always let her determine how far we go. I'm very lucky to have her, and I'm not about to do anything to jeopardize it. We are some very lucky fellows. We have found something that some never find, or settle for less than what they deserve. True love is the rarest form of magic gentlemen. I've said it before.

"Love can do amazing things. Can make the strongest, most powerful man becoming a weeping lump. Can make the meekest person a super powerful being. It is the only magic that is both a curse and a blessing. The only thing that even comes close to being that powerful is the dream of power, but I guarantee you that Love is far stronger and more empowering than money, or position."

"You are so wise." Neville said sarcastically. His tone was one of joking, but his words were complimentary.

"When we finally fight, the four of us will have more power than anyone could imagine, because we have someone to fight for. Each of us has someone who keeps our heart close to theirs. It gives us power. I see you guys when we train and I see it in your eyes as I'm sure you see it in mine. It's love my friends, the greatest power in the universe."

"Are you channeling Dumbledore?" Harry laughed.

"Make fun if you want, but I'm telling you. Sometimes that kooky old man gets it right." Blaise chuckled.

The four boys continued talking into the night. Harry felt a strong comraderie with his friends, something he realized had been missing for awhile now. All their training and schooling had taken away something that this group needed. A feeling of togetherness, and not that of fighters, but of family. Harry made a mental note to speak to Sirius about it. For now, he simply relaxed and enjoyed the laughter and conversation his friends, his brothers spouted. This was one of those moments Harry had often dreamt of. In this tiny circle, he was no savior, no prophesized hero, but just Harry, just one of the guys. He felt normal, and it was a feeling he cherished more than any other feeling, with the exception being his deepest love for the black haired girl who was most likely enjoying a similar moment with her own friends somewhere in the house.

24. Chapter 24

"So you think it will be soon?" Minerva McGonagall asked worriedly. She sat in the Headmaster's office, along with the other teachers of Hogwarts. They had been summoned to the office quite late this evening. Dumbledore had said he needed to speak with them over something quite urgent.

"Yes." The withered old man nodded. "Lord Voldemort will attack this school in the coming days. Many employees of the Ministry have suddenly disappeared, undoubtedly to join their master. Hagrid has heard from some of the Centaurs that wizards have been spotted in the Forbidden Forest. Our main focus should be the evacuation of the students."

"How can we do that?" Pomona Sprout asked, still clutching at her chest.

"I would think that a series of portkeys would be wise." Professor Flitwick suggested.

"Indeed, but I think we may be able to set up a secret passage between

Hogwarts and the Hog's Head Inn. My brother, Aberforth, has already consented to help us by allowing students to take refuge there."

Dumbledore added.

"What of the castle?" Snape drawled. "Are we to just abandon it?"

"No. We will fight. I have already begun opening floos in the common rooms, and the Great Hall to allow members of the Order come at our call. Our Special team informs me that they have many items in the works that will help in our campaign. As I understand it, the Weasley Twins have been retained for special services."

"That should make for very interesting situations." Flitwick smiled a bit.

"Is there anyway we can predict when You-Know-Who will make his move?" McGonagall asked.

"Unfortunately, there is no way in which we can monitor his movements. We no longer have any spies in his network. Remus Lupin has informed me, though, that the werewolves have come together, and he believes that they are heading towards us as we speak. We must hope that the attack comes before the full moon."

"What else can we do to prepare?" Professor Sprout asked.

"I would ask that you utilize your talents, much as we did to protect the Philosopher's Stone. My dear Professor Sprout, perhaps you can use your knowledge of magical plant life to protect some of the entrance's to our school, specifically the secret passages.

"Professor Flitwick, might you charm some objects to react to Death Eaters, something that might ensnare them at least for a little while?"

Dumbledore continued. "Professor Snape, Professor Slughorn, could you work together and come up with some type of potion dispersal device?"

"You mean like a muggle grenade?" Snape smirked. "Perhaps something similar to a water balloon?"

"If you believe it will work." Dumbledore chuckled. "Professor McGonagall, you and I shall concentrate our efforts on getting the children to safety. Hagrid, my friend, I expect you shall be collecting some more interesting creatures to patrol the grounds."

"O' course, yeh can count on me, Professor." Hagrid nodded.

"Professor Sinistra, if it is no trouble, perhaps you could keep watch through one of your marvelous telescopes during the nights. Specifically on the forest?"

The Astronomy professor nodded enthusiastically.

"The rest of you should assist Professor McGonagall and myself in finding ways in which to get the children to safety as quickly as possible. We will meet tomorrow evening to discuss our situation more. I would like if you all got some rest and think about what we might do. Thank you all."

The teaching staff rose as one and left the Headmaster to his thoughts.

Dumbledore watched them go and finally lowered his head into his hands sadly when the door finally shut. He rubbed his temples and sighed heavily.

His suspicions had been confirmed early that morning when he had inquired into Bellatrix's journey into Gringott's. Dumbledore had to swallow his pride and ask Amelia Bones for her help in securing the information, but it had been worth it. Dumbledore now knew that Voldemort's last Horcrux had been collected.

It made the old professor heartsick to think that the Dark Lord had his final Horcrux near him now. There would be no way to collect the damned cup away from him. There was also still that accursed snake to deal with as well.

Dumbledore felt a fantastic weight settling on his shoulders as young Harry Potter's words kept coming back to him.

"How many more have to die?"

Indeed, many more would die, and he was truly powerless to protect them all. For the first time, Dumbledore felt as if all his efforts to protect the world were failing. Dumbledore began to feel as if the side of light may not win the war.

Draco Malfoy felt tainted, unclean. He had been physically scrubbing himself under the scalding hot water for nearly thirty minutes now, and blood was mixing with the hot water. His eyes were unfocused as he went about trying to rid himself of the taint he felt all over his skin. He had just subjected himself to nearly four hours of physical intimacy with his aunt, Bellatrix LeStrange.

Draco had just figured out what it was that the Dark Lord Voldemort saw in young Draco, He saw a vessel, a new, younger body in which he would rule. The blood red Dark Mark on Draco's right arm was a siphon in which the Dark Lord was dumping his magical core into so it might bond with Draco's. Draco had experienced the delicious pleasure the added power had given him. He had taken the lives of his master's enemies, and nearly gotten revenge on his own enemies.

Yet, his power and his knowledge had continued to grow. Draco had finally put all the pieces together, cursing himself for not doing it sooner. One of the pieces had been his already psychotic aunt's interest in him. Bellatrix had followed Draco around like a lost puppy, offering many different things. It had all culminated yesterday when Bellatrix had all but thrown herself at him, proclaiming when Draco had pushed her away that he would eventually give himself to her.

She had been right. Draco had gone to her just an hour after she had left him. He needed someone who was close to the Dark Lord. Someone who might confirm his suspicions. Someone he could easily manipulate. His

aunt had proven to be that person. She was loyal only to who she sensed had the power.

She had smiled that infuriatingly satisfied smile when she opened her door to him. Draco gave no reason for being there, and Bellatrix had not asked him to provide one. She had led him to her bedchamber and for the next four hours he had been at her mercies.

Draco retched again, thinking back on what he'd done, and what she had done to him. He had never felt so vile as he did now, still scrubbing at his raw and bleeding flesh. He had always enjoyed sex, even when it was Pansy, who was so inexperienced and simply writhed under him, trying to please him. Draco had always preferred the more experienced older Slytherins, usually using his family name to get them in his bed. But what he had just come from made him believe he might never engage in the act ever again. Draco wished for the thousandth time that he could Obliviate himself.

Still, the disturbing experience had yielded some valuable information.

For one thing, the cup that the Dark Lord constantly clutched to his chest was very important. Bellatrix revealed that she had hidden it for her master many years ago, and she had been asked to retrieve it. She did not know what it was, only that it pulsed with their master's power, as if part of him resided in it, much like Draco exuded her master's power.

Draco wondered about the cup and why it was so important. Bellatrix had no inklings on its purpose, though many theories, all of which seemed to be that it was some sort of weapon, and that since they were on the verge of their coming campaign, he might want it close.

Bellatrix also noted that two Dementors were now stationed near their dark master. They had been called by the Dark Lord and now were hidden in shadows in the great chamber.

Draco felt his skin crawl. Voldemort planned to suck out Draco's soul and take over his body. Draco doubted the cup was a weapon. The Dark Lord had sought it out when he was near his weakest and when he had it, he appeared almost back to his old self. Strong and relentless.

Draco thought now as he finally shut off the water and stepped out of the shower. Blood pooled in little drops at his feet from the open wounds all over his body. Draco felt exhausted, both mentally and physically. He would need to rest. He went to his bed and lay upon the cool mattress. He waved his fingers and his window shot open, allowing freezing January winds to caress his raw skin.

Draco closed his eyes, seeing the golden cup in his master's eyes. It needed to be eliminated. Perhaps when the Dark Lord called for him at last. The moment he saw the Dementors, he would steal the cup in the moment his master felt he had won. He would take the cup and disappear away. He would return and kill the Dark Lord with his own magic.

Then he would emerge with the corpse of his master and lay it at the feet of Albus Dumbledore. He would claim it was his plan all along to kill the Dark Lord, and that he was sorry for what he'd done. After all, it had worked for Snape.

Draco would be hailed a hero, and the wizarding world would bow at his feet like they had for Harry Potter. Draco would take up the fallen Gryffindor's place. And then he would claim what had been rightfully his all along. The hand of Daphne Greengrass.

Yes, Draco would not be exiled from his own body. The Dark Lord would fall, and Draco would rule in his place. But before he accomplished all of this, he would take great pleasure in tearing his disgusting Aunt Bellatrix apart very slowly.

"We made a few of these." Fred said holding up a pair of goggles. The

were small, just a bit bigger than Harry's own glasses.

"We don't need fashion accessories." Ron remarked.

"Oh, have some faith." George replied. He and his twin had come as soon as Moody had approached them in their store. The old Auror had told them that certain parties would be interested in seeing some of their more unique wares. They were given a portkey to take as soon as they were ready.

The two Weasley's had packed up a variety of special items they were developing, and took the Portkey, which landed them on the Beacon's front porch, where they were greeted by a hyperactive house elf.

But the greatest shock came when they had settled themselves in the study to await their illustrious hosts. They were unsurprised by the sight of their younger brother, Hermione and Luna. Nor was Neville or Tracey a shock. Daphne had made them curious, but it was the sight of the man who had given them their start up funds that had knocked them both out of their seats.

"But, everyone said..." Fred began.

"You have got to teach us your secret." George grinned.

"You don't want to try it." Harry had grinned back. The next hour had been full of questions from the twins, wondering how Harry had once again survived. They never questioned the idea of keeping Harry hidden and letting the world at large believe him dead.

"This has got to be the very best prank ever." George smiled as he finally settled back into his seat.

"I hope I get to see the look on ol' Voldy's face when you show up to finish things." Fred chuckled.

"I just hope his shock gives me enough of a distraction to finish it." Harry admitted. "But we need to get to business. We're hoping you can help us

with some things for the coming battle.

"Harry, we've not stopped developing. Just look."

And so, item after item was shown off, and some even demonstrated to the gathered group. Sirius, who truly enjoyed the twins, had admitted his delight at the "Blinding Balls". Small balls, looking as unassuming as Muggle's Super Balls that they might get from a quarter machine at a market. Fred explained that you simply tossed it towards an enemy, and on the third bounce it exploded into a excruciatingly bright light.

"The best part is that it's reusable up to four times. We haven't gotten it to be permanent yet, but four flashes is nothing to scoff at." George said defensively.

"They're absolutely brilliant." Hermione complimented, examining on of the little balls.

"We've got about twenty here for you." Fred nodded to a little box of the multi colored balls.

More objects were explained. Wand lockers. Bands that attached to one's wand and it's owner's wrist meant to keep the wand close if a Death Eater used a Disarming charm or a Summoner.

"Ah, you'll remember this. Unassuming bit of wire. Toss it over your shoulder and it hovers about a foot off the ground..." George began.

"That's right." Neville chuckled. "Trips up your pursuer and then wraps around their legs."

"We call it a Tripcord." George nodded.

Now they were showing off the strange looking goggles.

"We showed you the Peruvian Darkness Powder, but we found a problem using it. Not only is your enemy blind and lost in the dark, so are you."

Fred shrugged.

"We went out into Muggle London one day and went to a movie." George

explained.

"Don't know why Wizards don't have the cinema. Was a hell of a film."

Fred grinned. "Gorgeous women, big action, and fantastic gadgets. Well, one gadget caught our interest. It allowed the hero character to see in the dark."

"It got us thinking, and then researching." George went on.

"It cost a lot of money, and we had to get it through more questionable dealers, but we finally got a Hand Of Glory."

"It's a mummified hand. Don't know who it belonged to, and don't care to find out." George chuckled.

"We ground it up, and did a few more things and came up with these babies. Goggles Of Glory." Fred smiled proudly. "The work on the same basis as the original Hand of Glory, giving light to their owner in the dark, but without the pesky decay smell, and you don't have to hold onto it."

Harry took a pair of the goggles and Sirius put out the fire and extinguished all the light. Harry was speechless. He placed the goggles on and could see as clearly as if the sun was shining brightly in the room.

"You guys got to try this." He laughed heartily.

The others each donned a pair and praised the twins for their ingenuity.

"Please, be careful with them." Fred pleaded. "It was extremely difficult getting a Hand of Glory, and it will be even harder to get another. They are extremely rare."

"I'll talk to Rufus Scrimgeour about these." Sirius said proudly. "We might be able to locate a few Hands, if you'll make these for the Aurors."

"Deal." Fred and George chorused.

"These give me a few ideas." Ron grinned. "Death Eaters won't know what hit them."

"I like the way you think, Ron." Blaise said, clapping his friend on the back. They slapped hands and began conspiring on ways to use the goggles and the Darkness powder.

Sirius turned the lights back on and the group removed their goggles. Harry looked to Daphne, who was smiling, but he noticed something in her eyes that made him pause. He reached out and gave her hand a squeeze. She turned to look at him, giving him one of the smiles she reserved just for him. He knew that the more they prepared, the more tense she had become. In fact, Harry had noticed a certain amount of nervous tension in all of his comrades.

Each day, they got news on Voldemort's movements and his building of troops. Each day, they trained harder perfecting their spell work as well as their communication. All of them could perform non verbal spells with the same power as screaming it out.

Hermione was the best of the girls in a duel, but none of them were slouches. Neville and Harry had the best teamwork when they fought together. All together, Harry was positive his group were more qualified than any Auror for the coming fight. But there was still the doubt and fear in each of them.

"In battle, anything can happen." Sirius, Moody and Tonks had repeated that statement so often it was almost a mantra. They all understood it's meaning. No matter how well trained you are, the unexpected always happened. The best they could do was to watch out for each other, and not to hesitate.

Harry hated to see that doubt in Daphne's normally smiling eyes.

Harry thanked the twins for their help and took Daphne and disappeared from the study.

"Oh, I wish those two would just get it done already." Tracey whispered

to Hermione, who nodded her agreement.

"The tension is almost unbearable." Hermione said.

"And I'm getting sick of listening to her whine about it." Tracey chuckled.

Hermione covered her mouth to keep from laughing as well.

"The giants are in place, and the dogs have arrived as well." Yaxley said reverently. He had been summoned to report on the progress of the Death Eater army. Voldemort gave a small smile, all the while stroking the golden chalice that he had hung around his neck.

"Very good. All is in place. Has young Malfoy reported yet?" Voldemort asked, staring blankly at nothing in particular.

"Yes, just a moment ago. I believe he is ready to lead the first wave, My lord."

"Very good. I want Dolohov and Carrow to begin to test their wards. Tell them to look for detection wards and take them down if they can. No doubt that interfering fool has cast more protection. I want you to send an envoy to the Acromantulas. Promise them fresh meat, that should get their attentions. Go."

"My lord." Yaxley bowed lowly.

Voldemort didn't watch the man leave, but simply listened for the sound of the chamber door closing. All was in readiness. In the morning, he would go to his armies and lead them into battle. He had given very specific orders that Dumbledore and Snape were to be his to deal with alone. Anyone else standing in the way was to be disposed of.

Voldemort wanted nothing less than a slaughter. He wanted to demoralize and frighten his enemies. He wanted them to submit to his rule. But before that, he needed to stamp the fight out of them. They would lose precious pure blood life, but it couldn't be helped.

The surviving Pure Bloods would serve him as they were meant to. The

half bloods and muggleborns had a much crueler fate in store. They would be rewards to his most loyal. Slaves, or playthings. The Dark Lord cared not what pleasures his followers sought. He had other matters to attend.

Tomorrow promised to be extraordinary. He did not believe that Hogwarts would fall. No it would take more than a day to conquer there. But he had the patience. No, tomorrow he would finally take possession of his new body.

He would allow Malfoy to lead the first wave of attack. Let the boy torture, mutilate and kill until he was lost to his own ecstasy, then recall him with special orders. The child would be so drunk with his bloodlust that he would be unable to think clearly, only desiring to return to battle like so many of his fellow Death Eaters. It would be then that Voldemort would order the Dementors to feast upon the child's soul. Then he, Lord Voldemort would take his new, younger, stronger body with its powerful magical core, and he would step onto the battlefield himself and there he would subjugate the wizarding world, and kill the only one who truly stood in his way any longer.

By midnight tomorrow, Albus Dumbledore would be dead at last.

"It's coming." Daphne whispered. "It's coming very soon." She snuggled her naked body closer to Harry's who wrapped his arms around her much tighter.

"I can feel it as well." He sighed. "It's like a storm building in the air."

"I'm afraid." Daphne admitted.

"We all are. We're as ready as we can be, but that means nothing. We have no idea what's in store for us all."

Daphne nestled her head against his shoulder and kissed his cheek softly. She had been a little surprised when he stole her away from the rest of

their friends and taken her to his room. There he had taken her in his arms and given her the one thing she had desired more than anything for several months. Himself.

No in the post intimacy glow, they simply held each other as tightly as they could, each silently praying that this was the first of many more nights of passion.

"I wish I knew for sure when they were going to strike. At least then I might sleep a little better." Daphne sighed.

"His followers are gathering all over the place. That's all we know for sure. He's got the werewolves, which isn't a problem unless he waits for the full moon. Then we could have problems. Otherwise they're just people. The giants might be a little harder. I'm just thankful you can't train dragons."

"Oh, thanks Harry." Daphne slapped his bare chest playfully. "If that were the case I'd just say let him have England, and take you with me to America or someplace just as far."

"I hear Brazil is quite beautiful."

Daphne stretched, moaning with pleasure. "MMmmm, warm climate, miles of sandy beaches, loads to see and do. I'm in."

Harry began rubbing his lover's bare back in soft delicate circles. Her skin was so soft, and intoxicating. He smiled to himself as he remembered the look on her face when he began to unbutton her blouse. He hadn't said anything to her. He had just kissed her passionately and undressed her. She hadn't been hard to convince once her mind caught up with the situation.

"I like to see you smile like that." Daphne remarked. Harry had been lost in his own thoughts and hadn't registered her movements. She was on top of him again, staring down into his smoldering green eyes. She bent

forward and drew him into a long sultry kiss.

"I wonder if I'll be missed tonight?" She wondered aloud when she broke the kiss.

"Do you really think anyone's going to form a search party for us?" Harry laughed.

"I'm sure Tracey, Susan and Hermione are quite glad to be rid of me. I've been a little on edge of late. Thank you for curing that."

"Is that what I did? I thought I was showing the depth of my love for you."

"Oh yes, you did. Quite well actually. I had thought, given what I've learned from listening to Pansy and Millicent that it would be rather, well, uncoordinated. But you surprise and I am very pleased."

"You know, I don't want to know what they said to make you think that. Please keep it to yourself." Harry winced.

"I'll only say that given what I've heard, and what I've just experienced, Draco had a lot to be jealous of you for."

"Ok. Seriously. No more." Harry pleaded, laughing all the while.

"Tracey will thank you I'm sure." Daphne smiled, kissing Harry deeply again.

"Why?"

"I've been rather a pain to live with for a little while. I've had to listen to her talk about how she's constantly teasing Neville, and how wonderful he was when they made love. I've listened to Hermione prattle on and on about how she misses Justin. Luna sneaks off nearly every night to be with Ron. She always comes back with that damned satisfied smirk, and Susan...Oh don't get me started on Susan. She says that her and Blaise haven't, but Tracey says they have. I have to agree. I can see it on her face."

"Ok, I've just heard way too much about my friends and their sex lives. I don't want to hear anymore. It's just...well...oogy."

"oogy? That's what you call it?" Daphne laughed. "You're right, though. I'm sorry. I'm just nervous, and happy and extremely relaxed. But you know what I really want right now?"

"What's that?" Harry looked up inquisitively.

Daphne pressed her body against his, touching her lips to his before staring into his brilliant green eyes.

"I want to do it again."

Dawn broke softly, bathing the world in sunlight. There were few clouds in the sky, and fresh blanket of snow upon the ground. It was very quiet as the whole of the student body were still sleeping, warm and cozy in their beds.

Teachers were up, and going about their preparations for the coming week's classes. Albus Dumbledore was sitting in the empty Great hall beginning his breakfast of eggs and kippers when there was a brilliant flash and a thunderous concussion that shook the entire castle.

Dumbledore stood swiftly, listening closely. He didn't wait long as it happened again. This time it was followed by screams echoing throughout the castle as frightened students awoke to the concussions.

"So, it finally begins." the headmaster said softly.

25. Chapter 25

"Follow me, Please." Minerva McGonagall urged the frantic group of students. She led them to the Great hall where the evacuation was to begin. Just as planned the heads of house had gone and collected their charges. Once in the great hall they would be separated by year and taken out of the castle.

As they walked hurriedly down the staircases, the castle shook. The

prefects helped to keep everyone moving, and McGonagall tried her very best not to show fear. She knew that if she appeared frightened, her young charges might panic, and that would make things far more difficult than they were to be already.

The castle shook again against whatever the Death Eaters were using to break the protective wards. Dumbledore's voice could be heard as she led her students into the Great hall. He was asking students to gather by year. As she entered the Great hall she saw seven groups converging. She noted that Flitwick was collecting first years close to the doorway.

"Alright." McGonagall turned to the Gryffindors behind her. "You are to gather with your fellow classmates by year. First Years are to go with Professor Flitwick. Hurry along now. The rest of you find your groups and await instructions. Quietly now."

The Gryffindors broke off to find their year mates and wait for instructions. McGonagall joined Dumbledore at the Head table, where the old man was peering over a map of Hogwarts.

"What is that?" She asked.

"A most ingenious map of the school. It was loaned to me by Sirius Black. With this map, we can observe the entirety of the school and find which halls are clear and which should be avoided. As you can see, nearly everyone is here now. Filius should take the first years to the seventh floor now and get them through the passage way."

Dumbledore stood and waved at the tiny professor who gave a curt nod and ordered the youngsters to follow him swiftly. Dumbledore turned back to the map to observe their progress.

"Has anyone been notified yet?" McGonagall asked.

"Fawkes has been sent with messages. We should be hearing from our people..."

There was a bright burst of flame and the beautiful phoenix appeared in front of the two professors. It gave a slight turn of its head and nodded. "Ah, very good." Dumbledore smiled. "Minerva, would you be so kind as to go to the Ravenclaw common room and greet Amos Diggory and his lot. If you would also send Pomona to the Hufflepuff common room. Thank you."

McGonagall hurried off to accomplish her tasks, leaving a sullen headmaster behind. Dumbledore was having a difficult time at the moment. He was trying to decide if it was too early to call for their secret weapon. He knew just the sight of it would inspire those who were going to fight, but would it be better to hold onto that particular card for now. Either way, Dumbledore knew that there was no way they would win this battle without Harry Potter and his friends.

Voldemort felt weak, even with his Horcrux so close to him, his magic was being exhausted.

"Damn Dumbledore for making these wards so bloody strong." He said to himself. He was using some of his strongest work to break through the protective wards. He was close to breaking through, he knew it. He only hoped his strength would hold out a little longer. Once the wards had broken, he could send his armies into the grounds and he could go back to their camp to rest.

He waved his wand in another series of intricate patterns, mumbling softly before unleashing the full might of the spell. With a loud rumble and a brilliant flash of light, Voldemort felt the wards collapse. He gave a satisfied smile and turned to his waiting armies.

He felt exhausted, drained of all his energy, yet he knew he had to remain the picture of power.

"I want Dumbledore and that traitorous worm, Severus Snape brought

before me." He spoke clearly, falsely projecting an image of strength.

"Any who surrender are to be spared and taken prisoner. Those who resist are to be made examples of. Go forth my legions, and so them my wrath!"

As one giants, werewolves, hags, and one hundred Death Eaters surged onto the grounds of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

Voldemort watch them for a moment before he retired to his camp.

He had failed to notice one cloaked and hooded follower watching him ever so carefully. When the Dark Lord disappeared from the front line,

Draco Malfoy followed his forces onto the grounds of his former school.

He knew that today would be the day his master would try to take his body. He had felt his magic course through him when he had awoken that morning. Draco knew that the bonding process was nearly finished.

Draco figured that a few hours of killing and destruction would solidify the bond, and that he would be asked to report sometime that evening, where dementors would surely try to suck out his soul. They would not succeed. By midnight, Draco Malfoy would kill the Dark Lord.

In the meantime, there was no reason he can't even a few scores of his own. Draco clenched his wand tightly and strode up the hill to the great castle.

"Wake up!" Sirius burst into Harry's room. Both Harry and Daphne jumped awake at the invasion.

"I apologize," Sirius said, turning away quickly, embarrassed slightly. "We just got word. Death Eaters have begun their attack."

"Are we going?" Harry asked. Daphne squeezed his arm under their blankets.

"As soon as you're all ready." Sirius said urgently. He quickly left, shutting the door behind him.

Daphne threw on Harry's robe and hurried back to her room where she could find something "more battle appropriate". Harry dressed quickly, grabbing the Dragon hide jacket he'd gotten in Italy so many months ago, for a little extra protection.

Twenty minutes later, Harry caught Daphne just before they entered the Dining hall to join everyone else.

"I want you to wear this under your shield cloak." He said handing the dragon hide coat to her. She looked up at him for a moment, but said nothing. She took the jacket slowly and put it on in front of him. Harry took Daphne in his arms and kissed her hard, clutching her desperately to him. Daphne returned the kiss with equal passions. She knew what they were about to do, and what was at stake. Not just the future of the wizarding world, but her own. Her life with Harry. They broke the kiss and simply stared into each other's eyes.

A moment later, they were among their friends, putting on shield cloaks, packing Weasley Defense items where they could get to them easily, and giving each other significant looks of encouragement and heartfelt pride. Sirius stood off to the side, smiling proudly at the collected group. He had trained them all, and was convinced that they would all fight valiantly until Voldemort and his followers were finished.

Sirius shot a look to Remus who was securing his shield cloak. Remus gave a meaningful look back to his oldest and greatest friend. A look that said all the things they had never spoken aloud to one another. A thousand regrets, a thousand praises, all communicated with one look. Moody stomped into the dining hall and watched as the nine young men and women were checking their supplies and fastening shield cloaks in preparation. He hadn't felt pride like this since he had been a young graduate of the Auror Academy so long ago. These young people carried

a great weight upon their shoulders. All the hopes and prayers of their world now hung on their actions. He watched as Sirius and Remus said so much with just their eyes, and he felt a tug on his withered, bitter old heart when he saw Tonks give one last kiss to her lover Remus.

Moody saw the same looks of hope and fear on the youngsters now. He knew what they were feeling, and secretly wished they didn't have to do what was needed. No young person should have to, and yet these nine had proven beyond any doubts that they were not only willing to make the sacrifices that might be asked, but they were more than capable of putting up a very good fight. Moody only hoped it would be enough.

"No matter what happens," Ron said to Blaise. "I'm very happy to call you my friend."

"Ron, you're more than my friend." Blaise smiled. "You're family. You're all my family."

"I'm very honored to be with you all today." Tracey said, tears burning her eyes. "I could never have dreamt of knowing such great people."

"You've all shown me real kindness, and compassion. You've looked past my craziness and accepted me into your lives. I thank you and love you all." Luna smiled, wiping at her eyes.

"I am truly honored to know you all." Harry said, eyeing each of his friends in turn. "We've been through all kinds of highs and lows and we've supported each other through it all. Today will be no different. I just want you all to know how much it means that you are willing to stand by my side. I can't thank you enough."

"Alright." Moody grunted. "There'll be time for speeches later on." He grabbed a handful of floo powder and tossed it into the fire. He limped into the green flames and called out "Hogwarts, Great Hall."

In a flash he was gone, leaving the others staring into the fireplace.

Silence reigned for a moment, broken only when Hermione spoke softly.

"Anyone want to smack my rear for luck?"

"Hermione?" Justin Finch-Fletchley said when he saw the brunette emerge from the roaring fire. He had been standing with the Sixth Year students awaiting instructions. So far all the students through fourth year had been taken out of the great hall. He had overheard some teacher mention that they had been taken to safety.

Justin didn't have the chance to ask anymore questions as Hermione had flung herself into his arms and was kissing him soundly. There were a few catcalls and whistles, but then there was nothing but awed silence. Justin knew it wasn't because Hermione was kissing him, though he could barely think of anything but her soft lips on his. When she finally pulled away, Justin saw what had miraculously silenced everyone.

Harry Potter stepped out of the fire and into the great hall, looking to the gathered people who would be fighting alongside him and his friends. Every where he looked, all he could see was gobsmacked faces. He spotted several students that he knew and gave them each a little nod of recognition.

There was a powerful surge of defiant rebellion throughout the Great Hall as whispers grew into cheers. Harry Potter was alive and he was there to lead them against the forces of darkness. There was a very palpable energy growing in the hall now as everyone, young and old welcomed the coming fight.

Dumbledore smiled to himself. As he watched the people before him reaching out to shake Harry's hand, embrace him, and call out that they were behind him, the old man knew that he had chosen well in sending word to Sirius. No one outside the castle would know Harry was alive, and it would be the last thing they would expect.

More and more people, members of the Order of the Phoenix, Ministry people loyal to Amelia Bones and the side of light, and allies from all over still came pouring into the Great Hall. Every single one got the same shock when they laid eyes on the young man now in the middle of the Great Hall surrounded by friends and family, greeting new people warmly, and preparing them all for the fight ahead.

"May I have your attentions?" Dumbledore called out. "Fifth years are to follow Professor Sprout to the Seventh floor."

"NO!" Came one angry voice. From among the fifth year students, a thin, pretty redhead stepped into view. Her brown eyes were fiery with rage and there was a long bright pink scar upon her right cheek.

"I am not running from these maniacs. Not anymore. I am staying and fighting." Ginny Weasley hollered.

"Ginny, please." Ron began, but she cut him off.

"Look what they did to me. What HE did to me. I have more right than anyone, save Harry to fight, and I'm not leaving. Not with out taking a few of them out first."

"Absolutely not!" Cried Molly Weasley. She and Arthur had just arrived along with the twins and to the surprise of many, Charlie Weasley.

"You are going home, where it is safe." Molly said with finality.

"No I am not, mother. I will not sit by waiting for word that you're all ok, or you've been killed. I am as capable than all of you and I will not leave your sides. If you send me home, I will only come back. I'll take a broom or whatever I need to in order to get back here."

"Mom?" Charlie said, softly placing a hand on his mother's arm. "She should stay. She can stay with me. I'll keep her safe."

Molly heaved a great sigh and looked into her son's bright eyes. "You keep her with you at all times, and watch out for her." She waved for all

of her family to come closer, including Harry and Hermione.

"All of you." She spoke with great seriousness as her eyes spilled tears.

"You all watch out for each other, you be careful and come out of this alive. I love each and everyone of you, and I do not wish to be saying goodbye."

They all entrapped the matriarch in a giant hug, which only serve to make Molly sob harder.

"Fifth Years, If you would please follow..." Dumbledore began, trying to take attention away from the family scene.

He didn't finish, however. He looked at the fifth years. He looked at the sixth and seventh years. Clearly, the evacuation was finished. There was no way he would be able to get any the remaining students to safety.

"Alright." Dumbledore said a bit sadly. "But you are to follow orders precisely when given." Dumbledore was stopped from going on when the castle gave a great shudder. The Headmaster turned to look around.

"They've breached the wards." He said to himself.

Harry Ron and Hermione rejoined their friends near the front of the Great Hall. Harry took Daphne's hand and gave it a tight, encouraging squeeze. She looked into his eyes and saw his love shining in them. She stepped closer, kissing him deeply.

"You be careful." She said softly.

"We are going to be ok. You have big plans for us, remember?"

It started very faintly, but it was growing louder with every second. It was the thunderous war cries of Voldemort's army approaching the main door.

"So much for time to prepare." Harry said chagrined.

"You will find we are very much prepared. Mister Potter." Flitwick smiled.

Death Eaters flooded onto the grounds, heading straight for the giant oak doors. Two of the giants reached it first, and were thrown back the moment they touched it.

"The doors are warded?" asked a Death Eater.

There were screams of rage as the Death Eaters began looking for different ways into the castle. Several giants began tearing up nearby trees to use as clubs on the stone walls, while everyone else looked for doors or windows in which to make an entrance.

None of them really bothered to take in the bigger picture and failed to notice the fifty people on brooms coming closer and closer.

"Aim for the giants!" Snape cried to the masses flying with him. "Try to get it into their eyes or mouths."

The swarm of broom riders began pelting the attacking force with fragile vials of potion. Draught of Living Death, to be precise. Snape and Dumbledore had figured that the toughest threat would be the giants. Snape had suggested they use this particular potion and brooms to get it to their attackers. It was well known that it was hard to take down a giant using magic.

After the first wave, however, the group of flyers had difficulties as the grounded Death Eaters began firing up at them. Snape took a page out Harry's book, by diving from great heights and heaving vials at giants who were mid roar.

Because they were much larger, it took a bit for the potion to take hold, but when it was all done, thirteen of the forty giants had been downed.

The aerial group regrouped on the astronomy tower when their ammunition had been depleted.

The plan was to keep their makeshift air force high and away from the battle, using them sparingly so the Death Eaters would be off balance.

Snape smiled to himself knowing that the next wave of their attack would be carrying a potion of Snape's own design.

The Death Eaters had split their forces, some staying with the remaining giants to batter at the oak doors, others looking for alternative routes into the castle.

The doors were beginning to weaken under the giants constant pounding. Draco Malfoy stood back behind the army, impatiently awaiting for entry into the castle, and staying hidden when the aerial wing pelted the forces with potions. Then, it had struck him as a well thought out plan.

Voldemort had again proven his ineptitude at planning for a battle. Draco was sure none of the Death Eaters had brooms. Silently he ran off towards the Quidditch pitch where he knew there were school brooms. If the Order could use the skies, why not Draco. Next to Potter, Draco had been the best seeker in the school.

He reached the broom shed and blasted the door of it's hinges. There were many old, broken brooms that were barely useable. Yet there was one broom that looked up to his task.

Draco grabbed the broom and felt it hum with energy. He turned back to the castle and tried to think of the best entry point. The Order wing had taken refuge on the Astronomy tower, but there was nothing in the north tower. Draco decided not to fly until he was closer, not wanting to draw attentions to himself.

Let the weaklings focus on the larger forces, while he snuck inside and made entry points for his forces. He would show Voldemort's followers what it meant to truly lead. Then they would follow him into victory.

Dumbledore watched as McGonagall lead every single suit of armor in the castle into the Entrance hall, where the giants were almost through. The noise of metal clanging on hard stone was near deafening to the old

man, and from the looks on the faces of many around him, they also didn't like the ruckus.

With a final clank, the suits of armor stood silent, patiently waiting for the moment to strike.

"The giants won't be able to enter, but the rest of them will begin firing as soon as there is a hole." Dumbledore said to Sirius who was at his right.

"So they'll only hit the armor. Good call. We can fire from here, and try to thin their numbers." Sirius grinned.

"Indeed. Severus will begin his second run shortly, and that should send more of their numbers running in horrible pain." Dumbledore smiled. "He has come up with a rather sinister little potion. I do not envy our enemies."

Sirius turned a suspicious eye to the old man, who simply stared at the great oak doors which were bowing and cracking under the onslaught from outside.

"Ready your wands!" Dumbledore ordered loudly.

Draco landed silently in the Divination classroom. It was quiet, and the incense was overpowering. Draco looked carefully as he didn't want to be stopped. Trelawney was no threat, unless she alerted the rest of the Order. If she were hiding here, she would need to be eliminated. Draco left nothing undisturbed, looking for the eccentric and fraudulent professor.

She was there, of course. Hiding in a small closet where she kept the crystal balls. She looked up at Draco with her eyes amplified by her thick spectacles. Draco smiled widely, offering his hand as if in friendship.

"You..." She began, pointing a long thin finger, her voice trembling. "You are not here to help me..."

"Well," Draco grinned malevolently. "I guess you do have the inner eye after all."

"You will fail. He knows, and he is looking to strike you down." She tried to warn Draco, but the blonde man only knelt in front of the frightened woman, sneering malevolently.

"He most likely knows. I am not so foolish as to believe he doesn't know. But he is weak, and I am not. He will not take me."

"I do not speak of the Dark Lord. His fate has already been written."

Trelawney tried.

"So it has." Draco purred. "So who is it who will strike me down then?"

Trelawney shook with fear, her eyes wide, tears streaming down her cheeks. She clutched her shawls tighter as Draco stood. With a smile on his face, Draco lovingly reached out and clasped the thin throat of the shaking Divination teacher. Trelawney struggled as Draco's grip grew ever tighter. As she thrashed and fought Draco's talon like grip, her glasses fell on the cold stone floor, cracking. Draco began to breathe heavier as Trelawney's eyes rolled into the back of her head and she gave one last gasp before her body fell limp to the floor.

Draco stood slowly, still breathing hard, a strange look on his face now.

He wiped away a few strands of his sleek blonde hair and stared at his first kill of the day. Draco swore that just before she had died she said something, but he had not heard her words. She had been unable to speak clearly, and Draco had been too lost to his lust for death that he'd had been too far gone to understand the gasping of the once haughty teacher. He stared at her for a long moment before rallying himself to help his fellow Death Eaters into the castle.

He began to step away, but quickly went back to the body, tearing a long thin strip of the woman's cheek and placing it lovingly into the velvet

pouch on his belt. He sighed serenely as he closed the drawstrings and then made his way out into the castle through the trap door, without even so much as a final look at the body of Sybil Trelawney.

26. Chapter 26

"So that is where we stand, I'm afraid." Dumbledore said sadly. He had gathered Harry and his friends in his office, far away from the fighting. The Marauder's Map lay open upon his desk, and he kept watch over it to monitor the battle. The main battle was centered around the entry hall, but several groups of people had broken away and scattered throughout the castle.

"So, there is only the snake and the cup left, and you're sure that Voldemort has the cup on him." Harry confirmed.

"I am. Thanks to reports from Bellatrix's escapade at Gringott's, I am positive the final two Horcruxes are near us. We must lure Voldemort to us, and destroy them before we kill Voldemort himself."

"How do we do that?" Hermione asked.

"It's not as if we can send him an invitation." Susan said angrily. She had only just learned of the Horcruxes.

"He wouldn't come anyway. He's a coward." Neville remarked.

"But a smart coward." Ron said. "He sends his pawns to weaken us so he can come in and finish it. That way he gets all the glory."

"Any ideas?" Daphne asked, looking at her friends who all looked just as lost as she felt.

"Maybe we could go to him." Blaise offered. "We could have Harry appear in front of him. While he's occupied with Harry, the rest of us could destroy these things."

"No. Undoubtedly he will have surrounded himself with his best Death Eaters. It would be suicide." Dumbledore sighed. "We need him to on our

field, where we have the advantage."

"I've got one." Harry said, staring pointedly at the Marauder's map. "Let's make him angry."

He stepped closer to the desk and leaned closer to the map. The others followed him to see what it was that had caught his attention.

Harry felt only rage. The little dot upon the map signified so much to Harry. From the first trip into Diagon alley, to his capture last fall. One name had been the bane of his existence at Hogwarts. Draco Malfoy. The map showed Draco had entered the castle. He was currently on the sixth floor in the northern part of the castle.

"He's going to bring in Death Eaters in through the Transfiguration Corridor." Daphne pointed to the map.

"And it looks like he's going to have help." Ron pointed.

"Ron, Neville, you guys come with me. The rest of you head off his buddies." Harry said commandingly. "We've got to stop him before he gets the Death Eaters in."

"I'm going with you." Daphne said stubbornly. Harry didn't argue, but turned and led the way into the castle. Dumbledore had been silent through the whole exchange, watching the interaction with fascination. He finally looked at the map on his desk to find out what had agitated the youth so fiercely.

"Oh dear." Dumbledore sputtered when he saw Draco's name. He quickly moved to the perch of his familiar. "Fawkes. Please retrieve Severus right away. I'm afraid Harry and his friends are heading into something they are not prepared for."

There was a flash of fire and the phoenix was gone. Dumbledore felt himself grow cold as he stared at the name upon the map.

Snape mounted his broom and waited while the rest of his group

prepared. He checked his makeshift bandolier where seven vials of his new acid waited to be pelted down upon the Death Eater army.

"We're ready Severus." Charlie Weasley nodded. He had been sent up here when he arrived. Snape was happy to have such a good flyer with them. He would have been extremely happy to have Potter, but Dumbledore had argued that they must keep Harry's involvement as quiet as possible until the Dark Lord himself appeared.

While Snape agreed with the plan, he still would have felt better having Harry up in the air with them.

"As before, aim for the giants." Snape ordered. "And be careful. We no longer have the element of surprise."

With a deep breath, Snape leapt off the Astronomy tower, followed by the others he led. Like birds of prey, the aerial group dove their brooms at the attacking force, still pounding and smashing at the great oak doors which led into the castle. Snape wondered how they had held up this long against the continuous onslaught from the giants.

Roars of confusion and searing pain came from the angry giants and Death Eaters, as the flying warriors began flinging their vials of acid. Snape smiled with satisfaction as his first vial went right down the throat of a howling giant, who had been hit in the back of the head by another Order member. Snape pulled away quickly to prepare for his next run, so he didn't see the giant clutch his smoking throat as it was eaten away from the inside. The dying giant stomped and flailed, smashing death Eaters under his gargantuan feet until he finally fell in a smoldering heap crushing a few Death Eaters who had been unable to escape.

Charlie Weasley flew low, banishing a vial straight at the face of a Death Eater, and pulling up just as two others tried to hex him off his broom. As he pulled up through the legs of a giant, he smashed another vial against

the inside of the grayish skinned thigh. The giant howled in agony and swatted at the growing wound on it's leg.

"We're never going to get the giants on our side if we keep doing things like this to them." he thought wryly.

Charlie swung his broom around when he had gained altitude. He saw others diving, swooping, and speeding above dropping their vials upon the biggest targets. Charlie had to admit that this had been a good idea. Controlling the skies would not ensure victory, but it would tip the balance in the light side's favor. The key was to eliminate the threat of the giants.

The lumbering beasts had the strength, and for the most part were impervious to most magic. As it now stood, the giants were most nearly finished. Only five remained fighting of the original forty. Thirteen were sleeping thanks to the Draught Of Living Death, and the others were now nursing serious burns, or in the case of the one Snape had gotten, dead. Charlie saw a flash out of the corner of his eye, and turned in time to see Snape following Fawkes north. He had no time to wonder what the reason was for Snape's quick retreat as his broom was struck with a blasting hex, snapping off the front of the handle. Charlie was losing altitude fast, and didn't have much time for fancy ideas. He fought the broom through a window of the castle, and crashed into the library. He was buried in an avalanche of books and shelving.

As he emerged from the mess, only bruised, Charlie began thanking whoever watched over him that it had been books and not the ground. He would live to fly another day. Charlie dug into his pocket to fetch his wand and join the others, only to find his wand had been snapped in the crash.

"But I'm still alive, and that's something." He shrugged. Quickly he left

the library to seek out his comrades, and hopefully find a usable wand.

"Why are we going this way?" Pansy Parkinson asked. "McGonagall told us to go to the Hospital wing to help Pomfrey."

"Why would we want to help the side that's going to lose?" Theodore Nott asked. He turned on Pansy, who involuntarily took a step back. "We're going to help get our families and the other Death Eaters inside to finish this farce of a battle. Then we'll be rewarded by the Dark Lord for our service."

"Or we'll get killed." Pansy argued. "Do you really believe that You-Know-Who is going to give you some fancy medal or loads of gold for opening the door?"

"Ever since the start of the year you've become this goody-goody bitch. You've become worse than Granger, and I'm so sick of listening to it. You used to know where your loyalties were."

"Shut up, Theodore." Pansy shrieked. "Astoria has done good things for our house."

"Yeah, letting mudbloods and blood traitors get in with us. She's setting us up for the chopping block." Nott argued. Behind him, Crabbe and Goyle stood, nodding stupidly. Pansy looked to her best friend, who was now moving to stand next to Theodore.

"Millie?" Pansy said, her voice a surprised whisper. "You're not seriously siding with them, are you?"

"I don't even know you anymore Pansy." Millicent said in her deep nearly masculine voice.

"You're just siding with them because Theodore took your virginity when no one else would even touch you." Pansy stamped.

"Is that true?" came a familiar drawling voice. "Theodore I'm shocked."

"Draco?" Nott asked, not believing his eyes.

"I hoped to find people loyal to the Dark Lord still hiding inside." Draco purred. "But tell me, did you really give it to Bulstrode? Have you sunk so low?"

"I am standing right here." Millicent snarled, clutching her wand tightly.

"Ever since Greengrass took leadership of Slytherin, she's been spreading this treat others equal tripe. She's got nearly the entire house believing in it. Pickings are slim. However, in Millie's defense, she's a great..."

"I don't need details, thank you." Draco said, shuddering as recent memories of his own escapades flooded his mind's eye.

"What is the situation?" Draco asked, changing the subject.

Pansy, seeing that their attentions were distracted, began backing away from her former friends. She hoped to get clear and possibly warn others that Draco was inside the castle. As she turned however, two hands clutched her and swung her back around.

Crabbe had his meaty arms around her now, and she was facing Draco's arrogant sneer.

"You weren't going to warn the Order, were you?" He smirked. "After all the good times we had?"

"They weren't good. It was me fooling myself. You were never good enough for me, I just couldn't see it then." Pansy spat.

"Theodore, Why didn't you hook up with Pansy?" Draco asked mockingly, not turning his vivid blue eyes from her smoldering brown. "She wasn't very good in bed, but at least she was pretty."

"Was?" Nott asked confused.

Draco reached out and violently tore a strip of flesh from Pansy's face as if ripping off a bandage. He used the same dark cutting hex he always used, but did it much faster than usual. Draco tucked the fresh cut strip into his pouch, never taking his eyes from Pansy, who struggled to get

free of Crabbe, screaming in frightened agony all the while.

With a nod from Draco, Crabbe pushed the shrieking girl to the floor.

Pansy fell hard, cracking her knees on the hard unforgiving stone floor.

She clutched at her face where blood seeped through her fingers staining her school sweater. She spun to face her former friends as they slowly closed in on her.

"What should we do to her?" Draco asked rhetorically. "Oh how I would love to keep you screaming all night, however, I do have things to do, people to kill, and a kingdom to conquer. So, I'm afraid you're to get a reprieve."

"You're going to let her live?" Nott asked angrily.

"Please." Draco chuckled. "Avada Kedavra."

A flash of green and Pansy Parkinson slumped over, dead.

Without a word, Draco turned and headed down the hall, followed by Nott, Crabbe and Goyle. Millicent lingered just a second after the rest to stare at her lifelong best friend, killed at the hands of the one they had trusted above all others. The one Pansy had sworn she would marry. For the first time in her life, Millicent Bulstrode was having second thoughts on where she stood in this war.

The Great Oak doors finally gave way and the entrance hall was flooded by Death Eaters. Leading the charge was Fenrir Greyback, the leader of the werewolf tribes who had declared loyalty to Voldemort. They had been given wands, but Fenrir preferred using his hands and teeth. He would have preferred a full moon night, but his blood lust knew no limitations.

He moved like an animal unleashed, barreling into his victims and tearing at their flesh until he was soaked in blood. He howled into the cavernous entrance hall, beckoning his forces forward.

Fenrir stood from the carcass that had once been a man and searched for the next closest victim when he spotted Remus Lupin, who was rushing towards him.

"You betray your roots, boy!" Fenrir called out in challenge. "It isn't too late to join us."

"You're sick, a disease on humanity." Remus countered. He whipped his wand, sending a mess of arrows at his opponent. Fenrir, clutching his own wand conjure a shield in time. The arrows fell to the floor and became vapor.

"Nice little trick, but nowhere near good enough." The werewolf called as he banished a large piece of the once great door at Remus who side-stepped as elegantly as a ballet dancer.

The two werewolves traded spells, each one growing more and more agitated with each failure. They circle each other, snarling in challenge. Fenrir struck first, tossing his wand aside and bull-rushing Remus, who also tossed away his wand. Remus gasped as the impact of Fenrir's bulk into his stomach pushed all the air out of his lungs. Still, Remus bashed and hammered at the elder wolf.

The two men crashed through a door into the staff room. Tumbling end-over-end, they fell on the floor, clawing, punching and snapping at each other. Fenrir was able to hold Remus down and strike blow after blow at the traitor.

"I gave you immeasurable power you ungrateful whelp!"

"You took my innocence and cursed my life." Remus shouted, pushing Fenrir off of him, and landing a solid punch into Fenrir's windpipe. The older wolf tumbled back, clutching his throat. Remus didn't let up, kicking and punching the bigger man until Fenrir was a bloody mess.

Remus took a few steps back, catching his breath, while Fenrir, laying on

the floor began laughing maniacally.

"You can't kill me, Lupin. No silver, and you won't lower yourself to use a killing curse. You're too good for that, eh?"

"You're better consider yourself lucky that I have no silver, you bastard."

Remus shouted.

"I can fix that." Tonks said. She waved her wand and conjured a silver dagger which she plunged deep into Fenrir's chest. Fenrir howled with rage and pain. He struggled to pull the knife free of his chest as he felt fire spreading inside of his body.

The alpha male of the werewolf clans tried to get to his feet, tried to crawl for safety, anything to save his life. It was all for nothing however when he finally succumbed to the poison that Tonks had pierced him with.

"You okay?" She asked of Remus who looked exhausted.

"You have impeccable timing, my love. Impeccable." Remus gasped.

"I saw you two roll in here and figured I'd back you up."

"Thank you." Remus said heartily as he kissed his lover firmly. "I will thank you properly later on.

"You better." Tonks smiled deviously.

"Come on, others need our help." Together they waded back into the raging battle just inside the castle entrance. The Death Eaters had made significant progress into the castle. The entrance all was no empty of fighting. Only bodies showed the signs of that battle had been there.

Remus and Tonks could hear the screams and war cries of people waging war inside the castle. Tonks grabbed Remus and they went to the Great Hall to see if anyone needed their assistance.

It happened so quick. Tonks passed a small alcove, not even looking.

Remus who was just behind her smelled the Death Eater before he saw

him. With a ferocious cry of feral rage, Remus tackled the robed figure just as he emerged from the shadows to attack Tonks. The two rolled on the floor, grappling with one another until there came the tell tale flash of green, and Remus went limp.

Tonks reacted instantly, blasting the robed attacker with a severing hex, cutting the man just above the shoulders. Tonks lunged forward, toppling the body of Remus' killer to the ground and picking up her lover's head and cradling it in her lap.

Tears of rage and loss spilled down her cheeks. Her normally spiky Pink hair began to lengthen and darken into a flat, mousy brown color. Her bright, sparkling eyes became darker as well. She sat there holding on to Remus until she was found by Professor Sprout twenty minutes later.

"This would be easier if we had that map." Tracey panted.

"We should be with Harry. Why did we agree to this?" Hermione asked.

"Because Nott is just as bad as Malfoy." Blaise growled. "He's got all Draco's supporters with him. As stupid as they are, they are quite powerful."

They rounded a corner and skidded to a halt. On the floor before them lay a body of someone familiar. Slowly they moved forward.

Tracey knelt down and felt a storm of emotion as she looked into the sad brown eyes of her former dorm mate, Pansy Parkinson.

"Who did this?" Blaise asked.

Tears fell from Tracey's eyes. "She had begun to see the light. She was becoming nice."

"Do you think she fought with Nott?" Hermione asked.

Tracey reached down and closed Pansy's eyes. She noticed a pool of blood, and turned pansy's head to see a long thin wound beginning just below Pansy's eye and straight down her cheek.

"What's that?" Hermione asked, peering closely at the wound.

"Draco did it." Susan said, her hand flying to her mouth in disgust. "He did it to my mom. Draco killed her."

Everyone turned to look at Susan, who was slowly backing away from Pansy's body.

"Draco's got help now. We need to get to Harry." Hermione urged.

Without another word Hermione led the groups as fast as they could go down to the Transfiguration Corridor.

"So what is your plan?" Nott asked as he ran next to Draco. The blonde wizard smirked as he eyed his companion. They had just emerged into the courtyard connected to the Transfiguration corridor.

"We clear any resistance and send up sparks. This will signal our forces waiting in the forest."

"Then what?" Nott was curious.

"Then, I am going to kill Dumbledore."

Nott stop so suddenly that Millicent ran into him, knocking him flat to the ground. Nott quickly got back to his feet and stared hard at the former Slytherin Prince. Draco simply smiled arrogantly.

"You don't truly believe you can beat Dumbledore in a duel, do you?"

Nott asked in awe.

"Yes. I can beat him, and I will. And then I will kill the Dark lord, and the entire world will fall to their knees and do as I command."

"Have you gone insane?"

"Obviously he has."

Draco, Nott and the others turned to see Harry Potter, Ron Weasley, Neville Longbottom, and Daphne Greengrass.

"YOU!" Draco said angrily. He pointed his wand and fired a series of spells which Harry dodged. "How are you still alive? I watched you die!"

"Then I must be a ghost." Harry said, ducking another volley of hexes.

"Take them, Potter is mine!" Draco shouted as he began moving forward.

He kept up a steady stream of hexes and curses, keeping Harry from countering. Draco figured he would simply keep Harry running about until he became tired, then he would eliminate the nuisance for good.

"You're a lousy shot, Draco." Taunted Harry.

"It doesn't matter Potter. Sooner or later you're not going to have anywhere left to hide."

Harry knew it was true. Draco was systematically eliminating every statue, low wall, and anything else Harry could hide behind. Harry would have to go on the offensive if he were going to have any chance.

"Diffindo." Harry shouted. Draco simply waved off the spell, and fired several more at his target. Harry rolled and dodged and leapt out of the way of each spell.

Draco suddenly fell forward onto his knees. Harry could see an angry looking Daphne holding her wand level at Draco's head. Crabbe, Goyle and Nott had been knocked out and lay on the ground. Harry also saw Neville and Ron looking over the Slytherins, making sure they were bound tightly.

"Looks like your back up is out. You've got no more help, Draco. Give up, and maybe we'll go easy on you."

Draco sneered at Harry, and with a speed no one present had ever believed possible, Draco was on his feet and with a flash, All Harry's friends were sent sprawling down the long corridor. Then Draco blasted a large chunk of the hall, cutting Harry off from rescue.

"It looks like we're even now, Potter."

"In your dreams, Malfoy."

"The Dark Lord may not be able to kill you, But I can."

Draco sent a flurry of spells at Harry. The raven-haired boy countered with a shield spell. Harry began to feel trepidation at his chances as he felt each spell smash against his shield.

"When I'm done with you Potter, I intend to make Greengrass my personal pet!"

"Over my dead body." Harry screamed as he fired several *Confringo* curses at his long-time rival. He growled with each miss, and sent a stunning spell at his school rival. Draco fell back as the spell hit him in the chest. Harry stood up slowly, breathing hard. He nearly fell over when Draco sat up, smirking wickedly.

"It's going to take more than that, Potter." Draco grinned, opening his robes to show his armor. "I've become very powerful since our last encounter. I'm even stronger than the Dark Lord. And after I've killed you, I will kill him."

Harry's eyes grew wide as Draco stood again. Harry again fired a volley of spells. Draco began to laugh as he dodged each spell. Harry was beginning to rack his brain for an idea to take down the arrogant ferret. He was beginning to feel tired from running and dodging Draco's spells. Harry needed something surprising.

He shoved his hand into his pocket and grabbed a soft packet, which he smashed onto the ground. Both boys were shrouded in darkness as the Peruvian Darkness Powder spread out. Harry quickly put his *Glory Goggles* on so he could take down his foe.

Just as Harry was about to strike, Draco conjured a strong wind to clear away the magical powder. He hit Harry with a stunner and followed up by summoning Harry's wand. "*Accio Wand.*"

Harry heard the spell uttered and cursed himself when he felt his wand ripped from his grip.

"Beg Potter."

"Never." Harry said angrily as he tried to get his breath back after being hit by a very powerful stunner. He stared defiantly up at Draco who only smiled back.

"It doesn't matter. It wouldn't change anything. Goodbye Potter."

"Diffindo!"

Draco fell to his knees clutching his wrist where his right hand used to be. Blood sprayed from the horrible gaping wound. Draco looked completely lost and surprised at the loss of his limb which rested by his knee, still clutching his wand.

Harry too, looked taken aback. He had been so sure that he was finished.

Both boys turned to see the approaching figure of Severus Snape.

"I can not allow you to continue Draco." Snape said slowly, keeping his wand leveled at Draco. "I know what he's done to you, and I will not let it finish."

"You traitor. You Bloody Bastard!" Draco screamed in defiance. Draco's eyes began to glow bright red in his fury.

"I am sorry, Draco. But it must be done. Sectumsempra!"

Draco's eyes went wide as he was hit with the spell. There was no scream, no cries of pain. There was simply a surprised little "oh" and Draco fell back onto the ground. He stared silently up at the gray sky, trying to think of all he had done, and what awaited him beyond the veil. He could feel his body growing colder as all his blood spilled out onto the snow.

Draco could see both Snape and Potter enter into his darkening field of vision, but he couldn't speak as his throat was dry. He could only stare at their faces, wondering why they both looked so saddened. Draco had hated them both. He had spent so much of his life dreaming of ways in

which to destroy Potter, many splendid manners in which Potter could meet his demise at Draco's own hands. He could fathom in his final moments why Potter would ever shed a tear at his demise.

Harry watched as Draco bled out onto the snow. He knelt beside his rival and looked up at Snape.

"Shouldn't we do something? We can't let him die." Harry asked of his old teacher.

"I'm sorry, but he must. It's a long story, and we've no time for it. Trust me when I say I wish there was another way." Snape said as he too, knelt beside Draco Malfoy. Neither man did anything other than watch as Draco's eyes closed and his breathing ceased. There was no sound. Harry felt a strange conflict. He had hated Malfoy more than any person he'd ever known. Yet he had never wanted to see Draco dead. Though it was true the Slytherin had deserved the very worst, Death seemed far too cruel.

There was a flash, and Harry felt himself tossed back into the snow covered ground. Harry scrambled back to his feet in time to see a strange blue energy leap out of the wound in Draco's chest and soar into the sky. Harry looked to Snape who looked quite upset.

"That should bring him to us." Snape smiled sadly.

Not far away, Lord Voldemort sat alone in his tent, struggling for breath. He had sent word for Draco to return, and there were two Dementors standing by. It was time. The bond was complete.

Voldemort stood weakly as his ears caught the sound of something approaching. Before he could figure out what the sound was, a brilliant blue light filled the tent and Voldemort felt himself lifted off the ground. Every fiber in his frail body became alive with energy and power. His magical core had returned to him. But it was stronger, more alive.

Voldemort fell into a heap on the floor. He sat up, flexing his fingers in front of his face. Energy crackled between his fingers.

Rage began boiling up in him now. From the very pit of his being until he could drown in the feeling. Draco had been killed. His new body had been destroyed. The Dark Lord stood now, shaking with anger until it culminated into one long, gut wrenching, earth shattering roar.

High up in the headmaster's office, Dumbledore took one long deep breath. He had just heard the far off cry, and he knew the time had come. With a great sigh, he sealed the envelope on his desk and walked slowly to the vibrant looking bird who watched his master sadly.

"Fawkes, I thank you, old friend, for your companionship. I am truly grateful for all you've done. I must ask one more thing."

Dumbledore explained his wishes and allowed the phoenix to take the envelope. With another flash of flame, the bird was gone. Dumbledore went back to his desk, and took his wand in his tired, old hands. He gazed about the office before taking another deep, soothing breath.

"At last, it is time." he said softly. Dumbledore left his office and began to make his way to the grounds where he knew Voldemort would be soon.

27. Chapter 27

"Come, Harry, there's nothing more we can do for him." Severus Snape said sadly. Though the castle of Hogwarts was under siege, and battle raged on, the Transfiguration courtyard was still as could be. Harry still knelt beside the body of his long time rival, Draco Malfoy.

"I'm sorry, professor, but it seems wrong to leave him here like this. He was a jerk, no doubt, but even he deserved better." Harry spoke softly.

"Forgive me, Harry. In all the years I witnessed the two of you fight, I never imagined you could even shed a tear for Draco." Severus said solemnly.

"I hated him." Harry began. "More than anyone, I hated Draco Malfoy.

Yet, I just feel so...so."

"Conflicted?" Snape gave a small sad smile. "It is good that you do feel so much right now. Maybe if Draco had better influences in his life, or if he could have seen beyond the narrow view of the world his father provided him. He may have become a better person, perhaps even a friend to you. We'll never know. But we must go. Voldemort will be marching on the castle now. We have precious little time."

Harry stood now and watched as Snape cleared the corridor that Draco had blocked with rubble. Ron, Neville and Daphne were all waiting, looks of sincere concern upon their faces. Daphne launched herself into Harry's arms, tears shining on her face.

At that moment they were joined by Harry's other friends. Hermione, Luna, Tracey, Susan, Blaise and Justin Finch-Fletchley, who was gripping Hermione's hand.

"We found Pansy Parkinson in one of the halls. She was dead." Hermione reported.

"Draco killed her." Susan added. "He left his calling card."

"We don't need to worry about Draco any longer." Snape said, motioning to the body in the courtyard. "I see you have taken care of his thugs."

Crabbe, Goyle, Nott and Bulstrode lay in a heap, all of them were unconscious and bound. Ron held their wands out to the Defense teacher, who took them and pocketed them inside his robe. He motioned for the group to follow him back towards the main entrance.

"Listen closely, I can only tell you this once. If we get it wrong, we all lose. Dumbledore has a plan and we need to help him carry it out. Don't ask questions, just listen and do as I instruct you."

The group, led by Snape, hurried on through the castle listening intently

as the once hated professor gave them their assignment. Just before they came to the entrance hall, Harry and his friends doubled back into the castle.

Snape emerged alone and greeted the headmaster, who was waiting quite patiently, a tiny smile on his face, his eyes twinkling madly.

"Am I correct in assuming our problem has been dealt with?" He asked.

"Draco has passed into the next great adventure." Snape confirmed.

"Potter is fine, and they have been informed. We have only but to play our parts."

"Severus, I thank you old friend. You have stood by me in the darkest of times, and been the voice of reason on several occasions. I can never repay you."

"Headmaster, stop it. Let's just do what we have to here."

Albus Dumbledore let out a long, heartfelt laugh and clapped the younger man upon the shoulder. Severus had known the headmaster to chuckle, but he had never once seen the old man laugh like a child. Clearly, the man who was spoken so highly of, even worshipped by some, had finally lost his mind. Of all the times...

The fighting had ceased and the Death Eaters had pulled back, as if signaled. The Order began to collect their wounded and take care of their fallen. A strange calm fell upon the grounds. A calm that was tainted with a cold that chilled everyone, and caused them all to repeatedly check over their shoulders.

Just beyond the tree line, Death Eaters gathered, all reverently bowed as their master, the Dark Lord, Voldemort stepped from the dark of the forest into their ranks. His eyes were blazing with an anger that none could ever recall him possessing before.

The Dark Lord spared no words as he strode forward with purpose. He

cleared the trees and approached the front of the castle. He came to a stop before the castle and took a long deep breath before touching his wand to his throat.

"This is the end. I have tolerated your pestilent attempts to stop me, but it ends now. I demand that Albus Dumbledore come out and face me.

Come, Dumbledore, and meet your end."

There was a long silent moment, and then, Albus Dumbledore emerged from the castle, looking as if he were merely taking a relaxing stroll in the gardens.

Dumbledore stopped when he was close enough to speak without having to shout. All around the two people gathered to witness what promised to be a spectacular show of magic. Death Eaters stood behind their master, while students, teachers and those who had stood with the light came out of the castle.

"So, we've finally come to it, Tom." Dumbledore said jovially.

"How dare you. I do not know how you managed to kill Draco, but it is only the latest in a very long list of grievances I have with you, old man. Today you die."

"Perhaps." Dumbledore said. "Perhaps it is indeed. But it is also the day that you will meet your end as well. It was I who destroyed you Horcruxes. You no longer have them to save you."

Voldemort snarled.

"You think you have destroyed them all? You think yourself so all knowing that you could have destroyed them all? You are sadly mistaken. But I don't need them. Not to finish you."

"Is that so? Well then, perhaps it is past time for idle chat."

"For once, we agree. DIE, OLD MAN!"

Voldemort struck with the Killing Curse, which Dumbledore easily

dodged. Then, chaos erupted for the Dark Lord. He felt the cup ripped from his neck and saw it soar off to his left where a small band of school children caught it and began running away. At that same moment, he felt a spell strike him across the chest.

The Dark Lord looked down to see his robes becoming darker with his own blood. He looked up to see the satisfied smile of Severus Snape.

"TRAITOR!" Bellatrix LeStrange shouted as she began to assault Snape with spells. Snape easily defended himself against the mad witches' offense. Bellatrix was predictable, which gave Snape all the advantage he needed.

Voldemort, unamused by the happenings, healed his wound quickly and took the fight to Dumbledore. The grounds once again flared with combat. Death Eaters engaged the fighter of the light. The Death Eaters, spurred on by the involvement of their dark master, fought harder and more deviously than they ever had before.

Dumbledore focused on his task. He had to keep Voldemort's attention for only a bit longer. The rest was up to Harry and his friends.

Luna led Ron through the forest quickly and as quietly as they could move. Ron kept trying to get Luna to turn back. Luna urged Ron on, reminding him they had a very important task to finish.

Harry had asked that they take care of the snake Horcrux. Luna had suggested that they run into the forest and simply summon the snake to them. Ron had laughed that it could only be that simple to do. The snake would be unguarded, and they could just cut its head off. Harry then removed the sword of Godric Gryffindor and handed it to his long time friend.

"Use this." He had smiled. Ron took it, shrugging at the fact that no one had heard the sarcasm in his comment. So it was that he and Luna were

traipsing through the forest, ever closer to the Death Eater encampment where the snake, Nagini was surely hidden away.

"This is good." Luna said finally coming to a halt. Ron nearly ran into her.

"How are we supposed to find one bloody snake in the forest?"

"That's easy." Luna smiled. "ACCIO NAGINI." She called out. They only waited a few moments before the great snake came hurtling to their feet. The snake, obviously angered at its method of travel hissed and coiled to strike.

Ron reacted quickly and, using the sword of Gryffindor he had retrieved from the headmaster's office, cut the snake's head clean off in one swipe. There was a powerful blast of magic, accompanied by a howl of rage and agony. Blood spilled from the carcass, staining the ground. The forest became still once again, as if nothing had ever disturbed it.

Luna stood, brushing herself off, smiling. "We did it."

Ron, who was sitting up, looked strangely worried. "It can't have been that easy." He kept looking hard into the trees, trying to see anything that might confirm his sense of impending dread.

He began standing, allowing Luna to help him up, when the quirky blonde's face suddenly looked strange, pained. Luna collapsed into Ron's arms, and she seemed weak.

"Luna?" Ron asked.

"Ron, I think I'm dying." Luna gasped.

"What?" Ron asked incredulously. Four Death Eaters emerged into the clearing., surrounding the pair. Ron felt his ire rising as he gently laid his lover onto the frozen ground. He turned to face the four who had so easily snuck up on them.

"What have you done? I'll kill everyone of you." He growled.

"I don't believe this." The leader said from behind his ornate mask.

"Outnumbered and his little girlfriend dying, and he still wants to fight."

The Death Eater fell before he could finish what he had planned to be a clever joke. Ron moved faster than he ever had before. Fueled by his grief, he struck with fist and wand. He was able to keep two of the robed men back with his spell work, all the while beating the third with his bare hands. He unleashed years of pent up fury on the Death Eater pinned underneath him.

Luna watched as Ron continued to brutalize the man. She protected him with a shield charm when the two others tried to stun him. The sound had brought Ron back and he turned his attentions back to the other two men.

It was over fast. Ron used severing hexes on two of them, killing them brutally. The third he had beaten into unconsciousness. He stood and rushed to Luna, who was shivering violently on the ground.

Ron cradled her head in his lap as he stroked her beautiful blonde hair, his eyes burning with tears. Her breathing was labored and ragged, and she looked paler than normal. Yet her bright dreamy blue eyes looked up at him with love and regret.

"Luna, hold on. I'll get you to safety. You're going to be ok." Ron pleaded.

"Ron, it's too late. Please just hold me close to you. I want to feel your arms around me." Luna gasped out. Ron pulled the weakening girl to him, wrapping his strong arms around her lithe frame easily. He sobbed into her hair as she slowly caressed the back of his neck.

Ron could feel Luna weakening in his arms. He heard her breaths shortening, and her heartbeat slowing. He had no idea what she'd been hit with, nor did he have any idea how to save her. His world was crumbling in his arms.

"Luna, I have to tell you. You need to know how you've changed my life.

You've been..."

There was a flash of green and Ron stopped speaking. Luna looked over his shoulder and saw the bloodied Death Eater pointing his wand at Ron's back. Luna shrieked with anger and raised her own wand weakly. With every ounce of strength she had left in her, she banished the murdering fiend into a outcropping of rocks.

Ron slumped onto his back, with Luna still holding him. Tears spilled from her eyes as she lay on his chest, clutching him tightly.

"it's ok Ronald." She whispered to his lifeless form. "We'll be together soon. You can tell me everything then."

Luna relaxed against Ron's unmoving chest. She was with the man she loved and as she looked back on her short life, she felt a strong sense of fullness for such a short life. Though her involvement had been not as big as some others, Luna knew she had helped to change the world for the better.

With one final squeeze of her lover's cold hand, Luna Lovegood closed her eyes for the very last time.

How many drops of the venom were we supposed to use?" Hermione asked as Harry dropped the golden cup into the cauldron.

"Use it all." Blaise suggested.

"Why not?" Susan added. "Let use it all just to be sure."

Hermione uncorked the vial of Basilisk venom they had found in Dumbledore's office, right where Snape had said it would be.

They had done everything their defense professor had asked of them.

Staying hidden until Voldemort began his attack. They had all banded together to summon the cup away from Voldemort. Harry had caught the cup out of the air, and Blaise had led them down into the dungeons to destroy it.

Ron and Luna had split from them and dashed into the forest to take care of the snake. Harry was confident that the two of them could handle the task. No one short of Hagrid knew the forest or its creatures as well as Luna, a secret she had finally shared with them all recently.

Hermione emptied the jar of venom into the cauldron and the reaction was immediate. There was smoke, and the sound of sizzling. It was followed by a small explosion of energy, which knocked them all on their butts. They had to cover their ears when a panicked howling scream began to fill the dungeon.

And then it was all over. They all stood quickly, converging on the cauldron where a blackened, warped cup lay in the venom.

"What do we do with it?" Tracey asked.

"I have an idea." Daphne smiled.

Snape had begun growing tired of his dance with Bellatrix. She had not been able to land a single blow against him, yet her flurry of spell work had prevented him from retaliating in kind.

But an opportunity presented himself when Sirius Black emerged from the sea of warring wizards. He was going spell for spell with a large man who could only be Dolohov.

Snape began backing towards his ally, keeping Bellatrix in his sight, using shields to prevent her from landing a single spell.

"Black." Snape called as he drew closer.

"Severus, Where is he?"

"He and his friends are taking care of Voldemort's protections. I'm having a little trouble with this witch. Can you help?"

"In case you haven't noticed, I'm a little preoccupied myself." Sirius called back.

"I think we might be able to help each other." Snape said meaningfully.

"I like your thinking."

Instantly the two wizards spun, trading off dueling opponents, catching them off guard. Dolohov fell to Snape's volley of blasting hexes and a well placed banishing charm, which sent the big Death Eaters body into a crowd of dark followers who had been trying to corner a group of students led by Fred and George Weasley.

Bellatrix proved to be a little more adept. But she now found herself facing Sirius and Snape. She glowered at the two men before working some truly amazing spell work, keeping both men moving defensively.

"How is she able to keep the two of us on the defensive?" Sirius asked.

"We don't think in crazy." Snape replied wryly.

"Oh, is that the secret?" Sirius barked in laughter. He dodged a spell that might have taken his head off and whipped his wand around sending a spell blazing towards the mad witch.

Bellatrix found herself upside down, dangling by an unseen force holding her ankle in the air. Snape let out a slight chuckle as he used his favored spell.

"Sectumsempra."

Bellatrix howled as the spell cut a long ferocious wound from her right shoulder to her navel. Blood poured like a fountain onto the trampled snow and stone. Her dark eyes glared hateful daggers at the shadowy professor who now stepped forward to collect her wand, snapping it right before her eyes.

"Good bye you bitch." He said softly. Sirius released the spell, and the body of Bellatrix LeStrange fell with a thud onto the ground. He took a long breathe and clapped Snape's hand in friendship.

"I've been wrong about you, Severus. I'm sorry."

"We can speak later, Black. We need to finish this."

"Good man. Who shall we take care of next?"

"SNAPE!"

The voice was unmistakable. Both men turned to see a raging Voldemort coming towards them. Snape began to raise his wand when he was thrown back by the force of Voldemort's Crucio spell. Snape writhed on the ground, clawing into the frozen soil, tearing his fingernails out with the force of it all. Blood seeped from his mouth from biting his tongue clean through.

"You have been un-loyal, Snape. I gave you so much, and this is how I am rewarded. By betrayal?" Voldemort said coldly as he hovered over his once most valued follower.

Sirius ran forward to help Snape, but he was thrown aside with a wave of Voldemort's skeletal hand. Sirius found himself tumbling into a group of Aurors who were finishing subduing a group of Voldemort's followers.

Sirius got to his feet and charged again. And Again he was tossed aside.

Snape had never felt a torture spell this strong. It was like the Dark Lord's power had grown immensely, instead of fading as he and Dumbledore had hypothesized would happen when Draco was killed.

"I'm going to kill you slowly, Snape. And then I'm going to find that coward Dumbledore and finish with him once and for all."

"TOM RIDDLE!"

A single voice cried out the Dark Lord's name, and all fighting ceased.

Every single set of eyes turned to stare as Harry Potter emerged from inside the castle entrance hall. He was flanked on either side by his friends, who all wore masks of determined fury.

The people who had been fighting all began to part, allowing Voldemort to see the boy he believed dead for the past few months.

"How? How can this be? How many times must I KILL YOU?" Voldemort

cried in rage.

"It's over. Throw down your wand, Tom." Harry said firmly.

"No. this is a trick. You are Dumbledore using Polyjuice."

"I'm afraid that is not the case." Dumbledore said as he emerged from the crowds to stand near Harry and his friends. "It is Harry. He did not die that night in your castle. We were able to save him."

"How? How can you still be alive?"

"You are such an idiot." Harry shook his head. "You act before you understand."

Harry turned to Daphne who tossed a broken metal cup onto the ground.

Voldemort stared hard, his eyes blazing red as the realization sank in.

"You're mortal once again, Tom. Nothing protects you from death, except your surrender. It's over, Tom." Harry smiled.

"I will kill you. A thousand times if I must. I will not surrender to a child!" Voldemort cried out and began to step forward.

He had forgotten Severus Snape who had been laying behind him. Snape pulled a long dagger from his robes and as quickly as his agonized limbs allowed, got to his feet, plunging the dagger into the center of Voldemort's back.

The Dark Lord screamed with rage, spinning around to kick Snape hard, back to the ground. He wasted no time in killing the most hated professor in Hogwarts entire history.

"NO!" Harry shouted. Dumbledore grabbed the youth's shoulder before Harry could run headlong into battle.

"We have unfinished business, Tom." Dumbledore shouted as the Dark Lord, still trying to reach the dagger in his back turned to snarl angrily at the headmaster.

"So we do." Voldemort's eyes flashed dangerously, the dagger forgotten.

The two combatants step towards one another again.

"I thought you had to face him." Daphne whispered.

"Maybe Dumbledore's going to weaken him before Harry has a go."

Neville remarked.

"Perhaps he never meant for me to face him at all." Harry said. "Just seeing me would distract him enough for Dumbledore to finish him."

Dumbledore fought with everything he knew. Every spell he used Voldemort countered, and vice versa. He was tiring, while Voldemort had yet to show any signs of fatigue. The dark wizard just kept lashing out with more and more violent spells.

Dumbledore had no time to wonder how it was Voldemort had come to be so much more powerful than their last encounter, though the headmaster knew it had to do with Draco Malfoy's death. It was possible that he and his colleague, Professor Snape had been wrong in assuming that Voldemort's power would simply die with the boy.

There was a collective gasp as Voldemort used *Everte Statum*, knocking Dumbledore to the ground as he was dealing with the snakes Voldemort had conjured just a moment before. Dumbledore felt his ribs crack from the force of his fall, and his chest tightened, making breathing difficult.

Voldemort didn't let up. He trapped Dumbledore with the *Cruciatus* curse, reveling in the cries of pain from the headmaster. He felt a lustful rapture as he watched Albus Dumbledore, the greatest wizard since Merlin, as they said, writhing in sheer agony at the Dark Lord's feet.

This was his final mistake.

"*Sectumsempra!*" Harry cried.

The spell struck true, and Voldemort was thrown back by it, landing on the dagger that was still lodged in his back, driving it ever deeper. The Dark Lord flipped himself onto his front and got to his feet, striking back

with malice, but missing his mark. Harry had already moved out of the Dark Lord's line of fire.

Before Voldemort could heal himself, Harry again used the spell Snape had utilized on Draco. And a third time. The dark lord fell to his knees, cursing and yowling in pain.

Harry rushed forward, using a blasting hex on Voldemort's wand hand, leaving a bloody mess of shattered bone and flesh.

"I warned you Tom Riddle." Harry said dangerously.

Voldemort, who was struggling for breath saw he was being surrounded by Harry's friends, who all held their wands leveled at the once great lord. Voldemort could also see that his remaining followers were being held at bay by the followers of the light.

"Harry," Dumbledore's ragged voice called out. "It must end, Harry."

Voldemort's blazing red eyes shot up to the green eyed youth, and for the first time in his life, there shined a new emotion on Voldemort's snake like face.

Fear.

He had no more protections, no more Horcruxes. He was mortal, and seemingly at the mercy of a child he had tried to kill time after time. A feral snarl erupted from deep in his throat as he tried to focus his power into his remaining hand. But before he could strike, he felt a searing pain, and to his utter dismay, saw that his remaining hand had been severed. He'd not heard the spell, but he saw a satisfied smile on the Longbottom boy's face.

"You dare?" Voldemort hissed breathlessly.

"I can't let you hurt anyone else." Neville said calmly.

"Goodbye Tom." Harry said as he cast the final curse at Voldemort's head.

"CONFRINGO!"

There was no great cheer, no cry of joy at the end. Only a long relieved silence. Voldemort's body was taken away by Hagrid and several others and burned on a pyre until there was nothing left save ash.

The bodies of Ron and Luna were discovered by centaurs who brought them to the castle. Many others bodies were gathered and were laid together until proper burials could be arranged.

Harry went to see the body of his first true friend. He had a great lump in his throat as he knelt down, and took the hand of his best friend.

"We had our problems, but you never failed to be there when it counted.

I hope you've finally found peace with yourself. I will never forget you.

Thank you for being my friend."

The Great Hall filled with the survivors of the great battle, and the house elves provided food and drink. Families came together and friends found solace in each other's company. People drifted from gathering to gathering to seek out friends, or just to wish people well.

There was a group that sat on the floor of a corner, all with drinks in hand, none of them speaking.

Justin Finch-Fletchley sat with his back to the wall, while his new girlfriend, Hermione Granger rested against his chest, eyes closed, a sad smile on her face. Neville Longbottom sat propped up by his true love, Tracey Davis who was shivering slightly. Neville pulled her closer to him, lending his body heat to warm the thin girl. Blaise Zabini held tightly to Susan Bones, both looking exhausted, and ready for a nice long sleep.

Each of them looked up at the approaching black haired figures of Daphne Greengrass, and her boyfriend, Harry Potter, who raised his goblet to his friends.

"Thank you. All of you. I never could have done this on my own. You all gave me the strength I needed."

"We would never have let you go it alone." Neville smiled softly.

"It was our honor, Harry." Blaise nodded. "Ron would have said the same."

"I will miss him." Tracey sniffed. "He could be a immature jerk, but he never let you down when it mattered."

"To Ron, the greatest man we never truly got to know." Blaise said, holding up his goblet.

"And to Luna, the woman who helped him see the light, and loved him harder than anyone ever could." Harry added.

"To Ron and Luna." Hermione said. The names were echoed by everyone in the group as they drank to their fallen friends.

"So what happens now?" Justin asked.

"We rebuild." Said Minerva McGonagall, who was now joining the small group. "We rebuild and do our best to heal what has been damaged. It will take time, but so long as we never forget the lessons, everything will heal with time."

They all stared at the Transfiguration teacher, who eyed them all proudly. She turned to Harry and gave a sad look to him.

"Mister Potter. The headmaster is asking for you."

Albus Dumbledore lay in a soft bed, propped up by fluffy pillows and a warm blanket draped over him. Every nerve screamed with pain. His wounds were far to severe to be healed, and he had insisted that Madam Pomfrey look after others, but the matron had simply refused and chosen to sit with the aged headmaster.

Harry came to his side and sat in the chair that Dumbledore motioned to.

Dumbledore looked to Madam Pomfrey and Professor McGonagall, asking for a few moments alone.

"I am very proud of you Harry. It was no easy thing to do what you did

today."

"You did most of it sir. I just finished what you and Professor Snape started." Harry shrugged.

"Harry, you put too small of an importance on your part. I'm not only speaking of your actions today, but the burden you carried your whole life. I did nothing to allieviate any of it. For my mistakes, I am truly sorry. I should have visited you while you stayed with your relatives. Should have answered all of your questions truthfully. But mostly, I should have had more faith in your ability to handle such knowledge.

"It should have been I who collected you from your relatives and delivered you Hogwarts letter. I should have taken you to Diagon Alley and explained everything then. Your parents, Voldemort, your godfather, everything. I hope that one day, you will be able to forgive me for my mistakes. I only did what I believed in your best interests, never to hurt you."

Harry sat listening to the elder man's diatribe and simply shook his head.

"I'm sorry, sir, but I can never forgive you. The things you did help to shape me into the man I am. I'm damn proud of that man. Despite everything, I believe myself to be a good person, and I hope I can do right by my new family, and the family I plan to have."

"Harry, my boy, I have no doubt that you will be a fine man, and teach your children what it means to be truly loved. Am I correct in assuming that you have finally learned that fact at last?"

"You are sir. My friends, Sirius, and especially Daphne have shown me the true meaning of Love. I get it now."

"Good. I have one final task for you. There is a small box in my office that was supposed to be given to Professor Snape. He was to give it to you. I had not thought it might be I who survived to give it to you. I ask

now that you live your life Harry. See the world, and help all you can to make it a better place. I will see you again, I've no doubt, on the other side."

Albus Dumbledore took Harry's hand in his and gave it a firm squeeze. He smiled gently and lay his head back on his pillows, sighing serenely as he shut his eyes, and died. At last, he had found peace and the rest he so longed for.

Harry held onto the headmaster's hand for a long time before he finally set in on the man's chest. With a silent nod in salute, Harry Potter said goodbye to the man who had been one of the greatest influences on his life.

Harry and Daphne entered the Headmaster's office and found a long thin box in the middle of the desk along with a sealed envelope addressed to Professor Snape. Harry opened the letter and read it through. When he was done, Harry folded the letter up and reverently dropped it into the fire.

"What did it say?" Daphne asked. Harry simply shook his head and smiled.

"It said that Snape had finally found the redemption he had sought after and that he should try to move forward. To live." Harry said softly. "I never got the chance to thank him for what he did for me. We had so much to resolve. I just hope he's at peace."

Harry then opened the box and had to sit. Resting inside were two wands. There was no note, but Harry needed none. He knew to whom the wands had once belonged to. Dumbledore had saved them and kept them for Harry. Harry felt a tear fall down his cheek, and Daphne's arms wrap around him comfortingly.

Over the next days, many funerals took place, one of the grandest being

that of Albus Dumbledore, who was buried on the grounds of Hogwarts in a white stone tomb, not far from Hagrid's hut. Harry and his friends did not attend as they chose to say good bye to their dear friends Luna and Ron who were buried together.

Luna's father had received a letter written by Luna the day before the final battle. In it she expressed her love for Ron and their plans to be wed as soon as school was finished. She also expressed that if the unthinkable were to happen, she wished to be buried near the other Weasleys, as she already felt their families were joined.

Luna's father took the letter to the Weasley clan, and it was agreed that the two should be buried side by side as if they had already been married. And so it was that Luna's headstone read Luna Lovegood-Weasley.

The mourners each told how they had witnessed the impact Ron and Luna had on each other. How the ill tempered boy had found serenity with Luna, and how Luna had found someone she could trust and open up to.

It was Harry's speech about Ron's friendship and Luna's devotion that moved everyone to tears. He shared much of his experiences with the two to the present crowd, emphasizing how much their sacrifice had truly meant to him, and that he knew that wherever they were now, they were together and happy beyond all measure to know such love, not from just each other, but every single person gathered there that day.

Hogwarts reopened after a few weeks and the school year finished a bit later than normal. Harry and his friends had not minded at all. It was good to get back and find a bit of normalcy. For Harry, going back to school, and not having any looming danger was a strange sensation, but he really enjoyed being normal at last.

28. Chapter 28

The year following the downfall of the Dark Lord Voldemort was one of many changes. The Wizengamot convicted over two hundred Death Eaters who had not escaped from Hogwarts. The rest had been put on the most wanted list. The gold seized from the vaults of Death Eaters, thanks to improved relations with the goblin nation allowed for Azkaban to be rebuilt as well as damages repaired at Hogwarts.

Minister of Magic, Amelia Bones had wanted to give Harry and his friends the Order of Merlin. Harry had refused it, asking it be presented to Ron and Luna posthumously. The awards were given to the Weasley family and Xenophilius Lovegood.

After a long and exciting summer abroad with his godfather and girlfriend, Harry Potter entered his seventh and final year at Hogwarts with his friends on the first of September just as always, but for the first time, he had a year free of drama and danger, with the exception of the occasional quidditch match.

Harry Potter knocked on the door of Neville's private room. He waited for a bit before knocking again. Neville's voice beckoned him in, and Harry opened the door to find Neville staring out the window.

"You're not finished dressing?" Harry asked.

"Is this really happening?" Neville Longbottom asked. The two men stared at each other for a long moment and Harry couldn't help but be amazed at how much they had changed in the past five years.

Neville stood tall, no longer round faced or chubby. He had a finely trimmed beard and his hair was cropped quite short. He was muscular and thin. Yet, he was shaking like a nervous first year.

"It won't be happening if you don't finish getting dressed. Come on Nev, It's your wedding day." Harry chuckled.

"Hey guys," Blaise Zabini smiled as he entered the groom's dressing room.

"You're not dressed yet Neville?"

"I think he might be having a minor breakdown." Harry chuckled.

"Why?" Blaise asked a little surprised. "You two have been together a long time, Nev. It's nothing big, just you know, like a hundred people waiting to see you pass out or forget your vows or..."

"Not helping." Harry grinned.

"It's not that. I'm fine with all that. It's just that, I never thought I would be so lucky. To find someone so special and be getting married. But now that you mention it, I don't know if I can make it through this thing with all those people..."

"Nev, I was giving you a hard time." Blaise held up his hands. "You're going to be fine."

"Not if he doesn't hurry up." Harry countered.

"Yeah, you shouldn't make your bride wait on HER day. Especially since it's Tracey."

"This might be less stressful if it wasn't for the reporters. I should have followed your example Harry." Neville shook his head as he put on his robes.

"Masterful stroke, my good man." Blaise commented.

"Yeah, Getting married far away from England on a tropical beach with only our closest friends and family and not tell anyone until we got them there. Not a bad bit of work." Harry nodded. "We didn't have to deal with any of the press until they found out on our return. Made things much easier."

"Tracey didn't want to do that. She had to have the whole spectacle."

Neville shrugged. "I couldn't take that away."

"See, you're going to make a great husband." Blaise smiled.

"Yeah, just follow the Zabini rules of husbandry and you'll never have to sleep on the sofa."

"I never should have told you guys about that." Blaise said deflatedly.

"Oh we would have heard about it through the ladies. You really think Susan would have kept that to herself." Harry chuckled.

There came a knock on the door and Sirius poked his head in. "We're staring in five minutes."

The boys helped Neville and got him out in front of the gathered.

Cameras flashed and Neville stared down the aisle as the procession began. Justin Finch-Fletchley escorted Hermione. They were also engaged to be married in the coming weeks. They had to post pone it as their schooling had prevented an earlier union. But it didn't matter. They were both attending university, Justin for medicine, Hermione for law. Hermione had liked the idea that Justin had of uniting the medical fields of both the muggle and wizarding worlds. She had thought it might be a good idea to apply that to government. She was a rising star in the Ministry, all the while taking law classes in the muggle world, no small feat, but not above her talents.

Next Blaise escorted his wife, and soon to be mother of his first born Susan. Blaise had jumped right into the banking world, helping to bring stronger alliances between the goblin nation and the wizarding world. Susan had gone into business with her long time friend Hannah Abbott and the two ran a new apothecary in Diagon Alley. Susan's aunt had expressed her desire to see Susan enter into government, but Susan had decided she wanted a quieter life. Amelia Bones had been saddened, but understanding.

Finally, Harry Potter stepped down the aisle, his beautiful wife Daphne on his arm. Neville had recalled the wedding on the beach six months

prior. They had all received portkeys to a tropical island somewhere in the Caribbean. The ceremony had been at sunset and only their closest of friends had been present to witness the union. Daphne had worn a simple white dress, and Harry had donned plain white pants and simple button down shirt. Neville had never seen two happier people in his life. It was that day he had noticed that Harry's scar, the one that had made him so famous, was faded, nearly invisible. He asked Harry about it later that evening, to which Harry had responded that it began fading not long after the battle.

Harry and Neville had gone into the Auror Corp, becoming the first of a new brand of Law enforcement officer. They were trained harder than any group, even since Mad-Eye Moody's time. Together in their first year, they had taken down over twenty of England's most wanted magical criminals, including former Death Eaters.

Daphne and Tracey had begun a petitioning the Ministry of Magic to open a school for younger wizards and witches. It was often heard commented that muggleborns seemed to have a leg up over their peers because they had a primary school in which they learned many basic skills, and how home education was fine, but seemed to be inadequate for equalization. Why should some wizards be better off because they had more emphasis on their home schooling than others.

The concept was being looked into in the Ministry, and both Daphne and Tracey were a part of the process, coming up with an education plan that would be complimented by Hogwarts.

At last, Neville felt his heart leap into his throat as Tracey began her walk towards him. She was just as stunningly beautiful as the day she had slammed him into the greenhouse wall and kissed him the very first time. Neville was convinced that he had found his soul mate not long after that

day. They had seen and experienced so much together, and they had been supported by some extraordinary people.

Tracey's father escorted his daughter towards the young man, who was most obviously nervous, given the amount of fidgeting. Yet he could not have asked for a better son in law. Neville was brave, smart and more powerful than most realized. Not just in his magical strength, but the amount of pull he had in the wizarding world. Neville's family name held much sway, and Neville only used it to help, as he seemed to have no personal agenda. Neville was very happy with what he had. Neville would provide for Tracey and they would love each other through all time.

The ceremony was elegant, one of the nicest Harry had ever witnessed. His involvement was minimal, which made him even happier. Watching Neville and Tracey finally join in marriage was amazing.

Throughout the ceremony he kept glancing at his beloved, who kept smiling shyly back at him. Daphne had been such a godsend for Harry. She had arrived at one of the lowest times in his life and helped to show him what the power of love could accomplish. She had helped him to see he could accomplish anything, even when he doubted himself so miserably.

When the ceremony was concluded, and the reception party was in full swing, Harry was taken out to a balcony overlooking the Longbottom estate with its beautiful rolling hillside by his wife.

Daphne handed him a glass of champagne and clinked it with her own glass of liquid. She looked quite stunning in the slinky blue dress that she and the other bride's maids had worn. Her long legs were accentuated by the heeled sandals and her raven black hair was done in an elegant knot. Harry found himself, as usual, enchanted by her beauty, and his mind

thought of a million different delights they might partake in with each other.

"I've something to tell you." She smiled. "More of a question I'd like to pose to you."

"All right." Harry said, eyeing his mischievous wife. She had a habit of doing something and then asking him if he would mind. It kept him on his toes, and he enjoyed her little surprises.

Yet, he still felt trepidation whenever she posed the question that usually led to all sorts of strange and pleasurable experiences...

"Are you ready for another adventure?"

Her smile was entrancing, and her eyes sparkled like the stars above them.

"Where are you taking me to now?" Harry chuckled. Daphne stepped closer, kissing him firmly and soundly. As she stepped away from him, she placed her hand on her stomach, staring into his confused eyes.

Harry watched his wife's face and realization dawned like a ton of bricks hitting him on the head.

"You're..." He stammered. Daphne simply nodded.

"We're..."

Again she nodded.

"I'm going to be a..."

"A daddy." Daphne grinned brightly

Harry swallowed hard, and pulled his wife into his arms. He breathed in her scent and held her tightly. He had wished for this for many years.

Never in his life had Harry felt happier or more ready for anything in his life than this. He looked up to the clear night sky and saw two stars twinkling madly, and Harry couldn't suppress the smile. He knew that somewhere, Dumbledore was celebrating the news with Ron, Luna,

Remus Lupin and Harry's own mother and father.

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