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Книги

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Сохранять

Знание полезно, но сила есть сила

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Гарри и Гермиона получают в подарок рукописную книгу в начале четвертого года. Книга, которая раскрывает ужасные истины о мире, в котором они живут. Приготовьтесь к более жесткому Гарри и битве, сосредоточенной на Министерстве.

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1. Prologue

Knowledge is Useful, but Power is Power

A/N: This story had such a good reception when I posted it in Common Sense (my odd ideas file) that I decided to continue it as its own story.

Chapter two should be up in a few days.

The fourth book is my favorite, but I have an abiding problem with the Goblet of Fire. Why make it in the first place? Why continue to use it? Here's a possible answer. BecomingStrong!Harry, SecretlyHelpfulbutEvil!

Dumbledore

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

An owl flew into Dumbledore's office on a beautiful June afternoon.

Sirius Black was alive, no thanks to the Ministry. The students had another day before they departed.

Albus took the parchment from the owl and bade the bird drink or eat.

Instead, the owl left. It seemed to know it carried offensive news.

Dumbledore read the parchment from the Ministry and frowned. His opposition to restarting the Triwizard Tournament was ended. The Minister convened a small panel of the Wizengamot, his cronies and friends, and pushed the idea through. The contracts were agreed, just waiting the last signatures. Dumbledore as Chief Warlock would have to be in London the following day to add his signature to the debacle.

He hated not having a choice. But that was the danger he hadn't known existed when he allowed his name to be put forward in the Wizengamot as Chief Warlock. He was now bound, by oath, by magic, to do the will of the Wizengamot. Had been for decades. Not a leader so much as its bound servant, a glorious sounding prison he had walked himself into. He would endanger school children for a competition when his whole body cried out that he mustn't. (Similar restrictions on his freedom had led him to bring the Philosopher's Stone into Hogwarts a few years earlier.)

The Chief Warlock was a prison but it wasn't unique. Any job in the Ministry could be a prison, not that many ever knew it. The Minister was told by his predecessor, if the predecessor survived his term of office.

Cornelius didn't know how to dress himself in the morning, but Lucius Malfoy knew how to craft laws that bent Dumbledore into (at least) mentally painful configurations. Malfoy yanked Fudge around and Fudge did what Malfoy wanted. Up to a point.

Dumbledore pulled a sheaf of parchments from his desk drawer, his file on Malfoy. He leafed through them, remembering Malfoy had to be devious. Had to propose benign sounding laws. If he did something as obvious as tossing Dumbledore out of Hogwarts with a few strokes of a quill on parchment...well, even his puppets on the Wizengamot might notice. So they played this game. Dumbledore, hamstrung, Malfoy a much weaker person but given wider latitude and full mobility.

Malfoy hadn't yet managed to evict Dumbledore from Hogwarts...but he'd come close a few times. Managed to get Fudge to throw the Malfoys a seat on the Board of Governors. Managed to hide his complicity in reopening the Chamber of Secrets that could have killed so many. Managed to resurrect this ridiculous tournament. Trying to push Dumbledore forward, into the public eye, trying to make him fail so that he could be deboned and served to the public.

Malfoy... He had done more than bought himself an acquittal for 'being under the Imperius Curse.' He had bought himself a whole lot of law to protect himself from people in the Ministry, people bound by oaths to the Ministry. Good people hamstrung by once decent laws, now abused by the evil who slunk around in the corners of their society.

That was the only reason Malfoy was still above ground. The old ways, the ways of justice for those who escaped official notice, were denied to Dumbledore because of words Malfoy or someone like him poured in Bagnold's ear...and Fudge's ear. There were laws that prevented Ministry

oathholders from killing except in direst self-defense. Dumbledore didn't believe at all in Malfoy's redemption. But the laws made him preach it...and denied him the power that lived inside his body, his magic in its full damage-dealing splendor. Otherwise, Dumbledore himself would have cleaved Malfoy's head from his body in a duel to the death moments after Malfoy walked free from the courtroom.

It was all a mess, all these purchased laws, all these private sanctuaries for evil.

He knew Tom Riddle's identity and couldn't say it. A law Abraxus had managed to get through the Wizengamot in the 1960s, well cloaked, but obvious enough when Dumbledore wanted to understand why he couldn't do the things he needed to do.

Dumbledore knew of Tom's horcruxes and couldn't hunt for them without a special permit. A permit application Lucius would see before almost anyone else.

Dumbledore shoved his Malfoy file back into his desk. He turned his attention back to this newest outrage from the Ministry, the proclamation about the resurrection of the Triwizard Tournament. He'd even have to take some credit for this debacle. "For encouraging international cooperation," would have to be his stated motivation.

It was disgusting. It had been expensive to make all this happen. Why had Malfoy spent gold to make all this happen? What did he get out of it? Not knowing worried Dumbledore.

If Dumbledore knew what Malfoy wanted, he could work through a proxy. Given enough time, enough notice. If he knew the target, he could erect something to interfere with Malfoy's plan.

This last year...hell, the last three years, Dumbledore had worked his will through Harry Potter. The poor child. What the coming year would

mean...how bad it would get...

Ah...

Ah! That was Lucius Malfoy's target. The Potter heir, once again. The boy who had a legend appended to him of being stronger at age fifteen months than Voldemort had been in the prime of his life. Fair or unfair, Harry Potter would always be a target.

So Lucius Malfoy had resurrected the Triwizard to add an old weapon into his quiver, one designed to handle very strong wizards. With the Triwizard Tournament came the strongest of the involuntary binding objects created and still possessed by the Ministry of Magic. The Goblet of Fire, a disgusting artifact. A binding tool.

Binding. It was a horrible, searing word in Dumbledore's mind.

Binding was the greatest of the secret arts of the wizarding world. The teaching of necromancy was illegal, unless done with a permit. The teaching of blood and soul magic were illegal. Period. No permits forthcoming. (Not that it had stopped Albus from exploring pieces of blood magic, including blood wards, over the years.) But the teaching of binding magic without a permit was the only kind punishable by death.

The study of binding magic was reserved to the Ministry alone. Reserved to the oathcrafters who doubled as lawyers in various departments. To the enchanters who maintained items like the Goblet of Fire.

Lucius Malfoy had a new plot in mind. His master's horcrux and basilisk show wasn't enough. Now he was going after Harry, the boy who had torn down his plot.

This was a Ministry affair so Dumbledore was bound to silence. Unlike Malfoy who had never sworn a Ministry oath and was not subject to those restraints. He bribed for votes rather than taking a seat...and the ties and the bindings of an oath. The man should be hunted down in the

night and slaughtered for what he'd done in the war, not strutting like a pale peacock grown fat from too much hand feeding.

Dumbledore had the will, but not the free will to do it. He couldn't fight his oaths and survive to take Malfoy to his grave.

So, there had to be a way to warn Harry, prepare him. Aid him without aiding him.

The Ministry oaths were wide and deep, but some of the components were old, some included by tradition. He'd been able to find wiggle room.

A time turner for Ms. Granger, for example, once he realized that the Dementors were coming. Even if an accident happened, with a time turner, things could be unwoven if done carefully.

Wiggle room. He could have the whole world if he were free of his oaths.

So, why not resign from the Wizengamot?

He would if he could. That was the last aspect of the oaths. Albus

Dumbledore served until he was dead or dismissed from office...ah! That

was something else he could work on. Getting himself dismissed. Malfoy

knew what he was about well enough to attack Dumbledore's position at Hogwarts, not his position with the Wizengamot. Malfoy wanted his

opponent tethered and easy to wound...if Malfoy ever engineered

Dumbledore's removal from the Wizengamot, the whole game might just change.

Plotting about the Wizengamot could wait.

For now, Dumbledore had to think of Harry, his once-again proxy in this unended war.

Dumbledore stood from his desk and began to peruse his collection of

rare volumes. He was looking for an idea, a spark. His hand linger over

Uncommon Magics for Uncommon Wizards. He'd always intended Harry to

have a copy eventually, but...it was too diluted, covered too many

subjects, to help Harry against the coming of the Goblet of Fire.

He worked his way through the rest of his books. He'd settled on allowing the Granger girl to find something and pass the information to Harry. It was the easiest way, it had worked several times before. For her to uncover Flamel, for her to uncover the basilisk.

The book Albus needed, the precise book, didn't exist.

Of course, all the true understanding of their culture passed from father to son. All attempts to write it down were banned... He didn't have the book he needed on the shelf because no one could ever put it on parchment. It was in his mind. Waiting to be put on paper. Waiting to cross from the old to the young.

He pulled a transcription quill off the shelf and sat at his desk. He pulled a roll of parchment from a drawer and set to cutting the roll into sheets.

If the book didn't exist, he would write the damned thing. No oath he was aware of prevented him from it, prevented him from leaving a personal journal in a place where a student might come across it. He would save Harry even if he couldn't tell Harry that his life would soon be endangered again. By Lucius Malfoy, by the greed of the Minister of Magic, by so many people who couldn't do more with their wands than clean a few dishes in dirty water.

He would help Harry to survive. Help him to remain free of entanglements and beckoning, innocent-looking prisons. He would never be able to admit what he'd done for their savior, but Dumbledore would do it.

It wasn't too late for the boy. He would live to become a man.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Harry Potter felt his body shaking apart. He opened his eyes, blinked, and the shaking stopped. He couldn't see anything without his glasses so

his hand fumbled a moment.

"Hermione?"

She looked like some beast of Hagrid's was about to devour her.

"Hermione?"

"Harry, someone gave me a book."

Normally that would make her happy. Delirious. But not now.

"I don't..."

"Someone gave Ginny a book, too."

The Chamber of Secrets. Harry would never forget that book. Hermione was right to be wary. She sought out books, books didn't seek her out.

Hermione was nothing if not cautious. Still, it was 1 September or, if after midnight, 2 September. Early for the yearly terror to set in.

"You want me to get a teacher?" His mouth and throat didn't work all that well so groggy. It was the first good night of sleep he'd (almost) gotten in months.

"I want you to look at it," she said.

"Where is it?"

"I didn't move it."

"I can't go to your room."

"Oh." She blushed. Strange there was enough light in the room to see it, but it must have been a whole body blush. "I can...levitate it to the common room."

"I'll get dressed."

He noticed that Hermione didn't wear much to bed in the autumn. He guessed he was starting to think about girls...and Hermione was no longer just a person garbed in sack cloth, gender indeterminate.

"Give me a few minutes. Thank you, Harry."

"I only owe you a hundred more favors. Try to space out the collecting of

them. Maybe some of them in the daytime..."

But she'd gone. Harry got up and changed into what he'd worn the day before, but left off the robe he'd worn to the welcoming feast the night before.

He walked downstairs and Hermione clattered down her stairs a few minutes later, a sort of book levitated in front of her.

It wasn't a bound volume...or even very thick. Harry could tell from a glance that it was handwritten, neat writing, but quill on parchment. A magical book, perhaps. Created by a witch or wizard, definitely.

"Does it write to you?"

"I don't know." Hermione sounded embarrassed. She'd freaked out without studying something first. But what had happened to Ginny Weasley scared her. A book, a friend, her favorite kind of teaching aid almost killing a young girl. She trusted but there were limits to her trust.

"It didn't show you a memory, did it?"

"No."

Harry looked at the book that Hermione had let settle onto the floor.

"Well, that diary couldn't be harmed by anything other than a basilisk fang. I guess if I could set it on fire..."

"You don't burn books..."

That was the old Hermione.

Harry smiled.

"I guess I could tear a bit of blank paper."

"Oh." She didn't object.

Harry crouched in front of the book. He tore a corner off the front 'cover.'

It came free with the normal tension involved in cutting parchment.

"That proves it," he said. It was normal parchment, not enchanted. Not demonic.

"Thank you, Harry."

Find a problem, bring it to Harry before it tried to eat Harry...that was how they worked things these days. After three years of solving problems, she didn't even have to ask.

Harry looked at the book. "Power" was the only word on the cover page. No author credited.

Harry changed from a crouch to a seated position. He opened the cover and began to read. It was clear the words had been laid on paper by a dictation quill, not that Harry owned one, but the writing was too even, too uniform, to have been done by a human hand.

"The common witch and wizard fear power - and adore it. This one paradox has guided and warped our world for at least four centuries, if not longer.

"Compare the present with the tales of Merlin. Consider how powerful the ones who made it into legend seem. How active. How supporting of the non-magical Kings they've allied themselves with. War mages and thinkers. Bloody war after war. Merlin. Morgana. Mordred. Ywain.

"How active Slytherin and Ravenclaw, Gryffindor and Hufflepuff in the days before they created Hogwarts, in the days they grew it and taught in it. These were powerful men and women. They always had followers and students, some enamored, some hoping to steal their secrets, some spying on them for others of power, some plotting how to bring the powerful to heel.

"The common man hated and envied power.

"Let me tell you what this means for the most powerful sorcerers of this age..."

Hermione read over Harry's shoulder but waited for him to finish the first page before her hand reached to turn the page.

"You read it first. You'll be done by dawn," Harry said.

"That's not fair."

"You took half the time to read what I just did."

"Fine." She wasn't going to fight the offer of a book.

She curled up in a chair and merged with the thin book. Harry took a different chair and let sleep claim him for a while.

When Hermione shook him awake again, she couldn't have seemed a more different person. Instead of scared, she was exhilarated.

"You have to read this."

"Just tell me what it's about."

"I think it was meant for you. You're the most powerful wizard I know."

"Me?" Every ounce of doubt he could squeeze went into that syllable.

"A hundred Dementors last June?"

Harry shrugged but accepted the book from Hermione. "What should I concentrate on?"

He wanted a cheat sheet so he didn't have to read the whole thing.

"From word one to the last word. You need to know all of this."

"Well, what's it about?"

"How to keep from making terrible mistakes..."

His life at Hogwarts seemed to tumble from one mistake to the next. "I guess I should read it," he said.

"Two or three times." She smiled at Harry.

"I'm not that bad."

"You're worse."

He opened the book and read the first page again. It was old fashioned writing...it did hurt his head a bit, but then the book began to scare him.

Scare him in a good way. A way that made him learn.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Harry came up to Hermione after Defense Against the Dark Arts. "I need the book."

She didn't have to ask which one. There was only one secret book they had between them now.

"Why?"

He pulled her into an empty corridor. "You keep a secret?"

"Yes."

"Moody's in the book."

"I remember. On that list of strong people who swore Ministry oaths, same with Dumbledore."

"He's on the list because he's thought to be strong," Harry said.

"Yes."

"He used the Imperius curse on me. Just now."

"And on me, too."

"And I made it not work. Slowly, but I made his curse fail."

"Oh."

Before reading the book, they would have assumed Harry was immune or some hogwash. Their reading of the book made them question what they'd just seen happen. The curse had taken hold...Harry had been willing to do as Moody had commanded...until he wrestled control of the spell away from Moody.

That wasn't immunity from a curse.

That was coming to terms with magical control. Learning to exercise vastly greater amounts of magic than the caster of the hostile spell possessed.

It was disturbing to Harry. This suggestion...this proof...of just how strong he might be. Able to end an Unforgivable cast by an old wizard, a retired Auror. It meant...

Disturbing things.

There was no direct way to measure the strength of a witch or wizard.

There were only comparative tests. For example, the handwritten book suggested that Hogwarts, long in the past, had pairs of final year students cast stunners at each other. Assuming the spells tried to pass each other in a roughly contained area, the stronger caster would overwhelm the weaker caster's spell. So one student would be stunned and the other not. Unless they were roughly at the same level, in which case the spells would both sputter out.

Put enough students in pairs and test them...and it would allow a teacher to create a ladder of strength. Who was the mature witch or wizard with the most strength. Who, with proper aim and casting, could cancel the spells thrown by others. Could throw spells that couldn't be canceled by others.

Magic was all about strength. Strength and will.

Harry realized he had strength, but his will needed reinforcing. Standing up to Moody, defeating his spell, definitely helped in that regard.

"The book's in my trunk," Hermione said.

"I want to read about the War of the Seven Kings again."

"Alright."

They made it up to the Common Room and Harry found an out of the way couch near a window. He sat down and waited for Hermione. When she turned up with the book for him and other books for herself, he knew she was interested. She would wait for him to re-read the story and then read it herself...until then, homework to start on.

"The relative peace that lasted for decades after the establishment of Hogwarts ended when the Muggle William the Conqueror arrived. His warfare for the Muggle throne prompted warfare on the magical side. It

was the first large-scale warring between magicals in centuries. Of course, there were famous duels between Merlin and Morgana, among others, but this new kind of war was groups of wizards going up against groups of wizards.

"It came to be called the War of the Seven Kings, although the two wizard 'Kings' were just earls. The other 'Kings' weren't nobility at all, just court wizards to Muggles fighting for or against William of Normandy.

"The effects that would rip apart the peace for good were simple. Some wizards on the field survived longer, untouched, than any others. They could cast and cast and injure and kill. They would take little to no damage in return. In fact, more than one of these 'special' wizards were hit with the ancient Babylonian and Roman war spells, such as Avada Kedavra or the Imperius, without effect.

"It took the wisest of wizards decades after the wars ended to propose a solution. The old curses were dominance curses. They didn't just require correct casting, such as the proper mental alignment, to have an effect. They required considerable magical strength...specifically more magical strength than the target possessed. Not just a little bit. A considerable amount. Two people of equal or near equal magical strength cannot ordinarily harm each other by casting the Killing Curse at each other. Nor the Cruciatus Curse.

"When combined with binding rituals and enchantments, the theorists labeled all of this magic dominance magic. Some of it was war magic, some was what lords used to take on vassals or servants. But it was all based on a hierarchy of power.

"In time, this knowledge was put aside and forgotten. Dominance magic was turned into Dark Arts was turned into Unforgivable Curses. They are considered unblockable. Books of magic theory propagate the idea. But,

of course, it's not true. A stronger wizard will always kill a much weaker wizard by using the Killing Curse...unless there is a physical barrier to intercept the magic. Two equals cannot harm each other with this class of magic.

"But the change in how this magic was regarded came from people who feared unchecked Lords of considerable power, such a vast amount there was no one to stand up against them. Wizards, except in times of war, rarely left their traditional lands. Even getting English or Welsh wizards to come to Hogwarts was difficult for centuries.

"So a local Lord was a powerful figure. It was rare for a common wizard to kill a Lord with a Killing Curse. It was hard to mount other attacks on a Lord because the stronger wizard could dissolve other offensive spells just by casting a spell in its direction. The Lords who fell in this period of time died due to treachery of those allowed close or through duels conducted with traditional weapons, such as swords.

"The legacy of the War of the Seven Kings was that the weaker wizards began to band together, bands that would grow and grow until a Wizengamot formed and a Ministry of Magic, a controller of the powerful magic, magic that would eventually allow groups of weaker wizards to control the vastly more powerful..."

Harry finished it, made to close the book, before Hermione took the pages from his hands.

There was too much to unpack there. How could he - Harry Potter, Fourth Year Student - be more powerful than Alastor Moody, a man who'd stood against Voldemort?

Moody was on the damned list in the book of very strong wizards who'd been clipped by taking a Ministry oath.

Harry had heard rumbles about the small size of the Ministry peace-

keeping force. Everything was grist for gossip at a school like Hogwarts. But now he wondered if there was a paradox at play. The job required strength, but the oaths involved might make the strong decline to take the jobs.

So, perhaps it wasn't just bad teachers like Snape keeping the numbers of Aurors low. Perhaps there was advice passed down families that the strong should stay out of the Ministry altogether, no matter what position was involved.

Harry knew so little when he came to Hogwarts. This struck him as more secrets that Harry hadn't been told. More secrets that an orphan was expected to learn for himself, the hard way. There was history not taught at Hogwarts that others knew...that guided what they did and why. Harry didn't believe that whining remedied much at all, so he set his mind to figuring out what to do.

"I don't understand," Hermione said. Rare words from her mouth.

"I'd read it before but this part didn't make sense...until I beat his curse."

"I knew you were strong, but..."

Harry kept quiet but nodded. It was troubling. His strength, the hints about what the Ministry really did. His complete lack of preparation for any of this. As much as Harry hated Voldemort, he could understand why the evil wizard had never joined the Ministry in his quest for power, never been entrapped and entangled. Not that Harry condoned murder. Not that Harry condoned terrorism in any form. But someone who wanted power shouldn't go looking for it in the Ministry of Magic, not at all.

"Harry, want to play some chess?" Ron asked. "Is Hermione trying to make you read that book?"

"We're just talking about it," Harry said. He hadn't seen Ron looking for

them in the Common Room, but he'd been inside his own head trying to puzzle things out.

Hermione opened and closed her mouth. She looked at Harry with some confusion. Why hadn't he told Ron?

Harry knew why he wasn't saying. Ron came from a Ministry family. Ron had to know some of this and Ron hadn't said a word.

"Homework, is it?" Ron asked.

"No," Hermione said. "Light reading. It's fascinating."

Ron's eyes glazed over.

Hermione had, apparently, decided to go with Harry's lead. Keep Ron out of it for now. Harry smiled. Harry didn't want Ron to know he'd wised up. Not when Ron's father worked in the Ministry and had sworn an oath. Not when Ron's family, save for Percy, seemed hell-bent on steering clear of the Ministry. Arthur Weasley had been trapped and had explained what the trap meant to his magically talented children, so Bill and Charlie knew and avoided the Ministry...information Harry might have liked to possess for himself.

He wondered if Bill had sworn oaths to the goblins. Any Gringotts oaths had to be less invasive, less restrictive than what Ministry employees swore. Only the weak, only the almost powerless would take the words at face value.

Dumbledore was strong, but perhaps he hadn't known what the oaths would do. Harry didn't know if the Headmaster came from an old wizarding family. He'd never thought about the question.

In Moody's case, Harry assumed the old Auror had joined during a war when survival was more important than what the oaths would do during peacetime. Moody might have known or not, but he hadn't necessarily expected to survive.

But, for Harry, all this history he wasn't taught was enough to make him doubt everything.

"Chess?" Ron asked.

Harry looked at Hermione. She shooed him off. Their conversation could wait until later.

Harry went off with Ron for another drubbing. Nothing at all seemed to have changed, but everything had. Every last thing.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

"Why aren't there any spells in here?" Harry asked against at the beginning of October. He'd read the book through a dozen times now.

He'd been so focused on what the book was that he was slow to recognize what it wasn't: a book of magic. Little theory in its pages, mostly history, lots of analysis and the twisting of the lines.

It was a warning. But it didn't explain how to survive. Just gave a big dose of caution.

"I don't think we need the spells. Or, you don't." Hermione sounded damned unhappy to have those words cross her lips.

"How you say?"

"Well, if we found a room to practice in..."

"Yes, let's do that," Harry said.

Hermione smiled. For the first time, her friend seemed happy to study. It took a hell of a hammer to the head, but he was willing to study.

"If we did a practice duel, if we both cast stunners at each other, you would knock me out and my spell wouldn't do anything..."

"I still can't believe I'm that much stronger..."

"Stronger than me. Stronger than Moody, for sure. Who knows who else?"

She wondered if he was stronger than Voldemort. After all, as an infant, Voldemort's Killing Curse fizzled. Some people chalked it up to Harry.

Others to something James Potter had done. A few thought the credit lay with the brilliant Lily Potter.

Hermione was now back to thinking it was all Harry.

"Let's find a room," Harry said.

Hermione smirked. Words like that, with a boy a little older, could mean a very different thing.

"There's a couple in the Charms corridor," she said.

Hermione kept out two books and returned the rest of what she'd been working on into her trunk before they left to start practicing magic, real magic. Harry looked at the two she kept out, books Harry hadn't seen her with before, not that he memorized what it was she liked to read.

They arrived in the dusty room not far away from where they took classes with Professor Flitwick.

"So, I think there are a couple of spells we can work on," she said.

"How about the stunner the books talks about."

"You already know Petrificus Totalus."

"So?" He wanted the stunner.

Hermione nodded and began flipping pages. "Alright. Here it is."

Harry came over and looked over her shoulder. He produced his wand and began to play with the prescribed wand motion. It was just a bit uncomfortable. He wondered...if it was strength and will that made for power in magic, could he just point and speak the spell?

He aimed at a dust covered table. He cast.

"You're doing it..."

A faint red light impacted the table.

"Wrong."

Hermione pulled her wand and tried to cast the spell the right way, the prescribed way. She got a faint red beam.

They both knew they hadn't gotten the spell, probably couldn't do more than inconvenience a squirrel.

But success fed belief. Which fed the will to make it work.

Knowing he was strong was worth years of schooling at Hogwarts.

Confidence in magic...worth his very life.

"Try it again," Hermione said.

He did. She did. A little success turned into moderate success turned into something to be proud of by the time Harry's stomach rumbled.

"We should do this again," he said.

"Yeah." She was disturbed and astounded how fast she learned the practical side of things when Harry goaded her to do better with his own success.

She wondered how strong she was. But she also wondered whether it was strength or will that was more important in the prime equation of magic.

She was most of all glad that Harry had started to believe in himself.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

There was excitement in most corners of the Gryffindor common room, but not where Harry and Hermione sat after the feast.

"Did you hear Dumbledore mention the Goblet of Fire before?"

"No," Hermione said.

"I think I would have remembered..."

"An artifact of binding."

Hermione had taken a deep plunge back through many of the books she owned, looking to verify elements of the hand-crafted book she'd been gifted. Not much lined up between the parallel accounts.

But she believed the new information. She believed in the theory of binding.

"The book?"

"Please," Harry said. There was a passage they both needed to read again.

Hermione returned to their quiet corner a few minutes later. She let Harry go first.

"There are many greater spells that only those of great magical power can use. In particular, enchanting of objects that will retain specific magical properties for decades or centuries is one of the most important to the magical world. Lords of the tenth, eleventh, and twelfth centuries often secured vassals to their causes by enchanting heirlooms for the benefit of the vassal or his family. The only other way, at that time, to have enchanting done was to contract with the goblins. However, they had different rules of property ownership and things 'purchased' during a lifetime were not able to pass to descendants legally. They should have passed back to the goblins.

"Various groups of lesser powered wizards attempted to break into enchanting for as long as they were locked out of it. The first breakthrough came in the late 14th century when a team headed by Longinus Diggory managed the first cooperative enchantment, using the magical strength of seven wizards to perform a task that one higher powered wizard could easily perform.

"The next 'breakthrough' came in replacing marks of vassalship that Lords of the age used. The subject of vassal magic, or binding magic as it came to be known, will be treated later in more detail. But on the subject of enchanting, the first binding enchantment constructed by cooperative magic was an object called the Goblet of Fire.

"I call particular attention to this artifact because it was the first time weaker wizards - a group of eleven wizards in this case - managed to create an enchantment to identify the most powerful wizards or witches within a group and bind them to a magical oath, on pain of loss of magic

for non-compliance. Prior to this devil-cup, only the strong could perform such a binding. The only limitation known for the Goblet of Fire is that its binding is temporary, it must be used with a finite ending date, perhaps the only safeguard installed in the original magic.

"At least thirty-one potentially powerful wizards have been murdered by means of the Goblet of Fire since its creation. Ten by use of the Goblet of Fire in competitions such as the Triwizard Tournament, long since abandoned. The remainder by acts of trickery perpetrated on the Goblet of Fire, usually some contract a wizard was bound to without knowing it, a contract that would be unknowingly violated costing the target-wizard his magic, a ripping that was invariably fatal..."

There was another page on the Goblet of Fire, but neither Harry nor Hermione could bring themselves to read it.

Someone had dusted this monstrous thing off...and brought it to Hogwarts. To bind three powerful young people, possibly to kill them.

The weak still ruled the world.

"You can't enter," Hermione said.

"No plans to."

"But what if..."

"Someone like Malfoy," Harry said. The blond Slytherin had had it in for Harry for years, since almost the first day they started at Hogwarts.

"Yeah."

"Is there any defense?"

"To being made subject to a binding?" Hermione clarified.

"Yes."

Hermione read the next page in the book and the page after that. "Doesn't say."

"Damn."

"According to what Dumbledore said, someone your age can't enter."

"But, can his name or hers be entered for him?"

Hermione shook her head. "Didn't say. I wish wizards had a lick of sense. They seem to think it's something wonderful. It sounds like a circus of death."

"Hermione doesn't like circuses?" Harry asked, smiling for the first time since he laid eyes on the Goblet of Fire.

"I don't like anything enslaved...by people or by fancy goblets."

"I agree."

They decided to spend the rest of the evening working on their magic, no longer dragging books out to learn new spells. No, they were trying to really put the effort into mastering what they already had.

To use a handful of spells, be able to modify them, be able to do as much as possible with a levitation and a stunner and a color changing spell.

Harry wanted to get better with his animation spells and Hermione had picked for both of them to see how far Harry could take the Patronus Charm (getting him to teach it to her was a bonus).

By the time curfew snuck up on them, Hermione had made good progress pulling together a Patronus Charm, but Harry's mind was elsewhere.

After getting his ass handed to him time and again when they practiced the stunning spell, Harry realized that force of will and quality of concentration were closely aligned. He followed up with an improvisation for Hermione, an animation to the clothes she wore so that she had to fight Harry and her own blouse and slacks.

After Harry laughed at her loss, he focused better and began to progress much faster. He wondered how to make a coloring charm an offensive weapon. He didn't know yet, but it would sit in the back of his mind for a time...until he had something to practice with.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Halloween. A few minutes before midnight. Harry sat alone in the common room trying to shuffle what he knew into some sort of shape. Harry had been bound by the Goblet of Fire. The weak wizards of the Ministry of Magic admitted there was nothing they could do, he was bound to the terms of the competition. A fourth competitor in a tournament that should have had only three.

Hermione had wanted to stay up with him, but he needed some time alone. It was enough that she believed in him. Ron had already turned on him.

The others who cheered for him believed he did it on purpose.

Of course, they had no way to understand how much he reviled the idea of being bound to a contract that wanted to rip his magic from him.

He had already been through the book again. This was the first time it had failed to be helpful. It said nothing about how to break a binding. It's advice was about foreknowledge and avoidance, not to ever join the Ministry in any role. Not how to wiggle free of oaths.

He'd read those pages closely this evening and noted that, according to the author, no one knew the full extent of the oaths they would take when joining the Ministry. They didn't hand over a stack of parchments on a person's first day. There was an oath upon applying. An oath at an interview. A few oaths upon starting as a paper-pushing junior Auror. A few more at the Academy if you survived the exposure to all the paper and rules. By the time was one was a capable employee of the Department of Magic Law Enforcement, one was bound with oaths thicker than cable.

But the book offered nothing about unwilling commitment to an oath or a contract. He wondered who had written the book, given it to Hermione.

It was a frequent topic between him and Hermione. He was grateful to know how much trouble he was in. But why had she been given the book? How did someone know the advice would be necessary at all? Was it someone with more reliable Sight than Trelawney? Someone who had foreseen all that had come to pass? The knowledge in the book hadn't stopped anything, just made Harry aware.

Perhaps that was the point. Bind him, make sure he knows he's in trouble, let him craft a solution with as many facts as possible.

Had to be better than his normal way. Fall into something horrible and try not to die.

He had three weeks to figure out how to survive the First Task. He had until June to figure out how to destroy the Goblet of Fire, but the sooner the better.

No one seemed to have a copy of the agreement that the Goblet was set to enforce. 'Old magic that,' was the clearest of many foggy answers.

Harry knew, roughly, how the Goblet had been made and to what purpose. But what did its specific rules say and do? What would get him in trouble with the Goblet?

Would the most powerful...shattering spell - he'd have to learn something that exploded things, wouldn't he? - work on the Goblet, or would it trigger the oath?

The only good thing Harry learned was that the Goblet would remain at Hogwarts, in the Great Hall, until the conclusion of the Tournament. That had to be important somehow. He needed to figure out why it was important and how to use it.

He reclined on the sofa and settled in for a nap. He didn't think he'd be able to sleep all that well. Better in the quiet of this room than near to Ron. He took off his glasses and set them on the floor, tucking them

under the sofa.

There was too much to consider. Too much running around in his head.

It just wouldn't settle.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

In the week leading up to the First Task, Harry knew he would face a dragon, thanks to Hagrid sneaking him near the enclosures. Professor Moody also knew it was dragons. He had just witnessed Harry telling Cedric Diggory it was dragons. More likely, Moody had known long before Harry had.

Now the unspeakably ugly professor wanted a chat.

His office was filled with fiddly enchantments that kept ping-pong and banging and smoking. Harry, who had been trying to reverse engineer some of the enchanting process by the comments included in the book, recognized the items as cheap, pale imitations of what enchanted items should be.

"Not impressed?" Moody asked.

"How do you get any work done in here?"

"If I were somewhere unsafe, I'd have my eye pointed out the back of my skull all the time."

Harry nodded.

"You've been quiet."

"Sir?"

"Since you got pulled into this."

What could he do, complain? He had a task to survive and a Goblet to destroy. "Working. Studying, sir."

"Well, you know it's dragons. What are you going to do?"

Harry had three or four ideas. Hermione hadn't liked them at all, so she'd been in the library for a week whenever she had a free moment. Not that

he cared to share how he was preparing with this professor, a man driven crazy by the oaths he'd sworn and bumped up against time and again while a Ministry employee. Semi-retirement hadn't eased much, if any, of the man's burden.

No, he didn't care to tell the whole truth to anyone controlled by the Ministry.

"I don't know, sir."

"Blast you don't." The man proceeded to sketch out a plan for Harry to follow, hinting and winking and dragging the dim-acting boy along.

The gist was: Harry was supposed to summon his broom and outfly one of the four dragons. Each of the dragons selected for the Tournament was a full-grown adult. Each of them had wings and could probably fly...plus there were claws and flames and teeth and who knew what else to worry about.

Getting swallowed by a dragon while he was on the back of a broom was probably a good show for the judges, but Harry just smiled and thanked the professor. He left the man behind as fast as he could manage.

Advice that would get him killed was something Harry could do without.

He had foreknowledge he would face a dragon. He had a library that had a shocking array of books on dragons. He had Hermione. He had more magical power than he knew what to do with, which Harry believed was the reason the Goblet had drawn him in. Hermione and Harry would pull together a better plan.

No, he wouldn't trust word one from someone who'd made Ministry oaths.

Harry guessed, now that he thought about it, that included Dumbledore, didn't it? Fudge, Bagman, Crouch, Moody, Mr. Weasley, Cedric's father. Everyone with a connection to the Ministry.

He went off to the Library to have a conversation with Hermione.

He definitely wouldn't be flying in the next few days. Not with a dragon snapping at him, trying to roast him.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

A camera flash blinded Harry in mid hug with Hermione. Without thinking, he sent one of his newest spells - Reducto - at the camera. It was the spell he planned, eventually, to use on the Goblet of Fire.

"You could have killed me," a rough looking man hollered, holding fragments of what could have been an expensive instrument.

"Harry, that's not sporting at all," Rita Skeeter said.

Harry stared at Skeeter, one person who wasn't supposed to be in the champion's tent. With or without her photographer in tow.

What a weak witch causing so many to cower.

"Draw your wand," Harry said.

Her venom-green quill waved in front of him.

"You're challenging me to a duel?"

"I'm giving you a chance to defend yourself from what you've done to me and my friends." The first article on Harry after the Weighing of the Wands had been a pack of lies. Which sent Hermione to the library where she had discovered there were no slander and libel laws in the Wizarding World, save that the dueling code was still intact to resolve disputes over honor.

"Harry, you're a young..."

Harry cast a spell, just one, without naming it. A moment later Rita Skeeter began to scream, she stepped back and to the side and bumped into her photographer putting them both on the ground.

Bagman and Crouch ran into the tent to see the aging witch rolling around on the ground, as if she were on fire, as if her brain were

completely addled.

Poppy Pomfrey was brought into the tent. She immobilized and silenced the reporter while the photographer looked on, angry but not so angry as to say something to Harry. The man possessed some drive to self-preservation.

"There's nothing wrong with her," Pomfrey said. "Mr. Potter, the others say you cast a spell at her."

"If you look at her lips," which were silenced, "this witch seems to think she's blind," Harry said.

Pomfrey undid the silencing and Skeeter confirmed she couldn't see.

Pomfrey did more testing, but Skeeter was unaffected by any curse the mediwitch knew.

Crouch interrupted. "Please take her to the medical tent."

"Mr. Potter..."

"Nurse, please get this intruder out of here. We have the task to start."

Harry watched Skeeter levitated out of the room. He guessed he would explain what he'd done to Pomfrey...or just undo it himself...after the task. Let Skeeter have a taste of unpleasantness for a while. She didn't report the things she saw, things that were true. Let her be blind for a while. See if that would change her attitude. A woman didn't need eyes if all she wanted to do was lie.

Cedric Diggory looked at Harry anew. Krum pretended nothing had happened. Delacour had a sour look, like she'd been eating crabapples.

Sour and constipated.

The four Triwizard Champions drew for dragons. Harry had the worst and the last.

The other three eventually left and did their battles. Harry calmed himself and got ready. It wasn't like he was going to do Greater Magic in

order to survive, but he took it seriously. He practiced the wand movements several times without casting. He would need to use this spell eight times, ten times, maybe more. It would be draining.

But it was safe.

Harry didn't need to defeat the dragon. Its own biology gave one a painless way to defeat it. No harm for Harry, no harm for the dragon. No harm for the eggs, he hoped. They hadn't researched that part.

He still used the proper wand movements for spells when he was doing class work...or anything seen by people other than him or Hermione. He didn't want people to begin guessing about his researches into magic.

Harry heard his name called and exited the tent. He drew in a deep breath. He heard the bellow of the female Horntail, much larger than he expected when he was as close as he was. His wand was already out, already casting.

The crowd made noises of confusion. They couldn't see what was happening. But the dragon slowed down. Stopped breathing flames. Stopped thrashing and tugging on her chain. Eventually, as Harry reached his fourteenth spell, the dragon lay down on the stone near where it was tethered.

Finally, the crowd realized something was happening. Not that they could see what it was. Not big, not flashy. But something that worked.

Harry cast one more time and the dragon went to sleep.

None of his spells landed anywhere near the dragon, not one. He aimed for and hit rocks underneath the dragon or to its side or behind it.

Harry felt drained. He walked up to the dragon and over to its nest of eggs. They still radiated heat. He picked up the golden egg and almost dropped it.

The damned thing was cold. So cold his fingers almost stuck to the metal.

He wrapped it in the robes he wore and trotted back a safe distance. He began casting again. He didn't verbalize the spell he used, but its effect became clear very soon. The dragon's eyes opened. It stood. It roared. It breathed flames on its own eggs.

Harry smiled and walked into the medical tent with his Golden Egg. He thought about ignoring Skeeter, but he waved his wand her way. She didn't make a sound but her eyes began to blink. She couldn't move, couldn't speak, so it would be some time before Pomfrey discovered her charge was all better, at least in body. In mind...well, Harry had given her her only chance. Let her lift her pen again and the witch wouldn't survive.

Harry had no interest in the weak binding and humiliating the strong.

Harry made it out of the tent without incurring an inspection from Pomfrey. Ron was the first of his age-mates to spot him.

"Harry, that was bloody awesome. How'd you do it?"

"Hi Ron."

Harry began walking back to the castle, wiping condensation off the egg.

Hermione ran up behind them.

"It worked," she said.

"What?" Ron asked. "What did you do?"

"What did it look like?" Harry asked.

"You put her to sleep."

"Yes."

"But how?" Ron pushed.

"Hermione?"

"There's a simple spell in...a book of household magic." She'd found it in Gilderoy Lockhart's book for housewives, not that she would admit that now. "It's the spell for making a cold box, the magical equivalent of a

refrigerator."

"Re-fry-what?"

"I made the dragon cold, so cold it had to sleep," Harry said. "I hit the rocks below, behind, and to the sides with a spell that made them begin chilling the air close by."

"That's brilliant."

It was better than brilliant. It was simple. And it worked.

Harry was able to put more power behind the spell than should have been possible. Enough to make a refrigerator large enough for a dragon, even without a top or a front door. It was a simple spell, powerfully applied.

Enough for one young wizard to walk past a dragon unaffected.

Harry made it back to the castle before anyone else came looking for him. Hermione and Ron sat with him in the Common Room, Ron trying to make amends, the overall conversation strained. There was too much different between the two parts of this former trio. It was a polite conversation for now. Polite and friendly but perhaps never again more than that.

Harry could tell Hermione wanted to ask about Skeeter. How he blinded her, he would save for another day. At least until Ron got bored and left them alone.

He sunk deeper into his seat and began to fall asleep while Hermione and Ron argued. His body was exhausted, but his mind had never been so unfettered. The party that started up around him, in his honor, less than an hour later was loud enough to wake the dead, but it didn't wake Harry.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

The day after the First Task, Hermione was ready to talk about the Goblet

of Fire, about all her research. She'd held back on filling Harry's head with what she knew while Harry had worked on his mastery of the cooling charm.

Since Harry had done more than survive the First Task - he'd destroyed it -, it was time to work on getting him unbound from the Goblet. She had gone through every book in the library that even mentioned enchanting or artifacts. She'd put together as detailed a 'biography' of the object as she could manage with present resources. Now, she had to see if Harry could make use of any of the information.

There was also the golden egg they needed to look at...but if they could destroy the Goblet before the Second Task, there was no reason to worry about the egg, right?

More important issues first.

She dragged Harry off the couch where he'd slept overnight, forced more breakfast than he normally ate down his throat, and dragged him to the room where they met in the Charms corridor. By the time they arrived, Harry was almost awake and functional.

"Hit me," he said.

She rolled open a scroll and showed him what she'd found. His eyes glazed over. There was a lot to get through. She had neat handwriting, but it still made his eyes prefer to cross.

Hours later, with Harry reading some of it out loud, and Hermione the rest, they made it through all her notes.

The things that stuck out: the Goblet was always used at the Ministry or Hogwarts. There were no records of it being used elsewhere.

They didn't know what that meant, but thought it important.

There was but a single account of the Goblet ripping the magic from a cheater involved in the Triwizard Tournament, one of the ill-fated ones

where none of the champions survived. It was horrible in every way.

There were no stories in the books of people attacking or attempting to destroy the Goblet itself. Harry wished there were.

Harry's stomach told both of them when it was time to take a pause. They headed for the Great Hall for lunch, but found the room in a roil.

That morning's copy of the Daily Prophet explained everything. Rita Skeeter had used eighty percent of the front page to attack Harry.

"Hogwarts Student, Boy-Who-Lived, Mounts Vicious Attack on Reporter."

One wouldn't know from the article that the First Task had been held.

That there were dragons on Hogwarts grounds. It was all about Rita, all the time. Her hissy fits sold papers and that was all that mattered...at least until Harry was finished with her.

Harry wasn't surprised when Aurors arrived before lunch was over.

The Ministry always did care more for appearances than anything else, just ask Hagrid about his lovely stay in Azkaban.

Dumbledore intercepted the five Aurors. He seemed to know the oldest one, a man who walked with something of a limp, his face full of pale, not-quite-tan colored hair. He looked like a damaged lion.

"Mr. Potter, if you would?" Dumbledore called out from near the door of the Great Hall. Harry took another bite of his sandwich and stood.

Dumbledore made the Aurors wait while he escorted Harry from the hall and to his office. Harry walked into the office and stood while the others gathered.

"Now, Auror Scrimgeour?" Dumbledore said.

"I just took his wand so we will soon understand how he blinded the Skeeter witch."

Harry searched his body for his own wand...it was gone. The Auror had pickpocketed him. That was the second time this year, once at the

Quidditch World Cup and now when it really mattered.

Harry went from unconcerned to furious in moments. Two of the Aurors had their wands on Harry. They knew what the leader of the team was going to try to do. Stealing a person's wand wasn't a crime when an Auror did it. Right?

There was no conversation, no interview. Just a presumption of guilt. Dumbledore did nothing, a stone statue would have been more useful. Ministry oaths and all that rot.

"What law did I break?" Harry asked.

"I don't know," the lead Auror said. "But when the Minister gives an order, I don't thumb through an old book."

"What Rita and I had was a lawful duel."

"Not what she's claimed," the Auror said.

Appearance was more important than fact.

"I take you as interfering after a lawful duel. You know what the dueling code says about that?"

"As a matter of fact, I don't."

Harry nodded. Dumbledore tucked himself away in a nook of his office.

He expected something to happen and he would not be party to it, the craven old man.

The Aurors holding wands cast. The Auror Dumbledore called Scrimgeour snapped Harry's wand. Harry put to use some of his practice with Hermione. He cast without a wand. He cast hard.

Harry remained standing. The others were all on the ground. Harry looked around the office. Some of what the Aurors cast made it through, not that it hit Harry. There were deep gouges in the walls behind Harry. At least one of the men had cast cutting curses. Harry thanked Merlin he cast stronger than the Aurors. His stunning spell overwhelmed their

offensive spells.

But he wouldn't take this 'legal' attempt on his life with a shrug.

The Ministry had to go. These weak people, little better than a gang of child-bullies, were about to find their world ended. Harry promised that.

He collected the pieces of his wand. He collected the wands possessed by the Aurors, most of them with more than one. He had a fistful of wood and animal parts. He tried each of them and got tepid reactions.

He wouldn't be able to replace his destroyed wand with someone else's.

He put them down in Dumbledore's fireplace and set them alight. They weren't happy to burn, but his magic overwhelmed them. They burned.

"The dueling code?"

Harry turned and saw Dumbledore moving around. "Yes."

"An after-the-fact violation of the dueling code?"

"Yes, Professor."

"Then my oaths as Chief Warlock don't compel me to stop whatever it is you feel you need to do."

"Thank you, sir."

Harry could hate and remain polite. Living with his aunt and uncle had taught him that kind of mental duplicity.

"It's a powerful stunning spell you've worked up. Wandless, too."

"If you say so."

"I believe in that lowest drawer right there...yes, that cabinet right there, Harry, you might find a collection of wands willed to Hogwarts over the years. I couldn't do anything like suggest you try them until you find one that suits you. No, I definitely can't suggest that."

"I understand," Harry said, baffled as he could be.

"I'll just step out of my office so you can handle your business, Harry."

"Alright, sir."

Harry had the sense the Headmaster hated the Aurors on the floor as much as Harry did. Why he thought that, Harry didn't know. It was important somehow, he suspected. He'd share all of this with Hermione and see what she made of it.

The book's pages on bindings had prompted Hermione to spend several days researching the giving and taking of oaths. That was what Harry would have to use now. An oath for each of the Aurors. An oath to stop the 'investigation,' an oath to punish Skeeter somehow, an oath to separate each of these people from the Ministry.

If he had to take the Ministry apart person by person, he'd do it. If he could make it all implode on itself, he would.

Harry tapped his fingers near the eyes of the youngest-looking Auror before breaking the stunning curse.

"Hello?" he called out. As if he were a small person in a vast, vast room. Completely dark to his perception.

"This wasn't your idea?" Harry asked.

"No." The Auror was almost ready to cry.

"Do you know the dueling code?"

"No."

"You interfered after a duel was over. It broke the duel. You're on the hook same as everyone else. Same as Rita Skeeter. There's not much I can't do to you," Harry said.

"What do you want?" The question asked through tears. The young Auror didn't even try to bluster. The weak who were also smart knew when they'd gambled and lost.

"Information, first. Then we'll get to the negotiation."

The Auror was succumbing to the effects of the darkness. He tried to keep silent, save for his tears, before he seemed to lose his poise. He went

through a panic attack, the horror of the experience written on his face.

The pain, the frustration, the confusion.

Harry found it made him sick. He was glad to know he was still a person and still deplored inflicting pain. It meant he wasn't a Voldemort-type.

That was good. But he cared more about his future safety than about his moral comfort. He would push hard even push past his own limits.

"Information," Harry said again.

"Alright."

"Who sent you here?"

"The Minister."

"Your orders?"

"Humiliation."

"Not arrest?"

"No."

Harry shook his head, not that the Auror could see. "How is a cutting curse humiliating?"

"I didn't cast one."

Did different people get different orders? Or was this Auror not clued in on the real purpose? Harry understood why the Ministry had and used a binding artifact like the Goblet. To control the outliers in their civilization, the very powerful. This Auror may not yet be trusted with the deepest secrets of the Ministry, its real reason for existence.

The deeper the questioning went, the harsher the oath Harry wanted to administer. By the time he questioned all five, including the leader Scrimgeour, Harry had to create something that would almost destroy all their lives before he felt safe. He sat down on the floor and scratched out an oath on parchment he'd liberated from Dumbledore's desk. It was horrible. The oath clauses were beyond horrible.

He thought he would need a wand to do what needed done. He dug in the drawer that Dumbledore pointed out, the wands left to Hogwarts. His fifth attempt found a good match. He looked at the tag that hung from a string from the wand. "Georgeanna Evans, 1714-1832."

Harry snapped the tag from the wand and thanked this woman for her gift through the centuries.

Harry woke each of the Aurors again, made them swear it through the tears and the pleas, and then removed the blinding effect he'd placed on each one. When all five swore, he released them.

Harry noticed that the portraits in the office had watched everything. He guessed the Headmaster would get a full accounting of what Harry had done, the wand he'd selected for the time being.

All five Aurors ran out of the room, all of them recognizing they were in breach of contract and had only a few minutes to get outside of the castle.

None of them could spend more than five minutes inside Hogwarts without losing their magic. Likewise, no more than five minutes inside the Ministry of Magic. The rest of the oaths Harry had inflicted on these lackies would make it hard for them to ever find peace.

It was horrible what he'd done to them, but they were still alive.

Soon, Rita Skeeter would cease to be a problem. Perhaps Harry wouldn't tell Hermione the full oath he'd written. He would sleep better keeping part of the secret to himself.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

The retraction of Rita's front page allegations the day after the First Task came a week later, on the inside back page, below a few notices placed by witches who had misplaced their cats. The brief apology by the publisher for comments above and beyond the necessary was just above

notice that Rita had attacked Aurors investigating her and was committed permanently to St. Mungo's. Hermione didn't even notice the story, so Harry didn't bring it up.

In fact they were well at work on the information that Scrimgeour had given up on the Goblet of Fire. Harry had asked all five men, but only the leader had even a single piece of advice.

'The Goblet had to be near, very near, to a large concentration of witches and wizards at all times it was holding a contract open.'

They had had to wait for a Hogsmeade weekend. Once everyone, save for the first and second years, was out of the castle, Harry and Hermione went to the Great Hall. There were three students sitting at a table. No teachers. Hell, the teachers were in Hogsmeade, too, weren't they?

Harry had decided there was no delicate way to handle the Goblet. He hadn't studied Runes at all. Hermione was in her second year of learning what it was all about.

They would have to go with the brute force method.

The school was cleared. It was time to see what happened if Harry threw a Reducto at the Goblet. He had the Evans wand which worked well in a pinch, but Harry had also decided to continue practicing his wandless skills. He'd seen Dumbledore perform magic close to wandless so Harry knew it could be done. Harry hid what he was doing with a 'wand' that was little more than a twig he'd found on the ground and polished to a decent sheen. It looked close enough to his previous, but now snapped wand, that no one had mentioned a difference. He would visit Ollivander's in the summer to get a new one, a real one.

He wouldn't depend on just one tool any more. The Evans wand, the fake 'wand.' Eventually a new real wand. Each of them was different, each of them did different things to his magic. He learned this way. He wanted to

keep learning this way.

For this attempt on the Goblet he would use the 'stick' he'd fashioned into a wand. He'd gotten very skilled with a Reducto cast wandlessly, just through a prop stick. In fact, this spell had more impact done this way than through he Evans. Harry guessed that antique wand hadn't been meant for offensive magics. It did much better with transfiguration.

Hermione remained by the doors of the Great Hall. Harry walked over to the side where the Goblet remained, waiting to steal the magic of someone powerful. Harry pushed magic through his stick and sent the densest, angriest Reducto he could manage. The curse struck the cup...and was absorbed.

Harry could feel fingers inside his chest, fingers trying to claw out the strength inside him, greedy fingers. He flexed his magic and the fingers inside him withered, snapped, broke.

The parasite died...and the Goblet of Fire exploded, a thousand chips of wood shreddings.

Harry found himself on the stone floor of the room, panting. He'd survived but he felt stomped on, almost torn to the point where he was broken.

He knelt and waited and his body began to conquer the lingering pain. It disappeared.

Harry had won.

"Hermione?"

She didn't answer back. He pushed himself to his feet. "Hermione?"

He turned and saw her collapsed on the stone floor. The children who'd been sitting at the Ravenclaw table were on the floor as well.

"Hermione."

He levitated her. Then added the three young ones to his collection. He

set off almost at a run through the halls of Hogwarts for the infirmary.

Madam Pomfrey looked up from her reading when he entered and directed Harry to put them down on their beds. He couldn't explain what had happened. He knew he had caused it, not that he explained himself that way. But why had the Goblet's exploding...done this?

He was free.

But Hermione...and the first years.

What had he done?

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Three days later, Hermione recovered enough of her energy for Pomfrey to wake her. Harry and Hermione compared stories.

They had both had hands in their chests. The Goblet had affected both of them after Harry attacked it.

Probably the first years as well.

Hermione had struggled against it, but the Goblet took all the magic it wanted from her...until it just stopped.

Harry hadn't fought the Goblet so much as all the people within proximity of the Goblet, Hermione and three first year girls. The Goblet had been willing to kill all of them in order to destroy Harry. Stealing their magic, combining it, lobbing it as a weapon.

It was good they'd waited so long before attempting this. Had there been a dozen people in the Great Hall...Harry might now be dead.

On the good side, the Ministry recognized that the destruction of the Goblet meant that the Tournament was strictly voluntary. Fleur had already left with the rest of Beauxbatons. Krum was rumored to be unhappy in Scotland, Harry didn't expect Durmstrang to remain. Then it would be two: Cedric and Harry. He hoped Dumbledore would end this mess.

From a Triwizard Tournament to a Quadwizard Tournament to a Diwizard Tournament.

What a mess.

Harry didn't leave the infirmary until Pomfrey kicked him out...or Hermione left under her own steam. It happened in time to rejoin Monday classes.

The young girls from Ravenclaw were awake again...and unharmed. Just exhausted and then refilled by time spent healing.

He hoped he never accidentally inflicted such harm, such pain on so many people ever again.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

"Potter, with me."

"Sir?"

Moody didn't bother to explain himself, just walked away from where Harry's class was breaking up. Hagrid's skrewts had left Harry more than a little frazzled.

"I know that the Ministry hasn't come to ask about the Goblet."

"Sir."

"The damned thing was hundreds of years old. It didn't just explode and injure four girls."

"Sir."

Vernon got this way sometimes. Harry knew roughly what to do, he thought.

"I'm not one for puzzles, boy. You're too big a puzzle for me to let alone."

Harry nodded.

"So, what did you do?"

"Hermione and I stopped in before heading to Hogsmeade. The food was all gone by then. Before we left she collapsed and the Goblet exploded..."

"If you're thinking of a career in politics, you need to lie better."

"I'd be a terrible politician," Harry said.

"Right you are."

"If that's all, sir." Harry turned to take the path back to the castle. They were almost at the gate that led to Hogsmeade.

Moody's hand grabbed Harry, spun him around, while another hand shoved something toward Harry.

He felt a twisting in his guts. "No," he shouted.

The twisting failed. It had been a portkey. "No."

Harry's hand flung out and landed on Moody, a stunning spell zipping from his hand into the man who had just tried to send him somewhere away from Hogwarts.

Moody crumpled to the dirt.

Harry stared at the man...the Ministry man...the oaths the man had sworn. Where would that portkey have taken Harry? The Ministry? Azkaban? The boy didn't want to know.

But he would need to find out. Need to find out what the Ministry had just tried to do.

The trick was, how to break someone like Moody?

He'd heard of truth serums, but getting his hands on one was something else. He needed to make it hard for Moody to lie to him.

Harry set to searching Moody's still body. His clothing had pockets within pockets. He eventually got hold of the man's flash and opened it. He began pouring. It wasn't a clear liquid at all and didn't smell of hard booze. It was a potion that was dark, angry. Harry had the idea it was Polyjuice, a rather nasty potion he'd used a few years earlier. Disgusting. Moody with Polyjuice? Moody on Polyjuice? Who would choose to look that beaten and mauled?

Perhaps the man wasn't Moody at all. Moody had retired from the Ministry. Perhaps this was a spy from the Ministry who wore Moody's face.

Harry continued his search. He even took Moody's leg from him, but left the roving eye in place. He couldn't figure out how to get it loose.

He didn't think his usual blinding trick would work this time. He hadn't explained it to anyone so he could do it again, but Moody's crazy eye might just work around the problem. Harry didn't cast a blinding curse. Hermione had found one for him to look at, but it was more complex than he felt comfortable trying to master at the time. Power, after all, didn't require experience...but the blinding curse did.

What Harry had done was an odd application of a color changing charm.

Things that were clear became black, like the lens of an eye or glass.

Thus, apparent blindness without anyone being able to detect a blindness curse. They would have found the problem had they gone looking for a color changing charm.

It was good to be overestimated sometimes. Harry preferred the simple to the complex.

Now people thought he had some undetectable blinding curse.

Undetectable by people looking for a blinding curse, it was true. But first year magic learned well, improved to the point where he could do variations on it.

Harry ripped a strip from Moody shirt and tied it over the man's face. He didn't know how the eye worked...Moody or whichever spy had taken Moody's place would see through it, but it would be disorienting.

He used his color changing spell as well. Perhaps being blind in one eye, with cloth covering it, and unblind with his enchanted eye would irritate the man and keep him off-centered long enough for Harry to make sense

of him.

Without his leg, as the very least, the man wasn't going to get up and attack Harry.

He wished he had a truth serum.

He wished he had Hermione to help him. But he wasn't going to leave this man here long enough to track down Hermione.

He would have to do it himself.

The Aurors in Dumbledore's office had known they were beaten...but who knew if Harry would have such luck this time. He needed a carrot and a stick.

He would offer Moody the freedom to leave...and would punish him with...

Harry didn't know. As he thought about it, he realized he knew very little magic. Because of the handwritten book and the work Hermione put him through, Harry had maybe fifteen spells well mastered. Fifteen spells after four years of magical schooling.

He was worse than ignorant...and he would have to set to fixing that soon.

He had learned a cutting curse after his run-in with the Aurors. Harry could threaten to add a missing hand to Moody's already missing leg. He wouldn't want to do it, but kidnapping was unforgivable.

Harry woke the incapacitated man and the interrogation of a lifetime started.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

An owl flew into the office. Albus took the missive and the owl went to Fawkes' perch for rest and refreshment. There was a fire going and it was a glorious place to be at the moment.

Dumbledore caressed the scroll. He knew what it said. It was his pardon

and his freedom and his hunting license all rolled into one. Strictly speaking, it was his official retirement as Chief Warlock.

Dumbledore wished he was in better health to enjoy his retirement. He felt a touch of something beastly settling in, some bug passed from student to student that he'd now caught.

Even sick, he was happy. Freedom suited Albus Dumbledore. In the confusion after Cornelius Fudge's murder by a man long thought dead, Barty Crouch Junior, Albus pushed through the idea that they needed a younger man at the head of the Wizengamot to help with the coming, massive changes confronting the Ministry of Magic. Hence, some other sucker would take the oaths as Chief Warlock. Malfoy hadn't even been at the meeting where his preliminary request was entertained.

Now Albus had the sealed scroll in his hand. He was free.

It would be a perfect day, but this damn flu had settled in and not even a Pepper-Up could make him feel right. Hell of a way to spend the week before Christmas.

Albus couldn't get Pomfrey to tell him just what was wrong with him.

There hadn't been many days in his life when he'd been under the weather, a side effect of being an enormously strong wizard.

Now that he was free, Albus could finish off the tasks he'd begun in the 1970s. He could handle the hunting of the horcruxes on his own. He could tap Minerva and let her take over Hogwarts. Albus could pay a midnight visit at Malfoy Mansion and end those smooth-tongued monsters. That would be the perfect start to a pleasant retirement.

He was content. He was free and he had his unknowing disciple. The real message he wanted to transmit - Albus' life's work - had taken hold in Harry Potter, not that the young man knew it. Strength was all. The boy would stumble into everything he needed to know. Albus didn't need to

pen the boy another book now. What a creative mind the young man had, simple spells and so much came from them.

The color changing spell he'd heard about in his office, when used on Aurors, had stunning effect.

The boy would be fine.

Albus no longer had to be sure of anything on that score. The boy's growing strength would inevitably draw Voldemort to him. The clash would happen and the world would go on. Albus would be elsewhere in Europe and not even hear the news for a week. He'd fought his war. He would handle his loose ends that his oaths had kept him from handling. Then he was done. His reputation was fixed. Too many years as a school teacher, too many years as an amateur politician. If he rewrote the laws of transfiguration, he might walk himself up the ladder. Otherwise, no. Him killing Voldemort wouldn't be a surprise, a miracle, it would just be what people expected...what they would grouse had taken him too long. Dumbledore killing Voldemort so late in all this might damage his reputation, come to think of it.

Dumbledore had become quite careful about his reputation. Now that he didn't really care any more. He didn't want to be saddled by undue expectations. He was done. He had a few more decades of life, but he wanted more or less anonymous years. Fun years.

He had them...

Albus felt his chest tightening, sweat beading on his forehead. His office was warm, but not that warm.

His first thought turned to poison.

He had been poisoned before. He reached into his desk and pulled out a bottle. A bezoar went down his throat.

Nothing. Nothing loosened or relaxed in his body.

Who'd gotten close enough...the last person who had spent time alone in this office was...Harry Potter. The boy didn't know Potions at all, not enough to know Poisons. But the boy had more than a healthy distrust of all things Ministry.

It was possible. Dumbledore had once been the ultimate symbol of the Ministry.

"Fawkes."

The phoenix flamed just about where Dumbledore sat and it wasn't long before drips of liquid began to rain down on Dumbledore. The old wizard raised his head and opened his mouth. He felt the phoenix tears land on his tongue.

Nothing else changed.

A bezoar and phoenix tears should remedy anything, poison wasn't the issue.

His eyes fell on the scroll from the Ministry, the one releasing him from his position as Chief Warlock. He cracked the seal and actually read the damned thing.

It didn't take long to figure out why he felt under the weather. The idiots who had written and signed the order hadn't released him from his oaths, just from the position. He was in conflict now. He was in violation.

To die because of this... Because of craftiness or idiocy.

If they had just fired him without some crafty bastard wordsmithing the letter. If they had just done what they were told...

Albus put his head on his desk and it never rose up again. Fawkes the Phoenix sang for his friend for several minutes before the office went silent. A new portrait hung behind Dumbledore's desk. The person in the portrait sleeping, not to wake for some time.

It wasn't until after dinner that the Deputy Headmistress found the

Headmaster. It was a solemn night in the castle. A solemn night for the Magical World.

A great man was dead.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

A/N: I've posted details about my original writing projects on my profile page. Check them out if you're interested.

2. Stumbling Around

Knowledge is Useful, but Power is Power

Chapter 2

A/N: This story was once a one-shot in my Common Sense collection.

Now this is the only place where I'm continuing it.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

The castle was decorated for Christmas, but it felt alien and cold with Dumbledore gone. The day after Dumbledore was laid to rest, the day before the Hogwarts Express ran back to London, Hermione drug Harry to the empty classroom in the Charms corridor.

"Slow down."

"I've got to pack later."

As if she hadn't been packed for a week already. She was returning to her family over the holidays now that the Yule Ball had been scuttled.

"I didn't know we were training," Harry said. "I thought with the Triwizard..."

"We're not training," Hermione said. "We're chatting."

"About?"

Hermione smiled, a rather unnerving look on her face. She knew something and wanted more. Her smile bespoke pain for anyone who got in between her and a good story.

"About?" Harry asked again.

"What you've been up to."

"You know. You were there." Of course, she hadn't been present for the most important parts. That was always how it worked - Harry had one final test every year and he had to carry it off, or fail, on his own.

"I didn't see a damned dry eye at the funeral, save for yours. So, spill."

"You know, the book."

"Yes?"

"He worked for them. I feel bad...but I couldn't cry for him."

Hermione shook her head. She had no love for the Ministry at this point, but she also knew better than to let Harry slide by with saying so little.

There was a secret he hadn't pushed her way yet. She could smell it.

"Harry."

The boy in question scowled.

"I want to know," she said.

"You don't."

"Tell me."

"It's not good."

He'd cracked. Half the battle was over. Him and his secrets. "I won't think any differently of you," she said.

"I think differently of me," Harry said. He didn't ask her to promise that nothing would change. He knew it would. He knew he'd stepped over the line, well over it. He'd done something great, something horrible, he hadn't even pieced it together himself.

"To be honest, I wasn't sad at the Headmaster's funeral because my mind was elsewhere."

"Where?" she asked.

"Let me tell you the story," Harry said. "You won't believe me otherwise."

"I'd always believe you."

He shook his head. "You remember the day that the Minister of Magic was assassinated?"

"I read about it in the Prophet the next day. Like everybody else," she said.

"Well, the day it happened, I was walking back from Care of Magical Creatures when 'Professor' Moody stopped me."

"I remember."

Harry proceeded to tell her about the attempted abduction.

"Harry...how did you..."

"All this time I thought I was stronger than Auror Moody. Not true,"

Harry said. "I was stronger than a man called Barty Crouch Junior."

"Polyjuice?"

Harry smiled. Hermione had a mind faster than anyone's.

"Was this Barty Crouch as bad as the other one?" Hermione still had a chip for a man who freed a house elf who didn't want to be freed, needless cruelty.

"He was a Death Eater. In Azkaban."

"If he was in..."

"His father, in the Ministry, snuck him out. Barty didn't know the details, but he knew that much. Too many years under the Imperius Curse broke him at least a little bit."

"The father...the one who freed the House Elf...used an Unforgivable on his own son?"

"For years."

She shook her head. Wizards were a daft bunch. Criminal and daft and insane beyond the range of a loon. They all preached the rule of law, the perfect order to rules, and not one of them wanted to follow them.

"What did you do?" Hermione asked. She knew he'd done something. He

acted too guilty to have done otherwise.

Harry sighed. He'd gotten away with explaining almost nothing about the Aurors who'd come to investigate Rita Skeeter's complaints. Now he had to tell Hermione some or all of the truth about this second, and worse, episode.

"We had a chat."

"Back up and start from the portkey you mentioned."

"Really?"

"This man tried to abduct you. You've sat on this story for more than a week, Harry. You should have told someone. If not me, someone else."

"He tried to put a portkey in my hand. I overwhelmed his magic."

"Oh." Hermione smiled, a happy one. Something new to help her understand how magic really worked, once she had a few moment or weeks to work on this problem. "Then?"

"I stunned him."

"Okay, but how did you get him to talk?"

They both felt this conversation was like pulling teeth. Given what Hermione's parents did for a profession, she had some experience with the real thing. She might have to threaten Harry with a trip to a dentist's chair in order to loosen his stubborn tongue.

"I've become very good with the cutting charm," Harry allowed, hoping her imagination would fill in the rest of the story.

Of course, the hint just made hungry for the meat of the story.

"You threatened him."

"Yes."

"With what?"

"The cutting charm."

Hermione began to laugh. She didn't know her Harry could be so good

with circular storytelling. "Applied where?"

"I cut off a mole on his neck once he reverted to his real appearance."

"Did that work? Get him talking?"

"No."

Hermione waited. She could outwait anyone, including Ron when he was being obstinate, which seemed more and more common as he aged.

Weren't boys supposed to get more mature sometime before they turned forty? She could see that Harry might go that way, but doubted it was possible with Ron having the twins for his older brothers. He might just be a permanent infant. But she would still outwait him.

Harry squirmed under her gaze. "I also cut off a pinky," Harry conceded.

Hermione stared at her friend. Not sure if she was impressed or queasy.

She had to remember who the man under 'interrogation' had been: a Death Eater.

"That worked?"

"No."

"What else did you cut off? A foot?"

"Nothing else."

"So how did you get him talking?"

"I suggested I might cut something else off?" A question, a tentative admission. He hoped she wouldn't push. A vain hope.

"What?"

Harry crossed his legs and looked sheepish. Sympathy for the devil.

Sympathy for what he'd threatened. Hermione got the message. Harry had threatened castration or emasculation.

Hermione swallowed and the room went quiet a minute. Why was threatening to cut something - but not doing it - that particular something - worse than cutting off a finger? She didn't even have that

kind of...wedding tackle. What did she have invested in it? Still, it made her queasy. Her friend had become so resolute in the last few months.

"You would have?"

"He tried to kidnap me," Harry said. "I would have cut the guy, gone and tossed up my lunch, and gone back to ask him some questions."

Hermione nodded. "Good," she said, unsure if she believed the word she'd used. "Good."

"I shouldn't have told you."

"It may...leave an impression, Harry, but I'm still your friend. Always."

Harry looked miserable but shook off his moroseness. "He talked."

"Anyone would have. Where did this happen?"

"He tried to lead me on the path to the gates leading to Hogsmeade. I worked on him just off the path where my stunner put him on the ground."

"I don't think I'll ever feel safe here again."

"I don't," Harry said. "What he told me. How easy it was for him to get in. There's no security here at all. Anyone can just walk right in and do anything vile."

"So, what did he say?"

Here Harry had to be careful. He'd said enough of the bad stuff that he could get away volunteering less of the really bad stuff.

"He put my name in the Goblet of Fire."

"Why?"

"It was some scheme of Voldemort's. Flashy, supposed to happen at the Final Task. Over complicated. It fell apart. That's why he tried to kidnap me that day."

"To take you to Voldemort?"

"Yes."

"So he knew where Voldemort is?"

"He did."

"Do you know?"

"Very well." At this Harry smiled. He thought he dangled something shiny at Hermione and now she batted at it like a cat on a mission.

"What did you do?"

"The kidnapper...paid Voldemort a visit for me."

"How," Hermione demanded.

"An oath I made him swear."

"Oh, Harry." She knew how much he hated them.

Harry gave her an appropriate sheepish smile. He had never told her what he'd done to those Aurors, never would if he could help it. He did hate oaths, but he hated abandoning a useful tool for the sake of principle even more. If there was one thing Harry believed in, it was survival, no matter what the tool or the situation.

"You have to keep this quiet, but I made him bring me the...Dark Lord."

"Harry!"

"And his attendant. And his snake." The snake was dead, Harry made sure of it. The other two were guests...of the Potter Family for now. Not well treated, but alive.

"Attendant?"

"Wormtail."

"You can...free Sirius."

"If we trusted the Ministry to believe the truth. If we trusted them to do the right things..."

"Fudge is gone, now they might...Fudge was killed by Crouch. Harry?"

Hermione didn't miss much, did she? "Yes."

"Was part of your oath...about the Minister?"

"Might have been."

"Harry!"

"Sorry," he said. He had gotten away with very little once he opened his mouth to start talking. He should have guessed that Hermione wouldn't let him wiggle all that well.

"I know we talked about...well, the problems there. But I never... I never wanted you to have to do all this by yourself...or at all."

Hermione seemed to be forgetting a great many of their conversations. Idealism could vanish in the face of opposition...in the face of dead eyes, blood smeared faces, staring back. Tears fell down her cheeks.

Harry had begun to realize that to make a great change required a great deal of pain. So far he hadn't been asked to pay more than he was willing to give. But he had found Hermione's limit.

"It's okay, Hermione. It's okay."

"No, it's not." She was crying and trying to get herself to stop. "You shouldn't have to..." Her words and her tone and her actions were all in conflict. There was fear there, fear of Harry, more than there was straight concern for a friend.

It was one thing to know a friend was powerful.

It was one thing to know that a powerful person attracted enemies.

It was something else to hear how a powerful friend might be forced to deal with his enemies.

"I know."

The rest of the story - and there was quite a bit of story - went untold. She didn't know why Harry had forced Crouch to murder the Minister. In fact, Hermione would never demanded this kind of information from Harry ever again. She knew that he would tell her if she wanted. She didn't. She couldn't.

So he hadn't had to explain his rationale. He hadn't had to confess about what had happened to the Aurors, about the secret orders one of them had received that could have resulted in Harry's losing his head that day. The Ministry existed for the weak, of course. There was no one weaker than the late Minister.

Harry rose to hug his friend, to ease her pain. She waved him off. She wouldn't let Harry comfort her. The fear again.

The revulsion.

Their study sessions in the Charms corridor came to an end that day, not to resume after the holidays.

Their friendship would change, become superficial.

Their startling developments in magic, in raw strength of magic, were over. From now on, if Harry wanted to grow, he would need to find the path himself. It was hard, impossible, when the entire world changed.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

The day after Christmas Harry wasn't all that happy. The boy looked something the picture of misery, sitting on the cold stone floor of a cave talking to a much older man, his godfather.

"Smile, kiddo," Sirius Black told his godson.

"I don't want to go back," Harry said.

"Well, I guess we can both hide out in this cave."

Harry rolled his eyes. "I know you have some place better."

"I do. But it's easier for you to make a hard decision when the choices are a freezing cave or a castle with all the food you can eat."

"Give me a third option," Harry said.

"Nope, freezing cave or castle with food. I think we can find some bats to eat if we go deep enough in here. I wonder if they taste like Snape?"

Harry smiled. "Fine, I'll go back."

"Your friend will come around," Sirius said.

"I don't think so."

"It's hard to realize that all the books in the world won't reflect reality. I went to Hogwarts based on what my mother told me. Of course my father could barely speak, or barely bothered, so it was all her voice in my head. James and Remus made it vastly different, far better."

Harry noted Sirius no longer included Pettigrew. He reminded himself that he could never tell Sirius where he was keeping Pettigrew...and his sworn lord.

"I didn't have the books...or the good experience. I had a fight for my life," Harry said.

"Yeah. If there were somewhere else we could put you..."

"The Ministry would come looking. Can't let a powerful wizard get out of control."

"I don't know that it's just the Ministry, Harry."

"But it is..."

"It's deeper than the Ministry."

"But..."

"Hear me out. The Ministry is people, right?"

"Yes."

"It's filled with people from old families."

"Yes."

"Inbreeding creates...problems with magic. Weakness."

"I agree." Harry had seen how far the weak would go to bring down and harm the strong.

"The problem is rooted in the old magical families," Sirius said. "The Ministry doing what it does is a symptom."

Harry agreed, but it didn't help him with that portion of his problems.

"I'm not going to be able to make two purebloods marry other people so they can have stronger children together."

"No, you won't be able to change anything. But now you know where the problem comes from. Jealousy."

"What should I do with that?"

"Understand it."

"I want to change it."

"The young and the change they want," Sirius said. "I wanted change. Peace. I got a decade-plus in prison."

"So you want me to keep my head down?"

"You are a prominent young wizard. You weren't raised to play these political games that the old families like to play..."

"Can't duel but they can argue?"

"Smart mouth, but not wrong, Harry. Yes, I suppose all the politicking substitutes for the fact that there is little strength in the lines." Sirius shook his head. "Listen to me, like my mother talking about how to breed more subservient house elves. It's disgusting."

"I can't live with it, Sirius."

"You could leave."

"It would get worse."

"But not for you."

"For people who couldn't help themselves. For people who weren't forewarned."

"You have that same quality James showed when he got a bit older, this compassion. It shows you're a real Potter, Harry, just like your father."

"Someone in the Ministry already fears me."

"I'd say more than one. I'd say you've been on some list or other since you were fifteen months old."

"What do I do?"

"Are you ready to take a life?"

Harry hadn't told his godfather as much as he's told Hermione. He had told some, but kept even more back. Sirius didn't know Harry as well as Hermione did. He didn't know what to look for, where to push.

"If I had to."

"Are you ready to kill a hundred, Harry." From his tone, Sirius seemed to hope that the answer was no. 'Hell no.'

"I don't want to kill anyone."

"But."

"If it were the only way."

"Well, I happen to subscribe to the opposite of whatever my mother believed. She wanted the weak drowned...while she could barely use a wand. So, it's complicated. I happen to think there has to be a better way. I don't want you to risk yourself, do you understand?"

"I don't think I will get a choice. Not really." He hadn't his first four years of Hogwarts. Why should the rest of his life in the Wizarding World be any different.

"Then that is where you have to concentrate. How do you give yourself a choice?"

It didn't make Harry feel better, but it did make sense. Even if it sounded impossible.

"Can I join you this summer?" Harry asked, very obviously changing the uncomfortable subject.

"I'll figure out a way...some way to make it legal."

"I don't want the Ministry to have any say..."

Sirius began to shake his head. "Let's not argue about this. The goal will be to make you stand out as little as possible Harry. Be as unthreatening

as possible."

"Okay, to that I can agree."

"How are your classes going?"

"I'm bored."

"Well, pick up something outside of class."

"Hermione and I were...well, we were studying that odd book...and taking some of the ideas and testing them."

"Does Hermione need to be there?"

"It's not the same."

Sirius wondered if his godson had found his first crush, followed by his first heartbreak. It wasn't just a friendship ending, Sirius thought, it sounded like it was something more, something fragile crushed. He knew not to ask while the pain was still lancing. Perhaps the next meeting or during the summer Sirius could probe, unless Harry brought it up earlier. This was not a topic for teasing.

Sirius hadn't had an easy time of being in prison. In fact, he would prefer to forget the entire experience, pretend he was still twenty again and live the condition of a young man's. That was normally how he conducted his post-Azkaban life. But, at this moment, his godson needed more than just a friend who happened to have blood ties and a connection to missing parents. Harry needed an advisor.

"No, it wouldn't be," Sirius said. "Things changing can be good..."

"I don't..."

"I know this isn't good for you...or her, Harry. But sometimes change is good or painful change can become good. I know this hurts now, so you need to...to find some way to get some good out of it. I definitely don't like the sound of you bored."

Harry nodded. He could see some merit in the advice. "I could always sop

up the time with Quidditch before. But that's..."

"Not an option in the winter. Perhaps you can get some people together to just have a match in the spring."

"Yeah." Harry had a half smile creep across his face.

"Otherwise, you should...find something else of an academic nature to keep your interest."

Harry boggled at his godfather suggest Harry do something studious. He poked the suggestion and dug deeper into it. "Are you suggesting I learn to be an animagus?" That was the most studious thing he had ever heard of Sirius doing.

Sirius smiled. "Well, that wasn't the only thing your father and Remus and I got up to. I think I learned more charms for our pranks than I did for my classes."

"I don't think I'm a prankster."

"Didn't say you had to be one. I just suggested you find something, Harry. Something to keep you interested."

"Warfare against the Ministry doesn't count?"

"Let's aim at something pleasant, something fun. You need some lightness right now, not a battle plan to write."

"You want me to learn to sing or something? I have a horrible voice."

"It can be magic of some sort. Remus and I put together the Marauder's Map to facilitate other...efforts. That was a fine piece of magic, we also had to sneak into every part of the castle. You ever tried sneaking into professor's offices? And their apartments? Nerve wracking and a hell of a lot of fun."

Sirius smiled, remembering.

Harry thought he and his godfather had distinctly different tastes in fun. But he began to wonder. He had enough offensive magic available for

now. He would like to know how to make people tell the truth, he had some very tough 'guests' who still lied more than they told the truth, but Harry didn't think digging deeper into potions would be any flavor of fun.

Perhaps it was time to play with the things that awed him. He could still remember how impressed he'd been seeing this part or that part of the grounds and the stadium set up for the Quidditch World Cup. A giant mess, as per usual with wizards about, but awe-inspiring.

What was there like that for him? He didn't know, but he found he wanted to try to find an answer.

It was a good project. "Thanks, Sirius."

"I like to see you smile, Harry. As a tiny mite, you had the widest grin."

"I don't need to hear what I was like when I was a tot."

"Tough, godfather's prerogative."

Harry shook his head.

Sirius watched his godson a while, not saying anything. "You should get back."

"Have a date lined up?"

"You know, now that you mention it," Sirius started, smiling. "I should look into that. Not so many sane women in Azkaban. However, I was referring to the early afternoon sunset. Walking back in the dark won't be the safest thing you've done in a dozen weeks."

"Alright, alright, I'm leaving," Harry said.

He didn't bother returning to Hogsmeade, although he considered looking in on his imprisoned Dark Lord and attendant. Instead, Harry skirted through the edge of the Forbidden Forest and made it across the ground before the day's light was depleted. Harry expected to return to a quiet castle. He was secretly glad there was no formal dance. He'd have been

pants at dancing. Harry thought to head up to Gryffindor Tower and change out of his warm clothes before dinner. Unfortunately, he never made it to the stairs.

"Mr. Potter, I've been looking for you for the last hour," Professor McGonagall said.

"Sorry, Professor." That was lesson one with a Dursley or an annoyed Hogwarts professor. Apologize. Even if one hadn't done anything wrong: apologize. Arguing won zilch.

"Come with me now. Two members of the Ministry of Magic are on there way here to see you."

"Me," Harry said, displeased.

"I believe Professor Dumbledore left you something in his will."

This was suspicious. Harry fell in step with his professor. He guessed they were heading for her office. He remembered the last time he was set to meet representatives of the Ministry. He touched his Evans wand up his sleeve. He had his 'blindness' trick ready if he should need it. He didn't want to have to explain himself to McGonagall, but he wasn't giving the Ministry a free shot.

"Where were you?" McGonagall asked, looking behind her toward student.

"Enjoying a nice day."

"There's snow everywhere, Potter."

"It was still a nice day."

Her lips pursed in response in place of any further inquiry. They arrived at her office where she opened the door and bade Harry to take a seat. She did not offer refreshments. She sat behind her desk and almost glared at her student.

"Did they say what Professor Dumbledore left me?"

"No, they didn't."

"I didn't expect anything."

"Well, knowing the Ministry they'll get it wrong." She looked at Harry again and realized she had said something she shouldn't in front of a student. "Forget that, Potter."

"Yes, ma'am."

The fire in her office glowed green and a witch and a wizard in garish robes stepped out. Harry supposed it could be official uniforms...or horrible fashion sense.

"Minerva," the woman said. "And Mr. Potter. Good. Minerva, might we have the office?"

"I am Potter's head of house. I will remain."

The witch seemed displeased. Harry did, too, for a moment. If these Ministry worked were anything like the Aurors he'd met with before...Harry didn't want a witness around to see what happened.

The witch nodded at her wizard companion. "I am with the Office of Legal Affairs, Mr. Potter. I specialize in handling the processes relating to wills."

"The Professor said that Professor Dumbledore left something for me?"

"Yes, quite right." The wizard began digging in his pockets, of which he possessed many, too many. "Hmm, here is what the language of his testament, dated May 1991, said. 'To Harry Potter, a soon-to-be student at Hogwarts who has done important things for our world, not least provide a stiff measure of hope during the darkest times in our history, I leave a starter collection of books along with a first book shelf. He's to have the three shelf unit painted in black that I keep near the entrance to my private quarters at Hogwarts in addition to my hand-annotated editions of Insights into Transfiguration, The Field Guide to Alchemical

Research, and Uncommon Magics for Uncommon Wizards.'" "

A bookshelf and three books. Harry was beyond confused. This sounded like something Dumbledore should have left for Hermione. But him...he wasn't known to be much of a reader, although that had changed in his private hours since the beginning of the year.

"Alright," Harry said. "If the Professor wanted me to have a small library, I will accept."

"One moment," the witch said.

Harry looked at her. Had she not been wearing robes, Harry wouldn't have been able to guess that she was a witch. She looked like anyone at all. No crazy hair, no pinched face. If Harry didn't know better, he'd guess she used some sort of Muggle cosmetics on her face.

"There is another option," the witch said.

"Oh?"

"You can certainly keep the bookshelf as a memento of your Headmaster. But I think you might like to donate these rare and important books where many people can use them."

"Donate?"

"To the Ministry Library."

"Who uses it?" Harry asked.

"Ministry workers, of course."

"What about a Hogwarts student?"

"I'm afraid not."

"So you want me to donate books to a library I can't use."

"These are important books annotated by an important wizard, Mr. Potter."

"I want my bookshelf and I want my books."

"I don't think you understand," the witch said. "At this time, these books

are legal to own."

Yes, every time Harry interacted with the Ministry of Magic he came away angry, sputtering angry. It was if these people didn't care who they pissed off, as if they had no fear of anyone or anything. Harry guessed Voldemort had scared them...but a fourth-year student at Hogwarts, no chance.

"But?" Harry asked.

"It wouldn't take long to make them illegal for an individual to own."

"So you could come back and confiscate my copies?"

"Well...that's one possibility," the witch said, smiling.

"Give me my books now...and then come back for them later. If the Professor thought they were going to be useful for me, I want to read them."

"He was obviously insane to leave such...dangerous books to a child who hadn't even begun his first year at Hogwarts. I suspect the Ministry could challenge the entire testament," the wizard said.

"I want my books." The more Harry argued, the more he was convinced these two did their little routine fairly often. They were too practiced working with each other.

"I didn't bring them, of course," the witch said.

Harry addressed the wizard. "Why did you turn over my property to this woman?"

"It's the law, Mr. Potter."

Wasn't that how all they cowards hid? The Aurors: 'I jump when the Minister says jump. I don't care about the law.' Legal wizards: 'It's the law.'

As if anyone knew or followed the laws. As if anyone at the Ministry would challenge this pair for their attempted theft.

"Where are they?" Harry asked the witch.

"The Ministry Library."

"Why don't you floo back and get my books for me?"

"I think, perhaps, you should just take up a lawsuit in the Wizengamot if you want to enforce this provision in the will. I suspect you won't get much of a cooperative response."

"You never intended to let me have what the Professor left?"

"They are important books read and marked up by an important wizard. What would a young student like yourself need with post-mastery level books?"

"What if I wanted to become a master?"

"Join the Ministry and you can read the books."

"I guess I will see you in court. What's your name?"

"I'm the Librarian."

"What is your name?"

"It'll be hard to sue a witch you don't know," the witch said.

"That's enough, Constance Pettigrew."

Harry sat back in his chair, furious at the woman's words and her identity. Pettigrew. He wasn't best pleased with McGonagall, either. She'd taken long enough to respond to all this mess.

Pettigrew.

His fingers itched to let loose with some spells.

He still had Peter Pettigrew in his control...still needed information the rat wasn't yet sharing fully. But this woman...this Ministry worker...she was just a straight enemy. A thief.

Harry looked at the witch. Now that McGonagall had said the name, Harry could see the resemblance. She still looked something like a muggle, but now she had a rat-like smile on her face, enjoying what she

was doing, stealing from a schoolboy.

"Well," the wizard said, rolling up the will. "I think we're done for now. The Ministry has no interest in the bookcase so you can release it to Mr. Potter. As Ms. Pettigrew said, if Harry wishes to enforce the rest of the provisions of the will, it seems he will need to mount a suit against the Ministry. Good day to you both."

They stood, walked to the fireplace, and disappeared into the green flames, back to the Ministry.

McGonagall looked almost as angry as Harry once the pair from the Ministry left. "They impounded his entire library about a day after he was found dead."

"You let them?"

"I didn't let anyone do anything," she snapped in response. Her face lightened in severity before she spoke again. "I only heard after it was done. I don't know why people bother with wills. The Ministry just picks through anything it wants. Less than half of what my uncle Clyde left to me made it into my hands."

"You could have warned me."

"I had no idea the Professor intended to leave you anything."

This was something else to despise the Ministry for. Theft. Taunting theft.

'Sue us, you dear deluded boy, if you dare.'

"What was the book on transfiguration?" Harry asked.

"Oh? That was the book Albus wrote on high-level transfiguration-based dueling. I've never come across it's like since."

That sounded like something Harry wanted to read.

"Is there a copy here?"

"In the restricted section. I suppose I could write you a pass, Potter, considering the Headmaster meant for you to have access to these three

books. Be careful with Uncommon Magics though. Half the things described in there could kill you."

"Half?"

"At least half. The magic we teach in school is generally safe, generally useful. There are quite a few disciplines that were discovered by accident, usually with the death of a witch or wizard trying to do something. Apparition was an accident, of course, quite lethal until the rules got worked out. Portkeys, too. Magical animal husbandry, very dangerous, mostly dangerous."

Harry just nodded and absorbed the warning. He thought about whining about her lack of assistance against the Constance Pettigrew, but Harry guessed whining would do nothing.

"I don't know why he chose to leave these kinds of books to a student who hadn't even begun Hogwarts. Well, he obviously didn't expect to die so young."

Harry thought the question pointless now that the annotated books had been stolen from him. He would read the library copies and make do.

"Can you help me get the bookcase? I suppose I can put my old schoolbooks on it."

McGonagall stood, looked toward the scotch she kept on a sideboard, and looked over at Potter. Her shoulders slumped a bit. "Yes, let's take a walk to the Headmaster's old rooms. I'm fairly sure I know which bookcase he was referring to."

The scotch would have to wait. A schoolteacher's hours were never free, were they?

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

McGonagall floated the bookcase past the entrance to Harry's dorm.

There was no one else in the dorm at present, but the place looked like

some major magical battle had been fought in here. Harry wished he could say it was just Ron being messy, but there was Neville's clutter, too, and Dean was none too tidy. Shockingly, Seamus seemed to pick up after himself. His mother must have beat the instinct into him almost as well as the Dursleys beat some tidiness into Harry.

Harry directed his Professor to put the bookcase against the wall near his bed.

"Thank you, Professor."

"I'm sorry this is all you will receive, Potter. You could talk to a barrister, but I think you'll find you spend considerable galleons for not much of a result."

"By the way they recommended I sue them, I gathered it would be pointless."

"Yes, the Wizengamot serves the Ministry and the Ministry serves the Wizengamot."

Harry nodded. He needed no further convincing. It was a black mark on a list that included Aurors who shot cutting curses at school boys.

"Dinner is in twenty minutes, Potter. Wash up."

"Yes, ma'am."

When she left Harry turned to his trunk and began digging out the books that he had splayed around inside. He picked up three and put them on his bookcase. He turned around for another three. When he put these on the bookcase, he found there were now nine books in place.

Even someone as mathematically challenged as Harry realized that three plus three didn't equal nine.

He plucked three of them off the case. Looking at their spines revealed familiar names, the titles of the books that the Ministry had confiscated from him. Stolen.

Harry looked at each of the books. It was baffling to him until he noticed a piece of parchment sticking out of the book on transfiguration.

Harry pulled the parchment and began to read.

"May 1991

"Dear Harry,

"Congratulations on graduating Hogwarts and defeating Voldemort. I was told many years ago that I wouldn't perish until after Voldemort was handled. This from a reliable seer. So, I have to assume you were responsible. Know that I died glad that you had surmounted all the challenges left for you.

"I apologize if you were surprised at what this bookcase has done, providing you with the books I willed to you. I have made these special arrangements to see that you get the three books I left you as I'm well aware of the Ministry's little theft ring. Knowing what I do about their habits, I used a particularly brilliant charm to embed these books inside the bookcase until such time as someone places books upon it. I suspect the Ministry gladly stole the 'flawed duplicates' I made at the same time I created this bookcase, while they passed on this plain piece of furniture.

"Enjoy these volumes and study them carefully when you have the sufficient background to do so. I would also keep them out of the public view as at least two of these volumes have something of a reputation in these dark, present times. Likely to be stolen by a friend as one of your likely enemies in the Ministry.

"I hope we've already sat down after you graduated and had a long conversation about the way this world really works. I hope I did catch you before you joined the Ministry of Magic, as I'm sure they will insist that you do. Be advised: I recommend that you do not join the Ministry of Magic in any case, at any level, no matter the circumstances.

"Should we not have had this conversation, I hope you will read Uncommon Magics first. Pay special attention to the sections on binding magic. Be forewarned. Be ready. If you are strong enough to defeat Voldemort as a toddler, you are strong enough for people to be wary of you. Arm yourself, Harry.

"Perhaps that is the extent of my advice. Be ready. These three books will help you, but they will not be sufficient on their own. Start here and never stop learning.

"I wonder if you will see the Ministry as an enemy. I did not until it was too late for me to do something. I hope you will consider the Ministry with a careful eye and a spirit predisposed to handle evil rather than let it fester.

"That was my great regret in life.

"Your mentor, Albus Dumbledore"

Harry set the parchment on his bed. He now knew who had written that book...the book...that helped Harry survive the Triwizard. His 'mentor,' not that he considered Dumbledore for that role. Harry's hatred of the Ministry still colored about everything he knew.

Even if Dumbledore hadn't been a dutiful Ministry lackey. Even if the powerful wizard had taken his oaths before he knew what they would mean. Dumbledore admitted in the letter he knew that the Ministry stole from the estate of dead witches and wizards...and fixed it so the problem wouldn't affect himself...and did nothing for anyone else in the same situation.

Harry immediately wanted to show the letter to Hermione.

He also immediately regretted the impulse.

It was better to let all that lie for a while, let it sit and recover from the wounds Harry had inflicted on it with the questions he'd answered

truthfully. It was one thing to do anything to survive; it was another to admit to what one had done. He'd thought Hermione could handle it - that, or he'd been so surprised that he couldn't craft a lie on demand - that he spoke the truth to her.

To be honest, Harry didn't know what to do with his new knowledge of Dumbledore. The man who wrote him a book so that he might survive the Tournament, a man who warned him off the Ministry of which he was a part. Talk about complex. Talk about conflicted.

There was gratitude, yes.

There was suspicion.

There was a whole helping of confusion, too.

Harry took the three books that had been stored, somehow, inside of the bookcase and put them at the bottom of his trunk. He pulled out his normal course books and stuck them on his book case.

No more books magically appeared.

No new letters.

But there was still a lot of confusion.

There would also be a lot of new reading to accomplish without Hermione's assistance and enthusiasm. That was something to mourn, almost as big a clot in his mind as the changing nature of their friendship, its withering or dying.

Harry washed his hands, as he'd been told, and went down to dinner.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

The first meal after term resumed saw the Headmaster's seat still empty at the Head Table. McGonagall rose from her seat, forced to play the Acting Headmistress for a time.

"If I might have your attention? Students, your attention.

"Given that Alastor Moody has gone missing as our Professor for Defense

Against the Dark Arts, the Ministry has seen fit to assign us a replacement professor for the rest of the term. Please welcome Dolores Umbridge, formerly senior undersecretary to the late Cornelius Fudge."

Harry looked at the overweight monster sitting at the table. She could barely muster a smile or a wave of the hand at her greeting. She might just be the only person sad about the death of Minister Fudge. It seemed it had cost her her well-titled Ministry position.

Since she was from the Ministry, Harry wouldn't trust her. Watch her, listen to her for clues, but there would be no trust.

"Given the late nature of her appointment, students who were supposed to have Defense tomorrow should take a study period instead. The Professor will begin teaching classes on Thursday.

"Now, enjoy your supper."

Harry took a modest portion of food. Ron, sitting across from Harry and Hermione, who all still sat together out of inertia rather than genuine friendship, took an immodest portion. Ron waited until he had food in his mouth to pass judgment on the new professor.

"She's going...to be a nightmare."

Hermione delivered a scathing review of Ron's table manners, which never seemed to improve no matter how often his deficiencies were pointed out to him.

Harry sat not looking toward Ron and ate. He considered the Ministry some more. He'd begun digging into the new books Dumbledore had left. He had more questions and no one to ask them to.

He sat and ate and listened.

Hogwarts was a different place now.

With Hermione different. And Ron different. And even Dumbledore gone.

Harry found that reading the books Dumbledore left made Harry

more...sympathetic to the old wizard. Angry with him, sure. But sympathetic.

What happens if one makes an irreversible mistake? (Like swearing an oath that was as hard as a noose.)

Like if one spoke the truth to a friend...and the friendship died. If one tried to survive and wound up having to hurt people, kill them.

Hogwarts was a different place now.

Not quite so magical. Not quite so interesting.

The advice Sirius had given him over the holidays began to reassert itself.

Harry needed something to counterbalance all the weight on his shoulders. Something to make magic fun again. Just learning to be strong, just preparing for a war, was a burden, not a pleasure if he did it by himself. It had been a challenge when he shared the project with Hermione.

What was there that was fun? Gobstones, no. He knew so little about magic aside from what was taught in the curriculum. Delving deeper into divination had zero charm for him. Astronomy club, no.

Maybe he could be one of those crazy wizards who recreated famous battles of the past, carving up little figures and animating the entire field of battle. Harry smiled and selected another piece of chicken.

Just smiling helped to make his appetite return.

He hadn't noticed how hungry he'd been for the past few weeks. Now he noticed it. He was thinner now than he'd been in November.

He'd have to reverse that.

He'd also have to investigate what wizards did for fun...beyond flying on a broom or playing games. Dumbledore had been reputed to bowl. Ron's father collected muggle junk. There had to be something else.

"Hermione, what do you know about wizarding hobbies?"

Her eyes lit up. Apparently she knew quite a bit.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Harry looked at his watch. In theory, it was Saturday so Harry didn't have classes and didn't need to be at any particular place at any particular time. In practice, his Saturdays were busy.

He looked at the...he guessed it was a tower...he'd been building. It all started from little blocks, bits of branches that he and Ron and cut into base materials for transfiguring into weird and strange houses. Ron had written to his father and his oldest brother about how to make structures with magic.

This tower Harry built, near to where Ron was building some kind of a castle, was the result of the advice that came via owl post.

Transfiguration to turn the blocks into different textures, different shapes. Color changing charms to adjust how they looked...or even turn them translucent like panes of glass.

It was good to know that the magic Harry learned for classes and also to protect himself could be used in other ways. He was glad he'd mentioned hobbies in front of Ron. Otherwise Harry would have never known that the Weasley family were some of the last practitioners of magical building in the United Kingdom. The Burrow looked like a mess because it had been expanded several times from the structure Arthur Weasley originally built. His home had once only needed to support a father, a mother, and a baby boy and it had been small and elegant...but when the demand of seven children pressed against all limits, the hasty expansions had made the structure rather a shambles.

But the Weasley family knew how to build things using magic. Now Ron knew, so Harry knew and Hermione, too, but she poo-poo'd the building so far as 'what babies did.' Harry thought it was great, relaxing and

energizing. Harry found it relaxing to build in miniature. He remembered the jealousy he felt at Dudley's having Legos...and getting angry with them and throwing them out the window. It was an accomplishment for a wizard to make things with magic, Harry decided.

To hell with ordinary building blocks.

So Harry had learned something from Ron, other than how to lose at chess.

Magical construction was too important to let it fall into neglect. Other buildings, famous ones, in the magical world were built by other races. Gringotts had been built by goblins, of course. The famous Malfoy Manor in Wiltshire had been built a hundred years earlier by dwarves. People claimed Hogwarts had been built by the founders, but Harry thought it more likely it had been built by dwarves. He'd looked at more than one book in the library to get an idea of what to build so he had just a tiny clue.

"I need to get up and take a walk," Harry said. "My legs are cramping from all this sitting around."

Ron looked up from his castle making. "That's a good one, Harry. You should keep it."

"I don't want to be a crazy wizard who builds towers large and small."

"Still, it's good." The thing was a double kind of swirl, a truly insane design but pretty to look at from the outside. Harry had no idea what he'd do with it if he ever built one at full size, not that it would be all that hard to make. Just find enough large stones and a solid patch of land with bedrock not too far from the surface...and Harry would be the proud creator of a tower.

Not that he wanted to build one for real. Not yet at least.

"Maybe I'll keep it for a while."

Normally Harry just dispelled the magic on the wooden blocks so he could reuse them. This time, with his spire/tower, he decided to hold onto it a while.

"Nice castle," Harry said to Ron.

"It's not quite right."

Harry agreed, not that he would say it wasn't right. Their friendship was fragile now, particularly as there was so much he wasn't able to talk about with Ron. But they had chess (which Ron always won) and now building (where Harry had a slight edge so far).

Harry ran his spire up to his room and put it on his bookcase before he grabbed his cloak and went for his walk.

He cut through the Forbidden Forest and aimed toward the Shrieking Shack. He had made this trip at least once a week since Barty Crouch, Jr., confronted him.

He had to have another conversation with a couple of very dangerous wizards.

He had some food shrunk in the pocket of his cloak. House elves in the Hogwarts kitchens were very quick to please.

Harry made it to the Shrieking Shack by eleven in the morning. He'd skip eating in the Great Hall for lunch and return for dinner. He had made small gains talking to...or interrogating...his two captives. He still wished he could brew a truth serum.

Of course, he still hadn't told his godfather that he had Wormtail captive. If so, Wormtail would be dead and Sirius would have had a permanent break from reality. Not that his mental health at present was anything to brag about.

Harry snuck in one of the windows at the back of the abandoned building. He worked his way into the basement, near the path that led

from the Whomping Willow on Hogwarts grounds to this building. He didn't use the tunnel because he didn't care to crawl through what seemed a mile of mud.

He'd rather walk.

Harry pulled the food from his pocket and expanded the package until it was the normal size again. He walked to the small cage where he kept his pet 'rat.' Harry stunned the rat in the cage, opened the door, dumped the rat onto the ground, and used the animagus reversal spell to force the stunned rat back into his ratlike human form. Magical ropes immobilized the traitor before Harry released the rat from his stunning.

It was a drill that Wormtail had become inured to.

"I'm hungry," was all he said.

"There will be food."

There was a reason Harry left the rat in rat form most of the time with a small amount of food in his cage. An animagus in animal form was constantly hungry...so Pettigrew was more receptive to conversation once per week when Harry visited.

Answering questions meant Pettigrew got to eat as a person before resuming his rat form. If he didn't answer, no food for him, just for the rat stuffed back in his cage. If Harry had a way of knowing about the truthfulness of what Pettigrew said...then he could decide what to finally do.

He guessed Pettigrew was mostly lying when he could. When what he said would be hard to verify.

The rat had a week between conversations to try to guess at what Harry might ask.

Still, the rat talked. The rat wanted to talk. (That was more than Harry usually got out of Voldemort-as-homunculus.)

Harry threw a bit of cheese at Pettigrew. The way Pettigrew twisted and turned for it, like a show dog starved by a cruel owner, was a bit sickening. How easily a person could become a subservient wretch Harry now knew...and wished he didn't.

"First, a bit of history," Harry said.

"What do you want to know?"

"You've heard that Dumbledore is dead."

"No. How?"

"He was how old? I assume a long life would stretch no further. I want to know about his Order of the Phoenix."

"I joined Voldemort because of the Order."

What did the rat mean? He was ordered to join Voldemort. Harry hoped that wasn't the case. He... "What do you mean?"

"Dumbledore was our side's most powerful wizard. But we did nothing in the Order or next to nothing."

"So you..."

"Thought the other side would win. I was with the knights of the light side...and we didn't fight all that often or all that well. We collected information. Sometimes we helped hide battle scenes from the muggles. I don't know that we ever took down a Death Eater. It was obvious Dumbledore was leading us to our deaths."

"When did you join?"

"Late 1978."

"Was Dumbledore head of the Wizengamot by then?"

"Yes. Well, maybe. I don't know. I don't keep his C.V. stamped on my hand."

"You think there was anything important about him being in the Wizengamot?"

"He was cautious, ever so cautious. Death by caution," the rat said. His sanity was worse than Sirius Black's and the rat hadn't spent more than a decade in the presence of Dementors.

"I wonder if he started the Order before he became Chief Warlock?"

"Yes, that I do know. The answer is yes. Dumbledore started the organization the year I was born, he mentioned that once or twice. My great uncle was head of the Wizengamot back then."

"I met your mother," Harry said.

"She's dead. You met my sister. They look very much alike and have the same shrill voices."

"She looks old enough to be your mother."

"She's almost a squib. So she must age fast. I never put her on my safe list. I wish I could have put her on a kill list."

"What was a safe list?"

"People we protected, people Voldemort as our lord was responsible to protect."

"That was how the dominance magic was set up?" Harry asked.

"How do you know about that? I didn't know about any of that until I met the Dark Lord."

"I guess I've been dueling more than one dark lord in my day," Harry said. "I've come across the idea."

"Yes. There was no way for him to share power. I know some of the pureblood idiots asked to be given this or that bit of authority once he won. He was powerful, but it was because he had more magic than anyone else, more ability to use it. The idiots didn't understand. So when I pledged my servitude, I took something real. I joined the Dark Lord in exchange for his protection of my mother."

"Not your sister."

"No."

Harry pondered that a bit. "He promised not to kill your mother, not ever. That was the exchange you agreed to?"

"His promise was a narrow one. He would give any protectee he came across one chance to surrender. Anyone who attacked him or defied him was fair game again."

This jogged a memory in Harry's mind. It would come to him.

"Why didn't you ask to protect your sister?"

Harry had no family he would willingly claim. He wanted to understand Wormtail's vehemence.

"A near-squib who shouldn't be allowed to breed," Pettigrew said. "A woman who had no power so that was all she ever craved, any small scrap she could get?"

That sickened Harry. He had no love, and a good deal of anger, for the Dursley family. He could never see launching an attack on them...unless it was in self defense. Vernon could get quite a bit punchy once he was in his cups.

"Tell me about her."

"Please, Harry, I'm hungry."

"Let's have some more give and take before I hand over a sandwich."

He found he wanted to understand the Ministry better. Pettigrew's sister. Anyone Pettigrew knew about.

Why Harry hadn't thought to ask the rat about the Ministry before he didn't know. All the gossip he might have picked up from Arthur Weasley on his return from his job, all his griping. Pettigrew might know quite a bit. Because for as much as Sirius Black counseled Harry to ease off his anger for the Ministry, it just wouldn't abate.

The attempted theft of books from a boy who didn't love books...was

enough to make Harry begin to love books. It was more than enough to stoke wider, harder fires inside him regarding the Ministry. But he wouldn't wait to be attacked again. He wouldn't keep having unexpected battles at a time someone else picked. He needed to craft a moderately sneaky plan to begin bringing down the Ministry, a plan that wouldn't require an impossible amount of risk on his part.

"Please," the rat pleaded.

"Hungry? Hmm." Harry leaned down and began to prepare a sandwich.

Ham and the wonderful cheese the house elves had aplenty and the bread they baked every day. He ran a smear of mustard along the top of the bread and cut it with a knife he should have used for potions ingredient preparation. Harry began to eat one half of it. Not touching the other half, leaving it as an offer and a possible punishment for Wormtail.

'Speak or I eat all of it.'

Harry had tried the same treatment he'd used on Barty Crouch, Jr., removal of fingers, threats to remove other things. Harry had removed two more fingers from the rat, but found this business with the food much more successful at getting something from the rat.

"Your sister?" Harry said with a full mouth, channeling the table manners of his friend Ron.

"She went to Hogwarts, got abominable scores. No one had any hopes for me when I arrived a few years after she left. She had ruined the Pettigrew name."

"You hate her...for that?"

"You know what she does at the Ministry? She has a title of Librarian or Acquirer or something. It's her job to sit in the legal office and pick over things to keep back from estates when wizards die. She's particularly fond of books that describe high level magics, things she would never be able

to perform if her life depended on them."

"So I could have received a book of nursery stories..."

"She hates children."

"But not magic books from the private library of Albus Dumbledore."

"No. She would have had those picked out...and probably burned to ashes...about five minutes after the list of bequests landed on her desk.

She has the power, at least she did when I still knew her, to order the Aurors or Hitwizards to break into a dead person's estate and confiscate everything."

A weak witch with the power of dozens to make up for her personal deficiencies.

"How did she get her job?"

"Didn't you listen? Our great uncle had been the head of the Wizengamot.

There was no question she could have a job in the Ministry. Of course, not as something important. But a paper pusher with a bunch of power, that's her deal. She was a sadist when we were children, now she's employed full-time as a sadist."

"That was why you once felt kinship with Sirius, wasn't it? Both from families you disliked."

"Perhaps."

Wormtail always went screwy when Sirius or Remus or James came up in conversation. Harry almost wished he could get the rat to talk about his father. He still next to nothing about his parents, just the sound of their dying moments... Thinking that was a punch to Harry's mind. He put together a couple pieces in rapid order.

The sound of his mother's voice. The words she exchanged with Voldemort.

"Voldemort offered to spare my mother. You were there, weren't you?"

You heard him. He offered one time before he killed her. She was on a safe list," Harry said.

"I would guess so. It was the only time he offered mercy."

"Not yours?"

"I didn't know her. The only name on my list was my mother's."

"So which Death Eater considered my mother family?"

Wormtail shook his head.

The conversation continued a while longer, focused on the bonding rituals Voldemort used on his followers. Pettigrew remembered what had happened, but he didn't know the theory behind the rituals. He couldn't even translate the spells that had been used.

Harry, of course, had Voldemort in another room, perhaps one dug out so that Remus could safely transform into a werewolf. But Voldemort feared nothing and often revealed little when Harry tried to talk with him. This time, because of one of the books Dumbledore left for him, Harry believed he'd make better progress.

First, he fed Wormtail half a sandwich. Then he cleaned out the wooden cage Wormtail had a jail cell. Harry had since upgraded it with magical durability spells, but the first version of it was wood and nails. Lots and lots of nails, a hundred nails punched down through the roof of the little structure. So many that if Wormtail, once inside the box, transformed into a human, his head and neck and upper torso would be pierced through with nails.

Harry made Wormtail change back, using the threat of leaving Wormtail bound in ropes without food or water for a week. The rat always complied once he realized how serious Harry was about what he said. Harry shoved the rat back into the box and left some water and bread behind.

He thought that he was almost done with Wormtail. He wondered what to do with the rat. Couldn't turn him over to a Ministry where his sister had some power. Didn't care to kill him in cold blood.

Perhaps something in one of the books Dumbledore left would give Harry an idea.

Harry walked deeper into the basement and opened a door.

"Potter, release me."

The Dark Lord was still in good condition. Of course, he couldn't eat normal food in his present condition. He couldn't exactly die from an unfed body. That Harry learned from practical experience first before he found a passage in Uncommon Magics to explain why.

The spirit was now a magical creation. Not human any longer. Not a spirit. A ritual-created sentient lifeform called a homunculus.

A thing of magic.

Still something that could be hurt. If one knew how.

Harry figured what he now understood would be enough to dislodge a few things of value from Voldemort.

Harry looked at the small, lumpish baby with a disturbingly deep voice.

It was on its back. Its two arms and two legs waved helplessly in the air.

Even a baby could have righted itself given enough time. But Voldemort, unfed by a strange concoction Wormtail described a few visits before, was weaker than a baby. Weak, but unable to die...and unable to abandon the shell he'd imprisoned himself inside.

Harry remembered something of Voldemort escaping from Quirrell.

Now it wasn't possible. Voldemort hadn't possessed some baby. This was Voldemort's spirit run through a ritual that made him into this distorted baby.

Harry pulled a book from an inside pocket of his cloak. Uncommon

Magics. He had a torn piece of parchment shoved in between two pages.

He opened the book there, found his place again, and began to read.

"Necromancy is a broad term that encompasses dozens of sub-disciplines, only some of which will be treated in this book. The common misperception of necromancy is that it revolves around raising the dead, such as Ineri. The truth is there are many useful magics lumped into necromancy, particularly spells for dealing with ghosts, gheists, and other spiritual phenomena.

Harry skipped a few paragraphs. Voldemort shouted a few more commands and demands.

"The muggles believe they can exorcise a ghost or a possessing spirit. Of course, this is patently false. Magicals took centuries to develop ritual methods for handling ghosts and gheists. The earliest successful method involved imprisoning a spirit into a small piece of wood or acorn and using it as a component of a ritual to 'impregnate' a woman. Instead of a normal gestation, the magical ritual created a homunculus within forty-eight hours which the woman had to pass through her birth canal. It was, of course, a ritual abandoned as soon as there were rituals not nearly so horrifying to conduct.

Voldemort was silent now. Harry turned the page and began to read again near the bottom of the page.

"The homunculus of a spirit will weaken, but not perish and not break, if it isn't kept fed with the basis potion used in the ritual, the components of which vary depending on local traditions but included magical plants and animals parts, particularly biles, blood, and poisons. This is how the early wizards would imprison spirits. Enflesh the dangerous spirits in a homunculus and hide it somewhere. The only book I could consult on the subject suggested that a homunculus could last more than a hundred

years before it's magic faltered. It was unclear if the spirit would be freed or forced to pass onward.

"Of course, practitioners of magic who feared these rituals might be used against them at some point developed further rituals to fully repower a homunculus. Common variants include familial rituals (involving blood and bone of current relatives and deceased ancestors), lordship rituals (involving the sacrifice of blood, bone, and lives of sworn vassals), and many hybrid methods.' Have I about got the story, Mr. Riddle?"

"Damn you, Potter."

"I'll take that as a yes. Did you know there is a particularly decrepit well behind the house we're in. A very deep one. There's an old bucket out there that's just large enough for you to fit in. How would you like to be underwater for the next hundred years...or longer?"

"What do you want?"

"I'm glad you asked. I want to understand where you failed."

"I didn't fail."

"I'm a fourteen year old who isn't dead. And you're a large albino dung-beetle looking thing. I'd call that failure."

"Damn you."

"I think the Ministry...or perhaps someone else...began to interfere with you. Someone realized you were powerful, could become powerful. I think you were rebelling. I think you did it badly," Harry said.

Echoing statements that could be made about his own life, his own interactions with the Ministry.

"Your eyes are open, are they, Potter?"

"Wide open."

"Fine. What do I get?"

"To sit on dry land."

"I want a body back. Use that worthless Wormtail to make it happen, assuming you haven't killed him yet."

The negotiations began hard and furious.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Harry was still reeling the evening after he negotiated with Voldemort.

He walked without consciously moving his feet toward the Great Hall. He could sort of hear that Ron was explaining something he was thinking about building out of blocks.

Harry didn't know what he should do.

It was so much easier with Hermione to help. With that book to rely upon as a crutch. With a single goal to accomplish: survive the Triwizard by any means necessary.

Now...now that he had a wider goal, a massive one...protect himself from the Ministry...it seemed so impossible.

He knew what Dumbledore had done: join up.

He knew what Voldemort had done: find weak wizards who might have joined the Ministry and convince them to work for Voldemort rather than the Ministry (or, in addition to the Ministry).

Neither had worked.

The conversation with Voldemort yesterday included a full discussion of what Dumbledore had included in his handwritten book. Some of which surprised Voldemort, although much of it was old news.

Then a thorough discussion of Dumbledore's death.

Harry had chalked it up to old age. Voldemort had a different explanation. "He killed himself."

"No, he didn't," Harry had shouted.

"He thought himself the smartest person in the land. But he clapped himself in Ministry chains, didn't he?"

"Why didn't you join the Ministry?"

"I was Head Boy. It was almost expected. I was going to do it, too, until I had a couple of interviews with the people who worked there."

"And?"

"I didn't join, did I?"

"What did you find out?"

"I got hold of inside opinions on how the Ministry worked. Not the glossy, fluffy version pushed at Hogwarts. I had one teacher who insisted it would be the best thing I ever did."

"Dumbledore?"

"No, he and I didn't like each other."

"Why do you say he killed himself?"

"Read back through what you told me. He had enough resentment inside him to write you a book on how awful the Ministry was, how evil it's oaths were. Then the Ministry's in a tumult. I wouldn't hesitate a bit that Dumbledore tried to use Fudge's death to his benefit."

"Make himself Minister?"

"He was Minister."

"He was Chief Warlock."

"He could pick the Minister. He could fire the Minister. He was the Minister."

Harry shook his head. Dumbledore had power, but power demanded to be used.

"His oaths kept him from doing anything with all that power. Now that I'm...old enough to look back on it all, that would have been the worst fate. To climb that greased pole, hit the top, and realize there was nothing I could do with all that power. My oaths would have tied me into a gnarled length of rope."

"You're sure..."

"He was a tinker. A little nudge here, a subtle hint there. He did something very small I'd guess that brought him in conflict with an oath. He probably died not knowing what killed him."

All that wisdom worth nothing.

"What did you fight for?" Harry asked Voldemort.

"I fought for nothing. I fought against all the Dumbledore prized."

"What would victory have looked like?"

"I never asked the question. There was no victory possible, you foolish boy. Just the struggle."

"How did you convince people to work for you if you never promised an ending?"

"If you wanted me to lie to you, you should have asked. To my foot soldiers I promised great things. Things none of them would ever live to see. I didn't care for an end to war. Peace is hell, Potter. Peace is the wasting of power. Power is action. Power is progress."

"So you lied?"

"You lie, too."

"Everyone does. But not about the important things."

"As if such a fine distinction matters."

"What magic did you use on them?"

"Raw will. It's an easy fix when a person wants to believe you. The Imperius is the spell-version, not as effective, much better targeted against enemies. But they can still struggle. You waste a wizard to keep up the spell and struggle back against the victim. It's hard magic, Potter. Powerful magic."

"I've been reading about dominance magic."

"You are Dumbledore's protegee, then. Where do you think I learned?"

When he tried to mold me into what he wanted. He didn't like me because I resisted. Because I took his bag of tricks, studied them, and began to use them on others. He liked having some exclusivity on bending minds."

Voldemort couldn't be Harry's model. Harry didn't fight because he enjoyed the fight. He only leaned on violence when it was his last resort. He wanted peace. Peace for himself. Peace for his (future) family. He wanted to be done with Voldemort and the Ministry, equal and different plagues.

"You could have toppled the Ministry in a week."

"It's not that easy, Potter. It can look like whatever to the people inside the country. But outside...outside the country it has to seem legitimate."

"You didn't want a foreign army hunting for your head."

"I would have destroyed it. I know more magic than...anyone living."

"You're not alive," Harry said.

"I will be. You will make me. That was our agreement."

"No, it wasn't."

"Potter!"

"You think you terrify me? In this shape, the pain in my scar isn't even that strong. Much less than when you were possessing Quirrell. I don't fear you. You think you're ordering around an idiot. I'm the stronger wizard now. I won't let that change."

"You've absorbed Dumbledore's lessons, then."

"I didn't trust him."

"You almost preach from the book he wrote you. You believe his 'power is all' philosophy."

"I do not."

"It's not so far off from my own belief," the homunculus had said.

"It's not true."

"It's the curse of every powerful person. We all worship power. We seek followers. We seek to mold the world so it suits us."

"No."

The whole conversation after Harry got Voldemort talking had been a nightmare. Scenes that replayed inside Harry's head.

A hand shook Harry back to the present. Hermione's hand. "Are you coming down with something?"

"No." An automatic response.

He was coming down with a terminal case of confusion. He didn't know what he was doing, what he should be doing. All the models he could follow were wrong.

"No?" Hermione asked.

"No."

Hermione didn't believe him, but she also didn't push. That right there said volumes how how their friendship had changed. Hermione wouldn't push because she didn't want to know. Didn't want to run the risk of learning something she couldn't handle. Not all knowledge was, apparently, worth the pain it wrought.

"Let's eat," Ron said.

Harry nodded and took a seat in the Great Hall. But the food was slow to come. Acting Headmistress McGonagall rose from her seat. The tables quieted.

"Sorry for the last minute change of schedule. This is now a feast to commemorate...well, the end of the Triwizard Tournament."

Laughter greeted the pronouncement. The Triwizard had been over since the Goblet of Fire exploded in this very room. Or, a more charitable soul could say the tournament had been over since Durmstrang or

Beauxbatons left.

As it was, no one seemed to see the point of having a celebration of a botched event.

Still the decorations in the Great Hall changed. The food appeared on golden platters and the plates themselves were of gold. The plates had an image of the Triwizard Cup emblazoned on them.

Harry enjoyed putting a huge scoop of a particularly dark colored stew all over the bottom of his plate, as if to blot out the whole experience. He raised a goblet of pumpkin juice and caught the eye of Cedric Diggory at the Hufflepuff table. He toasted his fellow champion. Cedric smiled and made the return gesture. They were both more than relieved that it was over.

"Please eat. We will remember this travesty from the Ministry after the meal is over. Unfortunately, none of the Ministry employees involved are still with the Ministry, so I will have to do all the summarizing."

"Hmm, hmm. Excuse me?" Professor Umbridge said.

"Professor?"

"I resent your implication that the Ministry was at fault. Cornelius did his best to make a very good spectacle."

"This is neither the time nor place to have this conversation, Professor."

"I will not have you slandering the late Minister."

"Sit down," McGonagall said. She held no fear for the squat professor.

Umbridge did sit, but McGonagall had earned herself an enemy.

Harry ate and watched and considered.

He knew that his enemy wasn't just one person. Not just Voldemort or just the late Barty Crouch Junior. It was a system. It was people like Umbridge creating rules for their benefit, or Constance Pettigrew putting some law on the books that allowed her to steal books. People who still

existed in institutions long after they'd conquered and broken the strength of real magical lords. Harry was unsure how to battle people who had no clear reason for their continued existence.

What would hurt them?

That was how he needed to think, to always walk toward a goal. He had felt energized when he was bound to the Goblet of Fire. It'd enraged him, motivated him, drove him hard.

He needed to fight to a goal. That was something that occurred to Harry. Voldemort had always aimed at a goal. The three times Harry had come up against Voldemort at or near Hogwarts, the spirit of the old Voldemort or the ghostly young Tom always sought a new body. His every effort, his actions were all aimed at gaining him the thing he lacked.

It seemed the Ministry possessed just one goal. Deny power to anyone else. They didn't try to make themselves better at anything or add new services. They just kept the corrals up and the docile animals calm inside them.

How to attack something that didn't want something...except the destruction of others?

"Pass the chicken," Ron said.

"Yeah," Harry said.

"You should see Madam Pomfrey after dinner," Hermione said.

"Maybe I will." Not because he would, but to end the strand of argument before it got started.

Harry took more potatoes and some salmon, which they only ever had on a feast night. He'd never tried it before he came to Hogwarts but it was becoming one of his favorite foods.

He had the biggest question now. He knew he had power. But where would he direct it? How? What did he want to accomplish.

War on the Ministry was too vague.

Peace from the Ministry was the end result of a hundred previous steps.

What did he want? What was the first step he could take to get it?

Harry had always reacted before.

Now he found he needed to plan. It began to hurt his mind right away.

He wouldn't react any more. He would...he would make the Ministry dance to his tune. Make its individuals begin attacking it, like one of those diseases that consumed a body from the inside out.

That was his goal.

How would he do it?

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

A/N: Some people asked why I left Dumbledore dead at the end of the first chapter when I was going to continue this story. I decided I needed Harry to stumble around a bit, so his 'mentor' had to go to make it happen.

3. Magic is Wonder

Knowledge is Useful, but Power is Power

Chapter Three

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

"We're supposed to cover curses today," the professor at the front of the classroom said. "I personally don't think it's all that safe to discuss such...distasteful topics with proper young witches and wizards.

Indeed..."

Harry sat in his desk and listened. He tried to keep from getting angry at this woman so dismissive of magic and envious of it.

'The common witch and wizard fear power - and adore it.' Harry remembered the opening of that book Dumbledore had given to Hermione. He did find himself quoting from it. Knowing what he did

about Dumbledore...what he knew about Tom Riddle...he was more than a bit terrified at what his following a plan approved of by Dumbledore might mean.

Still, he knew he would need power...and need to use it if he wanted to accomplish his single goal: freedom. Freedom from being hunted.

Freedom from being wrapped up in political games. Monsters like Umbridge who got into tussles over word choices because it gave their lives some hollow, shabby meaning.

Umbridge. The 'professor' in front of them was a perfect example, one who probably resented being at Hogwarts, at a school where she was supposed to teach magic that she may or may not be able to do herself, to teach students who could be smarter and more powerful than she was.

"Today we will talk about the history of curses, then. Proper history."

Harry looked straight ahead of him. He wished he could sleep if it were going to be a history class.

"The Ministry of Magic, under the greatest Minister of Magic, reformed the Committee on Experimental Charms four years ago. The new committee was responsible for...well, making sure the magic that we teach is safe to teach. In fact, a new series of well-vetted defense books will become available starting this summer. I hope to use these books if I continue teaching at Hogwarts next year."

Harry hoped something terrible would happen to her. It was a bit refreshing to have a new shambling disaster as a teacher every year. He knew where at least some of the trouble in his life would come from.

Snape and the new Defense teacher and anyone else who decided to pop in.

"Now, let us talk about the current project of the Ministry, the expansion of the Unforgivable Curses from three to thirteen."

Hermione's hand shot up.

"No questions at this time, Miss."

Hermione put her arm down.

"The late Minister, Minister Fudge, tasked me with steering the committee. It was my recommendation, approved and enthusiastically forward to the Wizengamot, that is currently under discussion. Now the reason that we wish to expand the Unforgivables is that...well, magic can be dangerous."

More of this fear. More of the spreading of fear.

Magic wasn't necessarily dangerous...except to a person so weak as to fear all magic.

As if a determination from a committee could save someone's life in the real world. As if a law ever did more than force a clever person to look for a loophole or exemption and, thus, continue on with whatever it was that the person wanted to do.

"The committee spent two years reviewing all known spells contained in the Ministry Library. Minister Fudge insisted on monthly updates from me, personally. He wanted to understand what we were learning, what our thinking was. You see, he was the finest Minister this country has ever had. He knew what his duty was...and he supported the people who worked for him and with him."

The Ministry wasn't to be feared, Harry realized was the subtle message of this professor. It was useful, it was great, it was to be admired along with the people who toiled uselessly in its bowels.

It was so caught up in itself that it was a stunned beast waiting for some predator to come along. It managed to tether Dumbledore...and luck kept Voldemort from destroying the Ministry. But now Harry knew where he would get the information he needed to really understand the place: the

consummate insider who stood at the front of the room giving an elegy for her dead patron, a speech that no one cared about except for her.

But Harry was listening now.

Harry found himself very interested in what she had to say.

The weak hid in a mass, clustered around a central figure who it seemed to obey without question. Of course there were people like Constance Pettigrew who joined the Ministry for their own reasons...but her awful reasons and what the Ministry wanted done were a hair's breadth apart. Control, locking down of freedom, reinforcing the strength of the Ministry.

This Umbridge took pride in the years she'd spent doing nothing.

That was how it worked there. Slowly, uselessly. That gave Harry ideas.

He would listen to this newly invigorated Umbridge. She was useless at Defense, but this was the kind of history that would give Harry

something to work with. Where, specifically, was the Ministry weakest?

What sort of...action (he didn't want to think of an attack)...would humble it fastest?

"What spells are going to be forbidden?" Hermione shouted out, tired of being ignored.

Umbridge looked up from her gauzy recounting of one of her meetings with the late Fudge. Her remembering of the various bits of praise the late Ministry offered her.

"I said no questions."

"But you said that spells were going to be banned."

Umbridge glared at the young witch. "Nasty pieces of magic."

"Which ones?"

"Which ones, Professor?' As I said, no questions."

Harry could tell both of them were getting upset.

"If you're banning magic, you have to explain why."

"I certainly do not, Miss...Granger."

Could Umbridge have sounded more disgusted at pronouncing Hermione's last name? Harry didn't think it was possible.

"I want to know..."

"Detention, Miss Granger. Tonight at seven thirty. No more questions."

Now Harry found himself angry, roaring angry. He had decided to have a question-and-answer with Umbridge at some point. Now he decided it would be happening sooner...and would be far rougher than he'd planned.

'No more questions.' She wouldn't get away with that for long. Not when Harry wanted her to talk.

"No more questions. The Ministry, of course, doesn't answer questions. We protect the witches and wizards of these Isles. We carefully study the questions that matter and render our thoughtful verdicts. I hope you all understand the value the Ministry brings to your lives. We make magic safer for all of you. We make sure that we aren't exposed to the Muggles. We make sure that everyone leads...happy lives."

Harry didn't think he would enjoy leading the kind of life that Umbridge found 'happy.' Not at all. One look at a fuming, silent Hermione confirmed she possessed a similar perspective.

'No more questions.' That was what the Ministry wanted above all else. Unreasoning compliance. Harry thought there were things he could do to make it very hard for the Ministry to avoid questions. 'No more questions.'

"Now, Cornelius was adamant that we review all the magic that the Ministry was familiar with. Every last piece..."

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Harry went up to Hermione after they both returned from supper in the Great Hall. "Don't go to the detention."

Hermione shook her head. "She is a...teacher."

"You asked a question and she gave you a detention. You should fight this one."

Hermione looked ready to argue with Harry. "I want to," she admitted a moment later. "I really do."

"I want you to stay here. I'm going to handle this for you."

"Harry..."

"I still don't like anyone who has high praise for the Ministry." He couched the whole thing as him playing protector for Hermione. In truth, there was much Harry hoped to discover by having a...conversation with the professor.

"I can fight...I should say, I need to be able to fight my own battles, Harry."

"Well, after today, you can fight all you want. I would like an uninterrupted hour with the Professor."

Hermione always seemed to get some of the truth out of him. She would never just agree and move on. He was trying to do something nice for her...and she still wanted to argue.

"You're not going to..."

"She will walk out of the castle tonight under her own power, I swear."

Hermione almost looked disappointed.

"You're not going to make her..."

Her mind had drifted back to what Harry had done to Barty Crouch Junior, the assassin of the Minister that Umbridge so admired.

"I think she should be gone from Hogwarts. I'll get her to swear an oath to leave. I want to ask her some questions about the Ministry before she

goes."

"Two Defense instructors in one year? You're just trying to get out of class."

Harry smiled. He was glad that Hermione had relented. "I'm just trying to make it possible to survive into adulthood."

Hermione nodded. "I'll take a book and go to my bed. No one should notice I didn't leave for my detention."

"Thank you."

"You're such a knight, Harry."

"I'm just a dumb kid."

"Alright. I'm glad you're such a nice, dumb kid."

Harry smiled a moment before he disappeared out of the common room.

That was the first time he'd had much of a conversation with Hermione since before the holiday break. He was glad she'd agreed to let him do this, even if her natural curiosity grated a bit on his skin. She always had to ask one too many questions. He hoped she would never stop doing it. He also hoped it would never drag her into harm.

He knew his motivations were complex. He wanted information, but he wouldn't want Hermione left alone with anyone from the Ministry. God only knew what they thought they could get away with. Stripping a person's free will wasn't enough with their standard package of oaths? Even a woman dismissed from office still sang the praises of the place. Perhaps it was her choice. Perhaps it was a binding on her freedom.

Harry arrived at the Defense classroom and snuck inside. Umbridge wasn't present.

Harry concentrated on extending his magic out, one of the loose hints contained in Uncommon Magics. He could feel people moving around below him. He held the 'bubble' of magic until he felt someone moving

down the hallway. He collapsed the bubble and felt like he had just gone jogging for a few hours. His body, his magic ached.

He still had plenty of fight in him, though.

Umbridge opened the door, walked in, and promptly fell to the floor, immobilized.

Ambushing wasn't fair, but it was effective.

He levitated the over-large professor into a chair and bound her in ropes.

Then he determined where she kept her wand...and a portkey...and levitated both of them away from her body. The idea of touching her made Harry queasy.

He took a chair and sat opposite of the professor, perhaps ten feet apart.

He prepared to perform a kind of magic that Voldemort had told him about...the enforcing of a powerful will on a weak one, the kind of magic that the Imperius curse copied in a formal way. He would cast no spell, but the intent was the same as one of the Unforgivables. Given the earlier discussion of how the Ministry used the Unforgivables as political window-dressing, Harry had no fear of the spell, of the myths built up and accreted around it.

Magic was magic.

He woke Umbridge and before she could scream for assistance, Harry let loose his magic and overwhelmed her. The way lords of old had ensured their vassals were honest and true in face-to-face meetings, the original truth serum, a lord's magic going against another's and beating out the impurities, the duplicities.

"You canceled the detention you had scheduled with Hermione Granger."

"Yes, I did. Thank you for reminding me." In this state of euphoria, the large woman's voice was even more disturbing than normal. It was girlish...and delighted...and inebriated. Umbridge would have been a

quiet drunk, Harry discovered.

"You were going to tell me why you came to Hogwarts," Harry demanded.

"I remember now. I came because it was my last option. I had risen with Cornelius through his victories and successes. When he perished - it was the worst day of my life. My career couldn't survive without his. Mr. Malfoy, who had been gracious with me while Cornelius lived, wanted me gone. He offered a position here. He wasn't very nice about it." Malfoy. Why did so many problems return back to Malfoy? Come summertime, Harry would have to find a way to run into the...irritating wizard.

"You were going to tell me why the late...why Minister Fudge listened to Mr. Malfoy."

"Well, Lucius knew more about the Ministry than anyone else. He always had suggestions. He always knew just the right way to implement his suggestions. He was a very grateful man."

Even when Umbridge was being honest, compelled from her at the cost of her magic collapsing, she thought and spoke in words that lied. Was that the only way to survive a life in the Ministry - to live a lie and find ways to believe it the truth? There were bad people in the Ministry...that was clear enough...but if the once-decent ones were also this warped and corrupted by their terms of service, there might be nothing to salvage.

"You were telling me about Minister Fudge's most important...favours to Mr. Malfoy."

"Oh, that would be a very long list. There was the Triwizard Tournament, perhaps not one of Lucius' better ideas. There were the reforms to the Auror Service, making them more polite when they were out working among witches and wizards..."

"Fudge made the Aurors more 'polite.' Explain that."

"Well, it was a few simple changes in the oaths they swore. Lucius knew just which ones to have modified."

"Gave wizards more rights in their own houses, didn't they?"

"Exactly. That was the reason Cornelius agreed with what Lucius wanted. A wizard should feel safe in his own home."

"What other oaths did Mr. Malfoy ask to change?"

"Many. Far too many to remember. Of course, it wasn't all change. There were quite a few new oaths. Upholding the law, of course, was an obvious one. Before Lucius suggested it, none of the Aurors had to swear to uphold the law, nor the wizards of the Wizengamot. That was an important reform."

With a man like Malfoy suggesting the laws...and then shackling the Ministry to obey them...it seemed less like a reform than a giant mistake.

"Who writes these oaths?"

"Many people. Many departments had staff who could prepare oaths. If you wanted a new Floo connection, you needed to swear an oath. If you wanted to market a new potion, there was one or another oath to swear. Referees for Quidditch games have to swear oaths. All different departments, all different oath writers."

Harry felt sick. The oaths were no longer just meant to bind the powerful. They were meant to bind everyone. As if everyone inside the Ministry was afraid of everything. Magic turned into imprisonment, robbed of anything except its ability to punish. How was this better than having a dozen lord-level wizards running around terrorizing the world. At least the lords could go to war with each other, fall in battle. The way the Ministry was building itself, there was no one who could rebel without tripping or triggering some oath, running up against some dire

consequence.

This was the end result of sadists who possessed unlimited fear. They walled up the world and tried to keep everything in, everything out. A good way to perish being doubly trapped.

"The Ministry doesn't like questions."

"The Ministry needn't answer anything."

"What does the Ministry fear?" Harry asked. He realized he'd stopped demanding like a lord and begun asking questions like someone who possessed genuine confusion.

"Disorder."

"What kind of disorder?"

Harry could have slapped himself for asking such an obvious question.

"All kinds of disorder," Umbridge said, proud to be on the side of right.

It exchanged services for oaths, bound up the people it was responsible to. Harry didn't know why the Ministry had the kinds of fears it must. Of course...there had to be more people than Lucius Malfoy creating and exploiting loopholes for their own use.

"How much money did Lucius Malfoy pay to Minister Fudge?"

"It wasn't payment. It was generosity."

If Harry wanted answers he had to follow the same conventions of lying words that lined Umbridge's mind.

"How generous was Lucius Malfoy with Cornelius Fudge?"

"Oh, very much so. Perhaps ten thousand a year."

"What was the Minister's salary?"

"It's been set at one thousand galleons per year for the last three hundred twelve years. No one in the Wizengamot wants to raise it. Requires raising taxes."

Fudge made ten times as much from Malfoy as he had from his official

job. No wonder he'd been so obliging.

"There's no law against bribery?"

"There is. The Minister took no bribes."

A large loophole, a very large one. No bribes whatsoever, but one can accept generosity from a friend. Laws and the lying words they rested upon.

But money was an idea. Harry had never considered how the Ministry funded itself.

"How much does an Auror make?"

"A thousand galleons."

"How much did you make at the Ministry?"

"A thousand galleons."

It had to be some kind of odd egalitarianism. Of course people with better titles could ask for bigger...acts of generosity.

"Where does all the money come from?"

"There's the Diagon Alley tax. Everything sold there, or in Hogsmeade, has twenty percent added into it for the Ministry."

More than one galleon of the seven galleons Harry had paid for his first wand had gone to pay for the Aurors who later snapped it. That was certainly a rude bit of abuse.

"And?"

"There's the spirit taxes."

"You tax ghosts?" Harry tried to guess how it would be possible? What happened for non-payment, exorcism?"

"Not ghosts. Butterbeer, firewhiskey."

"Ah."

"The Quidditch fees."

Every time wizards came together, at a match, at a bar, at a shopping

area, they supported the Ministry.

"No...no income tax?"

"No."

"No...property tax?"

"No."

Harry nodded, considering.

"When was the last time taxes were added or raised?"

"When Hogsmeade added a second bar. Three hundred years ago."

Harry felt something of the prankster emerging in him. There had to be a grand way to spoil everything just by giving away free alcohol. Would the Ministry collapse if butterbeer became free?

"So the Ministry collects more money if the pubs sell more butterbeer?"

"Yes."

"If people drink less..."

"We don't want the people to drink less. Makes them ask questions. Drunk people focus on getting drunk."

They also, coincidentally, spend their money building up the Ministry.

"How much extra is there in the budget?"

"I don't understand," Umbridge said.

"How much is there left over from the taxes at the end of a year?"

"We always spend all of it. Last time there was extra money, we dug a further two floors of the Ministry. Time before that we built Hogsmeade." Sounded like it didn't happen all that often. An expensive Ministry with a razor-thin budget and no way to raise taxes...assuming people stopped buying things in Diagon Alley and stopped drinking in the pubs...and stopped paying out for Quidditch matches.

There was the seed of a great idea here.

Harry knew it. He couldn't say what it was yet, but he knew it was there.

"The Ministry confiscates items from the estates of wizards. Why don't you sell what you don't need?"

"We can confiscate, of course. There's a secret law for that. But we can't sell anything without permission from the Wizengamot. That would..."

"Require exposing the open secret." Anyone of any age, McGonagall's age or older, had to know. But no one talked about this Ministry policy.

Harry had to wonder how many other secret policies existed. Things people knew about, resented, but never did anything to stop. "I can see why you have to dig more floors. Have to store it all somewhere."

"Very good." She giggled. "Very true."

It seemed this method of controlling a person really did work, but it seemed to have an inebriating side effect.

That gave Harry a more immediate answer to his Umbridge problem.

"I think you have a bottle or two in your room?"

"The last ones I bought at the Ministry. No tax."

Of course they'd exempt themselves, Harry realized.

"I think you should spend the rest of the evening enjoying your fine bottles."

"Yes."

"I think you should wake up remembering nothing of our conversation."

"Yes."

"I think tomorrow you should skip bathing in the morning and come to the Great Hall and start a fight with...Severus Snape."

"I've never liked him."

Harry refolded his magic inside himself. He stunned Umbridge, banished the ropes holding her, and returned the chair he'd sat in to its desk. He'd let Umbridge deal with the chair she had claim over.

He walked to the door, rewoke Umbridge, and disappeared out the door.

He stood at the door and listened. Umbridge woke and seemed to fall out of her chair. At any rate, something crashed inside the Defense classroom. He listened and eventually heard steps on the stone floors. Then it was all silent.

He had to imagine Umbridge breaking into her bottles of butterbeer...or Firewhiskey. He hadn't thought to ask. She could be any range from drunk to almost dead by tomorrow morning.

Harry would let chance handle things from there.

He set out for Gryffindor Tower. He had to decide what to tell Hermione the next day. Perhaps he'd just let the breakfast-time show explain everything. Umbridge and Snape fighting. McGonagall forced to end things. Students stunned or laughing or incredulous.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

To Harry's surprise, a week had passed and Hermione hadn't asked what Harry had done to Umbridge. Of course, the young witch had enjoyed the events leading up to Umbridge's sacking. But she never asked. She smiled when she saw the wounds Snape carried, but she didn't ask.

Instead, she began to study with Harry again.

Something had changed in their friendship once more. What it was, Harry couldn't say. He was glad that Hermione was back. He was glad to have another mind to bounce ideas from. He was glad to sit near her again and have quiet little jokes with her. The past was back in the present. It made Harry grateful.

Of course, he was also glad not to have to answer questions.

He had half expected interrogation. The other half of him expected Hermione to be angry that he had intervened. But it was all so different.

He didn't understand girls at all. Least of all Hermione.

She was in the library researching something so Harry felt safe retreating

to his room and picking up Uncommon Magics. He didn't read it or the two other books Dumbledore left for Harry in any public area, ever.

Harry had an idea of what to do about the Ministry. After talking to people as diverse as Sirius Black and Tom Riddle and Barty Crouch Junior and Dolores Umbridge, Harry had something of a plan.

The Ministry wasn't just people.

The Ministry wasn't just a collection of bad laws.

The Ministry was a very fragile institution, because of its monetary problems, that used cheap, if not free methods, to keep everyone and everything in line. It wanted no questions because it had no money to answer questions. No wiggle room to change anything it did. No emergency funding when an emergency appeared.

Harry had decided to try to destroy the institution and make the laws and the oaths all irrelevant.

He was no wizarding legal genius, but he guessed that a Ministry fallen apart under internal and external stresses wouldn't be able to maintain its oath and wouldn't be able to enforce its laws.

It was an indirect path to freedom, but a path was a path.

He hated to stick his own neck out and risk having to fight or kill ridiculous people. He would prefer to use his strength to collapse the thing without leaving any trace he was involved.

To do that, Harry realized he needed to become an enchanter, encapsulate his magic in objects so that he could perform greater magics even when hundreds of miles away.

Of course, enchanting was about the pinnacle of magic and Harry had a deficient fourth year student's education. He thought Uncommon Magics might have some suggestions.

If only it had an index.

As it was Harry had to improvise. He flipped a page and skimmed it.

Flipped and skimmed another. There were chapter headings, of course, but the formal section on enchanting would leave Hermione baffled.

There was prefatory material that appeared earlier in the volume he needed to understand before he could unravel what the book wanted to say about enchanting.

His eyes caught this paragraph, "The names of spells and the precise waving of wands are rituals-in-miniature designed to give a witch or wizard external confidence, or confirmation, that their spell will do what it was supposed to do. It is all unnecessary so long as the wizard or witch casting the spell has sufficient determination to make the spell happen.

This will-driven style of magical casting was once well used in these Isles, now long since abandoned for the 'new' style of casting."

The words had nothing to do with enchanting, but it was almost exactly what Harry wanted to know.

Rituals. Rituals-in-miniature.

Enchanting was described as ritual work. With runes used in various places and different materials and all sorts of complexity. If it was all about ensuring that someone had the confidence to bring the magic to completion...if that was the only point...

Harry needed to test his idea.

He got off his bed, put his book back in his trunk, and took his collection of blocks off the lower shelf of his bookcase. He sprinkled the wooden blocks on the floor of his room. He tapped one block and tried to push his magic into it. He could feel his magic cling to the block. He did it again and again with other blocks, imbuing seven blocks with different spells.

He moved away from where he put the blocks and waved his hand at the whole collection.

In that moment, the magic he'd put into the blocks, but not allowed free rein, all began to work. Each of the blocks turned clear, each began to expand, each began to elongate upward toward the sky.

What Harry saw was a model of a tower that he'd been trying to get out of his head for more than a month. Tall, clear, graceful. He hadn't been able to do it with the spells that Ron shared with Harry. But this sort of enchanting, where his magic had direct license to make and remake everything it touched...this created the tower of his imagination.

The thing continued to grow. Harry only stopped it once the self-sustaining magic had made the tower taller than Harry if he had been standing.

He stared at it. Shocked that anything had worked.

Shocked that he now knew how he was going to launch his attack on the Ministry of Magic. He was going to become one of those insane wizards who built towers.

A tower that no one would ever be able to forget.

Of course, there were details to consider. If he were very lucky, and if Harry could sneak into the Forbidden Forest enough to test out his ideas, he might be ready by the end of May. Maybe.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Dinner the first Sunday in April began strangely and went even stranger.

First off, Harry noticed there were extra seats at the Head Table.

Including one for Lucius Malfoy.

Second, Harry noticed that Professor Snape wasn't scowling. The look on his face was almost a smile.

Third, Professor McGonagall didn't stand at the beginning of dinner to make any remarks. Lucius Malfoy did.

Harry leaned forward and paid very close attention. Any time something

strange happened in this room, it usually forced Harry to do something, like risk his life. The new teachers were always introduced here. The oddities of the year, like a third floor corridor made inaccessible or the presence of Dementors or the launching of a Triwizard Tournament, were formally announced here.

Yes, anything odd that happened in this room usually made itself into something very unpleasant for Harry.

"Excuse me," Malfoy said in an amplified voice. "Quiet please."

He stood and waited and glared, his face never turning toward the Slytherin table, as if the students there should already know what this announcement was about.

"Thank you. I chair the Hogwarts board of governors. Since the late Headmaster passed, the governors have had several spirited conversations about when and how to fill this essential, vacant position at the premiere school for witches and wizards in the world. It wasn't easy to come to a consensus. No one will ever be able to fully...trod the path that Albus Dumbledore started. So it has taken us months to decide how to proceed.

"We thank Minerva McGonagall for serving as Acting Headmistress during this difficult time. Not only has Professor Dumbledore left us, but we've had two vacancies in the post for Defense Against the Dark Arts. A troubling time for us all."

Malfoy smiled. He had pulled something horrible off, Harry realized.

Something he considered wonderful.

"It is my distinct pleasure to announce the new Headmaster of Hogwarts.

A person with whom you're all familiar. A teacher of exceeding dedication and remarkable skill in his chosen field, indeed, a world reputation as a scholar. Now to add administrator to his list of skills.

Allow me to introduce Professor Severus Snape as the next Headmaster of Hogwarts."

The bottom dropped out of Harry's stomach. He was sure that Snape's first act as Headmaster would be to expel Harry.

Harry continued leaning forward as Snape stood to make some remarks. He didn't hear a word that anyone said. If there was anything important Hermione would clue him in, as always.

When the food appeared he ate.

When everyone started to leave, Hermione tugged on his shoulder.

It wasn't until he was out of the Great Hall that he realized he had fresh motivation. What was announced this evening was bad...and good.

Malfoy had done this.

The little politician had done this as a favor or to amuse himself. He'd just installed the worst Headmaster that Hogwarts would ever have...and no one seemed able to stop or derail him.

The people who might have been coopted...or numb...or less than concerned.

At one point when Harry began his fight against the Ministry and its oaths and its grasping ways, Harry had feared he would need to fight them...with spells and worse oaths.

It might be satisfying to tackle someone like Lucius Malfoy, but it wouldn't be enough. Even if Harry took apart the entire block Malfoy controlled...that controlled the Ministry...it would just leave apathy among the people and a new vacuum. He needed to end the somnolence. He needed to wake people up. They didn't need a parasite like Malfoy. They hadn't needed a man like Dumbledore vested with all the power he had, too bound up to use any of it. They didn't even need a Boy-Who-Lived.

They needed to wake and look and wonder.

It would be infinitely harder to accomplish than to permanently transfigure Lucius Malfoy into a pile of moss.

Harry finally clued into the conversation going on around him.

"...and George are going to be in detention for the rest of their lives," Ron said.

"It's not going to be a happy place," Hermione chipped in.

Neville, who was walking close to Harry, as if he were afraid that something from the shadows might attack him, "I'm not staying. I don't want to be here. My Gran won't hear of it."

Harry listened and wondered.

He also felt bad for poor Neville who had it the worst from Snape most classes.

"At least he won't be teaching," Harry said.

"He'll be hiring the teachers," Neville said.

"Well..."

Harry would have to get moving faster. He was perversely grateful for the fresh motivation. It seemed that every time he slackened just a bit, the Ministry or one of its leading figures did something to reignite the urgency.

Harry put a hand on Neville's shoulder. "It'll be fine." He turned and walked away.

Hermione called out, "Where are you going?"

"An errand I forgot earlier."

"Alright," she said. She would ask later, he hoped.

Their friendship was restored to the point where she would ask some things even if she wasn't already sure of the answer. Since he'd...intervened with Umbridge, things were almost back to normal

between Harry and Hermione, he thought. All it took was a reminder that even unremarkable people could be unpleasant, even dangerous.

Hermione required a reminder from time to time about just what this new world was. Enchanting but largely untamed. Bears and big cats rarely roamed population centers nowadays in the unmagical lands where she'd grown up. Here less than a mile from the front gate of Hogwarts were spiders as large as the hut Hagrid called home. There were dragons a couple hundred miles away. There were deadly magical serpents, including a basilisk that had once resided under Hogwarts, everywhere. That left aside the most deadly of all: witches and wizards who meant harm.

"Be careful," Neville said.

Harry nodded. He wondered what Neville knew or suspected. Time enough for that later.

Harry took off at an even, rapid pace. He circled through Hogwarts, looping and winding through corridors until he passed by the entrance to the Headmaster's office. With barely a pause in his step, his hand reached out and touched part of the stone wall next to the gargoyle that protected access to the office. Moments later, stone on the walls, the floor, and the ceiling all began to...stretch. It was as though the stone all decided to melt and aim to fill up the opening that provided access to the Headmaster's office, as though Hogwarts herself objected to the appointment and refused to seat the political designee. That was the impression Harry wanted to leave. Politicians were one thing, but magic was something far greater and more temperamental.

Harry continued on his long, winding path through Hogwarts until he finally stopped in front of the access to Gryffindor Tower. He said the password to the guardian and walked inside. He had a neutral expression

instead of the smile that belonged there.

Hermione would never ask about his errand.

The following days made it clear enough, to Hermione at least, what Harry had gotten up to. Neville kept a silly grin on his face for most of a week. Headmaster Snape never even looked at Harry. Who would suspect him of this kind of greater magic?

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Harry set off through the Forbidden Forest once more on a Saturday. It was almost a pleasant day. The preceding three weeks of rain had finally ended and so everyone was outside trying to enjoy the spring before the heat descended in a few months. Or it could be that having Snape as Headmaster drove everyone out of doors.

When Harry set foot in the Forest, he felt eyes on him.

He stopped and looked around. He thought he was quite a ways distant from where he'd encountered Hagrid's out-of-control Acromantula colony. He kept walking and continued to feel someone or something watching him. He didn't hear other movement through the underbrush. Harry angled his path so that it would appear to whoever was watching that Harry merely wanted to escape into Hogsmeade. He'd beg off his errand if he didn't feel the watching end.

Once Harry stepped into Hogsmeade the feeling vanished. The watching ended. Harry kept to the side streets and the alleys as he curved his way toward the Shrieking Shack. He went inside and had a fruitless conversation with Wormtail once more.

The rat was well on his way to insane by now. The terror of wondering what Harry might do, could do to him, had dislodged whatever was left of him. The rat made less and less sense. He was less and less useful.

Harry fed the rat and returned him to his cage.

Harry walked out of the basement into the backyard. There was still a fence mostly in place. It would be enough to cover what Harry needed to do. The last time he was here to speak with Tom Riddle, Harry and the homunculus had come to an insoluble power struggle. Harry wanted information; the ugly little baby wanted the world.

Harry began to crank the bucket left in the well. It felt heavy to him...and deep in the water. It had to be minutes later before Harry got the first glimmer of success. He heard something break the surface of the water. He heard something spitting, like a man pulled out a river after almost drowning. Then Harry heard angry words on the breeze. Horrible words. Harry smiled.

He turned the crank harder and brought the bucket up to the top of the well.

Voldemort was strapped inside the old bucket, a tight fit. He'd been underwater for weeks. Or had Harry left him two months by now. The information Harry had about homunculi was correct. The magic to create one ebbed slowly. Voldemort hadn't had a gasp of oxygen in months...and he was swearing just fine right now.

Harry kept his hands clear of the tiny hands waving and attempting to grapple onto Harry. He unhooked the bucket from the rope. He set the bucket on the ground and stood over it, so that his head would be the only thing Tom Riddle might be able to see shoved into and secured inside the well-bucket.

"Are you happy to see me?" Harry asked.

A stream of abuse flowed.

"We can put you back down into the well. If you like the cold..."

"What do you want, Potter?"

"Information."

"I want..."

"I don't care what you want. That book I read to you was right about what you are. You can't die right now...but you can feel anger and cold and boredom."

"I won't be put back in there."

"You can't stop me."

"I won't say anything."

"Then perhaps the next time I come looking for you I'll be fifty or a hundred years old. I think I'll buy this old house so that no one tries to knock it down...or block off the well. Indoor plumbing is a lot more convenient, especially with magic."

Harry smiled. This was the kind of negotiating he enjoyed.

"Potter..."

"Yes, Tom?"

"Ask your questions."

"I'll be angry if you lie to me. If you leave anything out."

"Ask your questions."

"Your friend Malfoy..."

"My servant Malfoy."

"He's close with Snape."

"I think Lucius made the potioneer godfather to his little heir."

Harry didn't think he'd ever heard that before. It wasn't just favoritism, then, but also a kind of nepotism. As if Vernon Dursley hired his son and stuck him at the head of the promotions line.

"Lucius had Snape made Headmaster."

That seemed to amuse the homunculus. "I control Britain, then, Potter. I have Lucius and others in the Ministry. I have Snape at Hogwarts. I could destroy it all, so easily."

"Not in your current state."

"I will escape."

"Perhaps. But I'll have handled your people before you can."

"I don't think you could handle that volume of murder. I may have had a small direct army, but I had legions of supporters."

"I've met some of them. But I won't be killing them, if I can help it."

"It won't work then. Prison..."

"No."

"The only way is the way of the torch. Burn them all."

"All of your power brokers seem useful, that's where the power comes from. If I get rid of the middlemen...well, we'll just see what happens."

"The entire world, the very small and the very large, is infested with parasites. There will always be a need for brokers."

"It's worth a test, isn't it? I could be wrong," Harry said, "but I want to know that I'm wrong. Not just guess at it."

"The only way is through war, Potter. War and power and death."

"I suppose that remains plan Zed. But I'll work my way through Alpha and Beta and the others first."

"It will fail."

"You failed. Dumbledore failed. I may fail five or ten or fifty times, but I won't start off with a method guaranteed to fail."

"Only the powerful deserve this magic."

"Hasn't done you much good?"

"I will recover. I will conquer."

"King of rubble and graves, is it?"

"Yes."

"I want to build."

"Build, build what?" The homunculus was amused, mocking.

"Dumbledore, and you, I suppose, thought magic was control. Though you were more interested in magic as power."

"That is what it is."

"I have at least as much strength as you," Harry declared, not bragging. The homunculus didn't dispute it. Voldemort must remember more of what happened in 1981 than anyone else knew.

"I believe magic is possibility..."

"A hedge witch needs a book of spells..."

"Not everyone can manage everything," Harry admitted. "But I think we accept too little. We don't have an eye for possibilities."

"So, magic is...what...wonder? Whimsy?"

"Yes."

"You can't fight a war with Bertie Bott's."

Harry had to keep a smile off his face. He could imagine fighting a war with bogey-flavored jelly beans. Chemical warfare.

"I don't need to conquer anyone, if my theory is right," Harry said. "I need people to demand more than they're getting. I need them to...put aside the Ministry."

"Oh. Clever. You want to rule from the shadows? Set a bunch of anonymous disposables to war with the Ministry?"

Of course Tom Riddle would take that interpretation of what Harry had just said. It wasn't what he meant. He really did want a peaceful life above all. He had come to realize that he would need peace for all if he wanted peace for himself.

Of course, the Ministry had no particular use for peace, did it? It needed people willing to wear some kind of yoke. It needed crime so that it could hire Aurors...subject to bindings and oaths. It needed people afraid of magic like apparition so that people would sign up for Floo access...and

swear Ministry oaths regarding the floo. It needed wizards with a lack of sense so that they'd pay for the Ministry to organize big Quidditch games...and pay for the continued existence of the Ministry through hidden taxes. It needed people worn out or in pain so they'd pay their spirit taxes and come back for more the following day.

"I want people to aspire to better. Is the greatest thing in the land to become Minister of Rubbish Heaps?"

"You'll want someone you can control eventually, Potter. Even during the war, I controlled more than fifty percent of the wizards in the Ministry. I was fighting myself, which amused me sometimes. Useful to know what the enemy will do before the enemy does."

Tom Riddle, the heretic, had wanted to burn it all down. But who would have been responsible, under a Dark Lord, for rebuilding? No one. War upon war upon war. Perhaps fun for someone who enjoyed combat and blood.

Harry laid his ideas out to see if Voldemort would say something that would cause him to pause. To see what his enemies might see, to see how they might react when he began his plan.

Harry took a step away, far from where Voldemort could see him, and knelt on the ground. There was a stone that he touched. A moment later the gray color faded and the stone was clearer than crystal. It began to melt upward, refashioning itself from a flat piece of river stone into a goblet made of crystal. Harry picked it up and stood. He held it over Tom Riddle.

"I'm tired of water. But I am hungry, Potter. You owe me food."

"I don't think it's food you want. I think it's your magic restored to you.

That requires a potion."

"You're learning."

"This goblet is empty."

"It's gaudy. Tacky."

"It's enchanted."

Harry had been learning to imbue magic into a creation as he made it.

One step transfiguration and enchanting because he believed it was possible.

"What does it do?"

"It's going to restore...wonder, to use your word...to the wizarding world."

"I doubt it."

Harry triggered the enchantment on the goblet. The piece of artificial crystal began to expand. The foot of the goblet turned into a kind of hook. The bell of the glass widened so that the inside was much larger than Dudley's football he never used.

"A Christmas ornament for a gigantic tree?"

"Well, I can make an enchantment do most anything."

Harry pulled out his fake wand so that Voldemort wouldn't see anything amiss. He pointed the wand at the homunculus, levitated the mass out of the bucket, and lowered it into the still growing and changing...goblet.

Tom Riddle screamed again once he was encased inside and the crystal grew up and around him, permanently sealing him inside.

Harry pocketed his fake wand once more and began untying the rope from the bucket. Once he had the old knot undone, he tied the rope around the hook-like protrusion from the crystal sphere. It was a kind of ornament, for keeping Voldemort at bay.

Harry pulled his fake wand again and levitated the orb over the well. He canceled the spell and watched the orb drop and splash. It sat and bobbed on top of the water. Harry realized his mistake, trapping an air bubble inside. He'd expected the weight of the enchanted clear stone to

outweigh the air pocket. Harry hadn't gotten the proportions quite right.

He forced the enchantment to change paths, begin cutting a few thin channels through the solid crystal so that air could exit and water could enter the center of the orb. Moments later the last protests of Voldemort were blotted out when the orb sunk under the surface of the water.

Harry kicked the old bucket to the side of the badly maintained yard.

He'd had this nagging feeling for weeks that the bucket could, in fact, fail as a prison for Tom Riddle, that the tiny baby would eventually get free.

That was why he decided to have this conversation and upgrade the prison that housed the homunculus.

Harry looked around, made sure he'd left no presence he'd been here, and went back into Hogsmeade. If someone was watching for him, Harry wanted suspicion to lay with what he was buying in the village...not what was he doing at an abandoned old house.

Harry began his walk back toward Hogwarts. Once he stepped foot out of the boundaries of Hogsmeade, he could feel someone or something watching him.

Another mystery to add to his list.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

An enormous black dog, quite shaggy and long-haired, carried a sack in his jaw as he trod between the trees of the forest near Ottery St.

Catchpole.

The dog kept moving upward, higher and higher among the small hills that lay outside of the town. Once the dog reached the highest point he stopped the let the bag fall from his mouth.

A crystal goblet hit the ground and rolled a few feet.

The dog used his nose to right the goblet. A few drops of saliva landed in the goblet.

The dog barked when the ground under its feet began to...shift. Dirt and grasses became harder and cooler. The black dog ran down the hill. It stopped at the trees and turned around, as if it were curious what could be happening.

In the gaining dawn, the dog only had a few moments to wait before it could make out the changes erupting in the land.

The top of the hill remained the same shape, but everything about it had changed. It was no longer dirt and stone. The pinnacle had become clear...stone...crystal. The goblet the dog had brought to the area was still at the top.

As the dawn passed over the crystal hill, the dog could make out brilliant streaks of gold running through the crystal. Also streaks of...of water. At least two springs poked their ways out of the top of the crystal pinnacle. Channels dug themselves for the water to pool before it began to run back down the hill.

The dog waited and watched. It grew bored and almost started to chase its own tail before something new started. The ground of soil and grass and stone began to shake. The dog yipped and ran deeper into the forest, far enough away that the earth didn't shake. The dog turned and watched. Boulders emerged out of the earth. Boulders of solid crystal.

There was a ring of boulders. The dog ran around the base of the pinnacle. There were boulders at every point. Then the eruptions ended. A moment later the boulders began to stretch upward, as if stone should live high in the sky, as if it should hang and twirl and never fall to earth again.

The stone that went up stretched very thin...and it did twirl. The dog watched the construction of a tower made of crystal, a tower that seemed so frail and thin and gossamer it should collapse in a faint wind. It didn't

collapse, it continued to grow. Veins of gold, veins of silver began to climb inside the crystal walls, imperfections that made the whole seem more perfect. Veins of water climbed and reflected rainbow colors in the gaining light.

The dog ran around the base of the tower. He found just one space where he could enter. A massive arch wide enough for a hundred black dogs to pass under at the same time.

The dog walked inside and stopped. He watched the tower finish building itself. The inside of the crystal tower cooled down and the dog could watch rivulets of water open in the walls...but not fall. The rivers cascading from the inside walls clung to the crystal until they drained in pools waiting at the bottom of the tower.

The dog entered one of the pools and began an awkward paddle. When the dog left the pool, it was dry. The dirt off its coat, the dead leaves stuck on its paws, all gone. The water remained pure and clean and beckoning.

The dog watched the center of the space for a moment. What had been the pinnacle, where the dog had left the crystal goblet, was now entirely enclosed by the tower. The solid crystal of this 'hill-top' now began to carve itself. A room. A desk and a chair from crystal. A complex of offices.

The dog trotted outside the crystal tower and began to make his way deeper into the forest. Eventually the dog stopped and transformed into a messy-haired human. The gray that had flecked the man's head of hair was gone. The lines gouged into his face by cruel circumstances and the harsh passage of years were gone. The wizard called Sirius Black looked twenty. He looked healthy. He was happy.

"Harry did it," Sirius said. "I don't know what he did, but he did it."

The wizard spent a few more minutes examining the tower from a distance. He could feel magic hanging in the air. Wards or something. He hoped that no muggles would stumble across this site. Now that Sirius had helped just a bit in the construction, he would have to get his godson to own up to what he'd done and why.

Sirius apparated away.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Harry had a big plate of food in front of him. He ate and ate until the Daily Prophet arrived. He paid the owl for a copy and opened it. It must have seemed strange, because Harry rarely read the paper at breakfast, but he didn't let the inquisitive stares slow him down.

Of course the way he was flipping pages would tell anyone he wasn't trying to gather the day's news. He was hunting for some specific piece of news.

Which, by the crumpling of the paper, wasn't to be found.

Harry uncrumpled the paper, folded it, and tucked it to his side on the bench. He continued eating. It was as if his sojourn with the paper hadn't happened.

Different owls brought in the day's mail. A few people paid a knut or two for one of the tabloids.

"Look what Lovegood's 'discovered' now," Seamus said.

Harry glanced toward his housemate. He saw something on the cover of the tabloid that made him smile. He beckoned one of the delivery owls over – how awe-inspiring was magic when it could be used to increase the intelligence of and train other animals, too bad it did little for the smarts of an average wizard. He plunked down his three knuts and took a copy of the newspaper. He glanced at the front of the paper, folded it, and tucked it next to his copy of the Prophet.

"Aren't you going to read it?" Ron asked.

"I had a letter last night. I know what it's about. I just wanted to see a picture. My correspondent wasn't all that descriptive."

Hermione glanced over at Seamus' copy. "What is it?"

"Some kind of tower sprung up on a hill," Seamus said. What he was reading managed to stall him from dipping into breakfast.

Harry had trouble keeping a smile off his face.

Ron even took a look at what Seamus was reading. "That's...that's better than great."

"That's why I wanted to see a picture," Harry said.

"Where is it?" Ron asked.

"Near where you live," Seamus replied to Ron.

"I'm going there the first day we get back."

"What makes you think it will still be there?" Hermione asked. Her head was turned so she could read the front page now that Seamus had continued into an inside page.

"Take a giant to knock that down."

"Not even then," Harry said, very sure of what he said.

"It looks like it's moving in the picture," Hermione said.

"Article said it appears to sway in the breeze," Seamus said.

"I really want to see it now. Of course my mother will probably say no,"

Ron said.

Harry pulled more eggs onto his plate and three rashers of bacon. He was hungry and content and ready to see what would happen next.

"This article is saying something about Merlin building in crystal,"

Seamus said. "He'd be a thousand years old."

"He could have left a relic that created something like that," Hermione said, unconvinced.

"Nah. It's Lovegood. If it weren't Merlin it would be blibbering humdingers or something taking the credit."

"Blibbering what?" Hermione asked.

"You should read the Quibbler," Seamus said. "Stretches your mind."

"No thank you."

Seamus laughed and continued reading.

"What are they calling it?" Ron asked.

"Well, this article calls it the Crystal Tower. Who knows if that will stick.

Some nutty wizard will turn up to claim credit eventually, he'll have a name for it, I guess."

Harry didn't object to the name Crystal Tower.

To be honest, he was just glad it had all worked.

Sirius hadn't been very descriptive in the letter he wrote demanding more information from Harry.

Next time Harry could slip out of the castle they'd talk. Harry wasn't committing anything to paper regarding this project.

He did enjoy the speculation about Merlin. That was the reason he'd gone for crystal. Weren't there stories about Merlin created a crystal mausoleum for himself or Arthur, depending on who told the story. Harry wanted those associations to echo.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

The fourth floor of the Ministry was deserted again. Three or four times this day Constance Pettigrew had been in the atrium when whole groups of Aurors rushed in or rushed out. As if the world were ending. More of that bunkum with the tower Xeno Lovegood discovered. The fresh rumor was that one of the water springs actually produced a sweet alcohol by the poolful. More than one Auror had come back on duty the previous day completely sloppy, so the story went. She had been in her office

yesterday.

Today's series of events were something else. It took some time, but she did finally hear what had happened.

Some drunk witch or wizard had torched the 'National Memorial' where Harry Potter didn't die when You-Know-Who went to kill him. Burned the whole thing down. Even destroyed part of the cemetery where James Potter and his mudblood wife were buried. They'd been friends of her awful younger brother, Peter.

She made the appropriate noises, of course, to the people who told her the day's news. But it didn't matter to Constance.

Yet it seemed to be the most important thing in a decade to everyone else in the building. She had a job to do, a job she had come to enjoy even if it had seemed for a long time to be the worst place they could have banished her. Of course, all it took to enjoy something distasteful was the proper mental attitude.

She took the lift to the Atrium again, preparing to head out to inspect the estate of a dead witch. She believed there were a considerable number of books in the property. An Auror or two should accompany her on such a visit, but she doubt anyone would remember to pay her that courtesy...not when everyone was either out at the Crystal Tower or trying to keep the muggles from discovering a burning house that they couldn't exactly see.

What a mess.

The Obliviators were a rotten bunch, Constance knew. Idiots.

She had come to enjoy inspecting the belongings of the dead. A bit gruesome, more than a bit morbid. But one's necessities became one's pleasures after a while. She did enjoy impounding books for the Ministry, not that she admitted it. She did enjoy refusing people permission to use

the Ministry's library. She did enjoy purging the contents of the library. Magic that no one used was little better than a curiosity. Why keep and warehouse such relics, as useful as keeping a room of broken wands or another of spent portkeys. So much trash, in her opinion.

Constance looked around the Atrium and didn't see any Aurors waiting around. She focused in on the lifts and no one came out of them looking a likely partner for the afternoon's work. She pulled the slip of paper from her purse. The estate was located outside Stafford, near where several prominent wizards maintained their properties.

She hoped for a good haul.

To be truthful, she hoped for illegal books.

There were special provisions that rumbled into place when that happened, special levies the Ministry could make against the gold value of the estate. Enough illegal books in a library and the estate could belong entirely to the Ministry. Of course, Constance had a long-standing compensation scheme to make sure she profited (legally) by what she found.

Even without making a good marriage into a wealthy family, Constance had become quite well-to-do, not wealthy exactly, but she had more gold in her vault now than her entire multi-branch family had ever had before, not that she shared.

She walked to the idiot in charge of checking in visitors to the Ministry and testing their wands.

"Pip, can you call up to the Auror office for me?"

Philip Greengrass looked at Constance and was slow to acknowledge her.

As he was with anyone who called him Pip.

"They're busy today, Connie."

"Call up there for me."

Any of the security desk wizards kept a matched set of mirrors to summon help, not that the help would be instantaneous, not that it would protect the security wizard against someone who really wanted inside.

"There was a package brought in for you, did you know?" Greengrass asked.

"Did you tell me?"

"Before I arrived. You and Mace Bottoms don't get on, do you?" The implication being that Constance Pettigrew didn't get on with anyone. She glared at him, not responding.

Philip Greengrass dug around in the bins under his desk. "Here it is. Feels like a book."

Probably an anonymous donation of something illegal...to get it out of an estate before it could be found and taxed. Constance received a few books this way a month. Cost her about eight galleons in prize money every time a book showed up like this. Oh well, better to have the thing than to have someone sell it or hide it.

"Give it here."

Greengrass pushed the package toward Pettigrew. She looked at it then picked it up looking for an identifier. Her name was on it. The rest was anonymous brown paper and twine. Perhaps there was a bookplate inside. That might help her track it back to the estate that would owe the tax. She pulled her wand and cast about the strongest cutting charm she knew. The twine fell to the floor.

"Pick that up, would you?" Greengrass asked.

"I'm the librarian, not the custodian."

She unwrapped the brown paper and let it fall to the floor.

"Pick that up," Greengrass demanded.

"Let me look at this, you fool. It's very old."

Constance cracked the book open. She began to turn the fine vellum pages. A few pages in the pages stuck together. She licked a finger and tried to pull the pages apart. The moisture on the paper had an...unexpected effect.

The paper she touched with her saliva began to flake away, like dust exposed to wind. The infection of the one page spread to the entirety of the book at a rapid pace. Her single swipe of saliva had destroyed an ancient, extremely valuable book.

Constance dropped the book on the security table when what was left of the book began to...leak. The few drops of water turned into a thin trickle. From there the water came in a gush.

Almost as soon as the water touched the floor, the powdered pages of the book that had flown all over the Atrium began to sprout as if they were seeds in some enchanted jungle. The running water began to carve itself channels in the stone floor. Some branching toward the fireplaces to extinguish them, some branching toward the lifts, to flood them. The Ministry of Magic quickly became the only governmental building in the world with a working (and unwanted) waterfall.

Constance turned to run, but Philip Greengrass stunned her before he summoned the Aurors. He wasn't taking the fall for this. Let it fall on some money-making scheme cooked up by the witch from the library. Let her see if her lack of supporters in the Ministry would leave her in good stead.

Her family only controlled the one seat in the Wizengamot. Why Philip could badmouth Pettigrew to enough families in the next day or two to secure any kind of guilty verdict against her. The Pettigrews had long been rather weak although they thought themselves mighty.

Greengrass watched mushrooms pop up on the wet floor of the Ministry.

He watched vines climb fireplaces and walls. He watched...things grow out of the stone walls and pop off. Little creatures, a bit smaller than garden gnomes but totally made of stone. Not alive and yet animate.

Some new invention by a witch or a wizard, hopefully not as misbegotten as a basilisk or a snorkack or a chimera.

Greengrass tapped his communication mirror again and upgraded the crisis he was reporting. He also requested more people to respond. They were never going to clean all this up.

Because, to Philip, this resembled something out of one of the tales he'd heard as a child. About the witch who made a house of candy so she could lure in muggle children for her dinner. Or that crazy wizard who made his house from a bubble in a lake. Powerful wizards and witches who were totally insane. A return of the greater magics, unleashing a true tropical swamp in the middle of subterranean London. Someone insane had done this.

Someone insane, yes.

Some protesting what Constance Pettigrew did, how she made her money, her special little cut.

Yes, yes. That would be just how Philip Greengrass would explain everything. He wasn't interested in taking responsibility for this one at all. It would all land on Pettigrew. Let's see her family keep her in her sinecure after this. Philip could think of half a dozen people better suited to serving as Ministry librarian.

Yes, all the better this happened to Pettigrew. All for the great glory of the Greengrass families and its many allies. Let her rot, the old hag.

A colony of the new stone gnomes took up residence in her hair, tugging and pulling.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Little had changed in the month since Snape was announced as Headmaster of Hogwarts. He hadn't gone on a rampage and started cursing students. He also hadn't managed to break down the 'temporary' wall that kept him out of the Headmaster's office.

That alone kept a careful smile on Harry's face.

Of course it was time to explain himself to his godfather, Sirius Black, but Hermione caught him as he was slipping from Gryffindor common room.

"I'm just taking a walk," Harry said.

"I'd like to take a walk. May I join you?"

Harry could tell that Hermione knew more was up than he'd said. Of course, she knew Sirius and knew him to be innocent of the crimes alleged against him. There was no reason she couldn't come along. In fact, Harry thought it might be nice.

"Do you need anything from your room?"

"No, let's head out."

They kept a companionable silence while they were in the castle. There were a couple hours between the last class of the day and the dinner hour so Harry knew he would have to move quickly to get to Sirius, have a chat, and make it back for his evening meal.

Having Hermione along might complicate things.

"So where are we going?" Hermione asked once they were both out of the castle.

"I know this shaggy black dog."

"How is your...dog?"

Harry liked that Hermione was being careful with her words, even out of doors. "Needy, it seems. I've been neglecting to visit him."

"Lots to confess, is there?"

"Yes."

"Good. I've been cautious about asking. But if you're..."

"It's fine. You can ask," Harry said.

"I'll wait," Hermione said. "I heard about...your house, I guess it was."

"I don't remember it. I don't know why anyone kept it around, wrecked."

"But, still."

"Someone did it to get a reaction," Harry said. "Did it to scare people."

"I don't care about the why," Hermione said. "I just...don't want you to be unhappy about it."

"I expect worse," Harry said. "The powers-that-be are scared."

"That swamp in the Ministry."

"Yes."

"The crystal tower?"

"Yes."

"All the freeze liquor people are hauling out of it. Never been so many drunks in all the world, it sounds like."

"That could be a problem." Harry might have to adjust the rate of alcohol production. For now, he looked at it this way: he was starving the Ministry of its spirit taxes. Even as he put more demand upon the services of Hit Wizards and Aurors. Stress the Ministry hard enough, it might just shatter clean.

"Alcohol."

"That's what I hear."

She could disapprove all she wanted. Harry had a good reason.

"You going to tell me how you did that. I know you didn't leave Hogwarts?"

"Let's talk it over with Old Blacky."

"Your dog. You're going to tell your dog before you'll tell me?" Hermione

asked, smiling a bit.

"Just this way. Stories for a pence. Five stories for two pence." Harry trying out a career as a carnival barker.

"I don't have any muggle...err, normal money on me."

"No need right now. But that's how my mind thinks. Normal money. Not the bronze, silver, and gold of what I've got in Gringotts."

Harry disappeared into the brush of the Forbidden Forest. Hermione had to dive in after him.

"Can you...I don't know...feel someone watching us?" Harry asked.

"No."

"Every time I come into this forest, I feel...well, eyes on me."

"Those acromantulas?"

"They'd just try to eat me, not watch me."

"Well, centaurs?"

"Maybe."

"Do you take the same path all the time?"

"No."

"Same schedule."

"Usually a Saturday morning. But the other times vary. Whenever I can get away."

"You have been sneaking out. Now I understand how you did..."

"No. Just wait for the story. I haven't gone any further than Hogsmeade."

Harry indicated the side path they would take and the conversation fell off. Harry was too busy scouting the woods for anything looking his way, anything that might complicate the journey.

It wasn't long before they skirted around Hogsmeade and made it to a cavern in the hills beyond the village. Hermione could, it seemed, be patient from time to time.

Harry led her into the almost round room inside the cavern. He tapped a stone on the floor and it melted into a chair. He sat down and turned to look at Hermione.

"I can't conjure furniture yet. Could you?"

"I didn't conjure," Harry said. "Transfiguration. Go ahead, you know how to do it."

"We've never covered stone to furniture changes."

"You won't hurt anything if you get it wrong."

The perfectionist streak in her kept her from wanting to venture out.

"I won't ever admit if your first attempt fails," Harry said.

Hermione took out her wand and attempted a stone-to-chair transfiguration. She didn't verbalize any spells, but she was so tentative...as she had been back when they'd first experimented with casting stunning spells based on will and power. Those days of studying, of training together, had been good for Hermione. The end of that studying seemed to make her shyer, less confident, less like Hermione. Perhaps it wasn't just Harry who suffered in those lonely days and weeks. Perhaps Hermione was just as hurt and confused?

Harry watched her first attempt fizzle.

He saw her try again. And again. Her third attempt produced something that resembled a chair. She chose to stop. She sat and tried to find the right balance so she wouldn't topple just off her chair.

"Thank you for not laughing," she said.

"Wouldn't dream of it. You still remember how to cast a powerful reducto."

"Not as strong as yours."

"Strong enough to hurt," Harry said, smiling.

A pop outside the cavern had Harry up and pivoted toward the mouth of

the cave. Sirius Black strode inside. "Been waiting long...oh, you brought your friend?"

"I hope that's okay."

"If you wanted a chaperone for a date, you should have asked Remus. Me, I'd be a bad influence," the wizard said. "I'd be handing out firewhiskey faster than you could drink it. A little Potter would spring up ten months later, I'm sure."

Sirius had a wand out and transfigured his own stone into a seat. All three of them sat, quietly. Harry shaking his head. Hermione blushing. Sirius assessing the damage he'd done with a few well-placed words.

"You should have told me about the pool of liquor, Harry. I'd have hung around."

"That was the reason I didn't. A drunk black dog would have gotten a lot of attention, all bad."

"True, that's damned true. So, my no-good godson sends me a package by owl a week ago. In it is a cup..."

"It was a goblet," Harry corrected.

"A cup that I was supposed to take to such a spot at such a time of day.

Imagine my surprise when the cup starts some kind of chain reaction that turns dirt into crystal and starts auto-building a tower. I could have been one stranded puppy at the top of the damned thing. How tall is it?"

"I don't know."

"How did you build it, then, if you don't know?"

"It built itself. Went as high as it could manage. What did it look like?"

Harry asked.

"I almost pissed myself," Sirius said. He seemed to be hamming things up for Hermione's sake. In front of just Harry, the man wasn't quite so vulgar.

"I'll bet you tried everything to go and do it yourself...before you turned to your broken down godfather?"

"True."

"It sounds like something very similar happened inside the Ministry. I understand there are mushrooms growing up the lifts for three floors. And a waterfall landing in the lowest part of the Ministry that's forced everyone out."

"They can't stop any of it, can they?"

"The bits and scraps I hear? No, they can't stop it."

Harry grinned.

"They're going to be scared," Sirius said.

"I know. My parents' house."

"As a distraction, yes, to get the Ministry's embarrassment off the front page. Get that tower forgotten about. You know how many people have apparated out to look at the thing? How many stick around and spend the day drinking the free hooch?"

"Lots."

"Why would 'they' attack the house where Harry lived?" Hermione asked.

"Harry's behind this, but they don't know that. So they weren't doing it as payback. They were hitting at the biggest targets they could think of,"

Sirius said. "You're still a symbol of their uselessness in the last war. All the Death Eaters losing to a baby, their Dark Lord reduced to nothing."

"I know," Harry said.

"So, how did you do it?"

"I enchanted the goblet."

"It was a cup. How did you enchant it?"

"I told you I've been working through some different books on magic."

"Yes," Sirius said. "You did. But you didn't say that you could turn a cup

into a tower."

"I suppose I could let you read my copy of Uncommon Magics."

"Just explain it," Sirius said.

"I packed into an object lots of magic and lots of intention. The magic knew what to do once it got started."

"But how..."

"Well, there's this book..."

Hermione began to laugh. She caught what Harry was doing. He didn't have the same sense of humor that Sirius did, but he had a sense of humor. Harry was paying back his godfather...not with embarrassment but with frustration.

"You're a wet sod, Harry."

"Most days," Harry agreed.

"What will you do next?" Sirius asked.

"Wait."

"For what?"

"For the scared people to identify themselves."

"How?"

"Some people burned down my parents' home. I expect someone will try burning down or bludgeoning the Crystal Tower."

"You did something to it," Hermione said.

"Maybe."

"Well?"

"Well, what?"

"Exactly," she pushed. "What did you do?"

"I don't know if it'll work. Let's see if it comes to pass."

Hermione shook her head.

"I thought you were going to find a hobby other than waging war against

the Ministry," Sirius said.

"All roads lead through the Ministry Atrium."

Harry was fighting a proxy war against the Ministry or some faction that profited from the Ministry. They didn't know that Harry was behind what had happened. Harry couldn't point to a group of wizards and say that they had burned down the Potter Cottage in Godric's Hollow.

But they were fighting on the same plane. Harry to make the Ministry ridiculous, superfluous. The Ministry adherents fought to raise the fear level and make the Ministry relevant in a time of uncertainty. Causing the problem that they would then sweep in and solve. This was a fight to destroy or save the Ministry.

"This isn't violent, yet. But it will be."

"I'm not sticking out my neck. I'm being careful."

"It's not you who will draw blood first, Harry. The people who invested in the Ministry, the people drawing out steep dividends. They are the ones who will protect what they have."

"Malfoy."

"And two hundred other families, at least."

"If the mood shifts, if no one needs them..."

"They'll make themselves needed. They'll make their fees flow."

"I'm not done yet, Sirius. Not at all. This is just the first gesture: flush them out."

"I'm not going to tell you to stop."

"I will," Hermione interjected. "I don't want you to get hurt."

"I would rather be on the offense now, Hermione, than on the defense for the rest of my life. Draw them out, concentrate them somewhere, perhaps attempting to rehabilitate the Ministry that I've almost destroyed, and...handle them."

"Kill them."

"If it comes to it, yes. But I prefer to terrify them. The Quibbler put in mind the idea of Merlin's return. Why not do something to scare them back to semi-lawful ways from outright criminality."

"I don't think they can change."

"They can adapt or die," Harry said. "I will give them one chance."

"Harry," Sirius started to say.

"Say what you need to. I need to hear what could happen, what could go wrong. What's the worst that will happen. Tell me your thoughts so I can get ready."

"I want to help you find another path."

"Which one? Tell me and I'd be glad to try it."

Sirius was quiet a moment. "At least you're being cautious, not putting yourself in the middle. Yet."

"With any luck, never."

"Never build a plan just on luck," Sirius admonished.

"No. No, I understand that. But I can hope."

"Hope is also a bad foundation. If it came down to a shooting war..."

"I'm ready."

"What if they manage to get a lord-level wizard on their side?"

"They would have already if they could have. They've been waiting more than a decade. Now that Dumbledore's dead, they're activating again.

They fear the possibility of new opposition, but they're more grateful for the other side to have no leader."

"You'll end up being that leader," Hermione said.

"No, I won't. Not if I don't declare what I'm doing."

"They might try to smoke you out, too," Sirius said.

"The attack on my parents' home should smoke me out. It won't. I don't

want to end up dueling these fools. I don't want to conduct raids. I don't want to wait for them to attack me. I want to make people, the average people, wake up."

"It's a fool's dream," Hermione said.

"Well, it's not the whole plan. Just the overture. If it doesn't work...then we get harder."

"We?" Sirius asked.

"I'm not asking you to help. Just for advice from time to time. Make sure you throw out the objections I haven't seen."

"Children shouldn't have to fight these wars."

"Who else is there?" Harry asked.

"People my age."

"No one else sees the problem...or, if they do, they ignore it."

"Be careful."

The next few hours passed in less tense conversations. Hermione, in particular, asked more questions about the enchanting that Harry was doing contra all the advice she knew. He wasn't using runes engraved in a surface. He wasn't doing a recognized ritual. He was just pouring in magic and intention into a magically crafted object, a goblet, a transfigured book. The magic of the object seemed to make it easier for the other magic to adhere and remain. Harry had tried, and failed, to enchant with an unmodified stone he'd found on a path. The magic had just dissipated away.

The chair he sat on in the cave was from an ordinary stone. The transfiguration he'd done might last a day or two. The Crystal Tower he'd enchanted might last a year or ten.

Hermione was shocked when she realized what Harry had stumbled onto wasn't mentioned in any book she knew. It was just an artifact of trial

and error, mostly error. An idea and a lot of tests and mostly failed results. Until it just started to work.

Harry and Hermione left the cave an hour before the sun began to set. It had been a long day, exhausting for Harry not the least. His entire plan had been dissected three ways and still expected to sit up and dance.

McGonagall caught them before they made it in the castle. She was most displeased.

"You and your walks, Potter."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Well, come along. The Headmaster has been looking for you for hours.

Almost prepared to start hunting for you."

"What's the meeting about?"

"I'm sure I don't know." The Professor looked at Hermione. "Miss Granger, supper begins in twenty minutes. Please wash up."

Hermione looked at Harry before she turned for the stairs.

"Another surprise?" Harry asked.

"I hear things have gone badly for the last woman to spring a surprise on you."

"You mean that librarian?"

"I understand Constance was...dismissed."

"Well, it came too late to save my books." Of course, Harry hadn't revealed that he'd received his books after all. But he could still be publicly bitter about what the Ministry tried, and failed, to do.

"I would keep a civil tongue in your head, Potter. I believe the new...Headmaster is a lot less forgiving."

McGonagall was going to be as valuable as ever. Stating the obvious and offering no help.

"Will you stay for the meeting?"

"If the Headmaster permits."

To Harry it seemed it was long past time for McGonagall to retire. In the last month, her age had really begun to show. Frustration with being passed over. Anger at who the new Headmaster was. She kept it bottled up somewhat, but not enough. Harry didn't expect either of them to return for the following year so long as Snape remained in office.

McGonagall led Harry through the Great Hall and to the anteroom where Harry had once been told about the ordeal involved in the Triwizard Tournament. Now Snape used it as his office, given that the old one had disappeared. The best prank Harry would ever pull...and no one thought it a prank. Yet.

Harry tried to guess at what Snape wanted now.

He found he couldn't think of a thing. There were too many possibilities to narrow in on a handful, to make a meaningful survey.

McGonagall knocked on the door.

"Come in."

McGonagall pulled the door open and stepped inside. Snape looked up, saw Harry with McGonagall.

"Thank you, Professor. Will you oversee dinner tonight this evening? I suspect this may take some time," Snape said, almost channeling the politeness of Dumbledore, but the words came flavored with his own tone of voice.

Harry wondered if there was a manual Headmaster had to follow. This Snape seemed vastly different from the Potions Master from the dungeon. The clothing was dark and austere, but the man's face seemed younger, less worn.

Harry had to wonder if some oath Snape had sworn ended with Dumbledore's death. Or perhaps some new oaths he'd sworn as

Headmaster lightened his life in some way, not that Harry could see how giving up some freedom would make him seem a freer soul.

Professor McGonall inclined her head a few degrees, barely an acknowledgment of Snape's request. She turned and left.

A man who had been standing in the shadows emerged. A dirty man, more crabbed and gnarled than even the Durmstrang headmaster had been. He stared at Harry. Harry stared back for a moment. The man wore Ministry robes.

Snape pointed at a chair in front of a desk. "Sit, Potter," the Headmaster said. "It's bad news, the very worst kind."

The man in Ministry garb smiled. A third of his teeth were rotten - or perhaps they were all fine, but the light was playing tricks.

"What happened?" Harry asked.

"Sit down, Potter."

Something horrible had happened, of that Harry was sure. It wasn't Sirius. It wasn't Hermione. What was it? Neither Snape nor the wizard in the garish robes spoke a moment. They let the tension twist. They left Harry in confusion and pain.

Harry prepared for an attack of some kind.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

A/N: Thank you to everyone who downloaded a free copy of my ebook during the promotion I had in June. I hope you enjoyed the story.

Information about my original writing projects is available from my website: [www . JamesSchubring . com](http://www.JamesSchubring.com)

4. Imagination is Magic

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Chapter Four (Imagination Is Magic)

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

"I won't say it again, Potter," Headmaster Snape demanded. "Sit down."

Harry fell into a seat in the Headmaster's windowless office, much different from the space Dumbledore used that was still denied to Snape.

Harry had been summoned to this office to receive some sort of bad news. Neither Snape nor the unfamiliar wizard who'd come to do the briefing were in any hurry to break the quarantine.

Snape acted uncomfortable with Harry's confusion. The other man, though, didn't even hide his eagerness.

"Sir?"

Finally, the man in the Ministry robes whose teeth were just as rotten as they had first seemed took a spot beside the still-seated Snape. "My name is Vicarius Lord Yaxley. I am a senior investigator for the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. Do you understand, Mr. Potter?"

The ugly man's voice danced with joy. It was no great stretch of the imagination that the man would gut unicorns and club kneazles if he could get away with it. For the pleasure he took in pain.

"Yes," Harry said.

"I am sorry to bring you this news. Your family has been attacked."

Family?

Did Yaxley mean the Dursleys? They were family in a technical sense, not that Harry would go out of his way to claim them. Non-magicals who gave non-magicals a bad name. But also Harry's legal guardians.

"Are they okay?"

Harry feared the worst. He didn't like them, but he didn't want them dead.

"We don't know," Yaxley said.

Harry sat deeper into the chair at the unexpected answer. He half expected to be told his relatives were murdered. But the Ministry was

telling him about an attack and then about their unknown status.

Not knowing...it may have felt worse.

"Are my aunt and uncle in hospital?"

"I said, if you'll listen, that we don't know. They certainly aren't in St.

Mungo's, of course. We know that much."

The man kept saying 'they.'

"My aunt? My uncle? Both of them?" Harry clarified.

"I believe there was also a cousin listed in your file? We haven't been able to locate the young man."

Dudley wouldn't have been back from Smeltings this early in the spring.

Harry's next question, 'what happens to me,' caused him to stop talking altogether.

That question, 'what happens to Harry Potter,' was the critical point.

Wasn't it? Changing his fate was the point of disappearing Harry's family.

Living with the Dursleys had been no great pleasure. Living with uncertainty, with danger, that was worse. What would happen to Harry?

He tried to think through the implications.

They were many, vast. Very few positive, given the sadist with the rotten teeth in a key position at the Ministry.

This was now a dangerous time to be Harry Potter.

In fact, Harry was seated in a chair and not, as he'd feared a minute earlier, in a battle for his life against Snape or this Yaxley. Shooting spells and dodging and shielding.

Except that he was now in a battle for his life. Because of more devious minds, more subtle plots.

He didn't know the ways that laws regarded those still underage, but

Harry doubted they'd be structured in his favor.

Harry was sick with anger.

"My aunt, my uncle, and my cousin?" Harry asked.

"Yes, haven't you been listening?"

The ministry man smiled, perhaps proud of his rotten teeth.

"He's trying to understand, Yaxley," Snape said.

Harry thought it might be the first time the man had ever publicly defended Harry. Could the day get any weirder or more painful?

"He's been told. We wasted enough time waiting for him to arrive. I was supposed to return to the Ministry for a meeting about Mr. Potter an hour ago."

The bureaucrat and his power and his meetings. Meetings about Harry that Harry wouldn't be invited to attend.

"Why would you have a meeting about me?"

"The Ministry cares about all of its citizens," Yaxley said without any conviction.

The Ministry only cared about itself, Harry thought.

Harry had been thinking and rethinking his path, this path of power he walked. The violence he'd done. The way he'd used dominance magic against Barty Crouch, Junior, and the Defense teacher, Umbridge. He had fewer qualms now.

Not when this was the face of law and order in magical Britain.

"I understand my family's old home, the one in Godric's Hollow, was also burned down."

"Yes, that's correct. I was at the scene investigating."

"Are the same people involved?"

"The thought never occurred to me. I will look into it." A taunting lilt to his words, bragging and daring and proud.

With that, Harry understood.

The man delivering this news had also been the one who created or

participated in both these events. Yaxley had helped to burn the ruins. He had also been to Number 4 Privet Drive.

Harry didn't have a single fact to support that guess. But it felt true.

Even if the man hadn't gone in person, he approved in spirit.

Harry looked between Yaxley and Snape. He focused his magic and pushed. His magic brushed up against them.

They had similar features, similarities in their magic. There was a darkness rotting in both of them. They were of similar magical potential or strength. They were below what Harry now possessed although both likely had far better training and decades more experience.

Harry could crush them from where he sat. He could do it. He could make Snape murder the wizard with the rotten teeth. Harry thought about it.

It was so tempting.

But it was also so obvious. It would be out-of-character for this revised Snape. Someone would look for Imperius. Perhaps even find dominance magic, raw will, lingering.

He was tempted. First they'd burned the ruins at Godric's Hollow, a reminder of the deaths of James and Lily Potter and also of Harry Potter's survival against Voldemort. Now they came even closer to Harry. He'd need new guardians.

Proper wizarding guardians.

Harry could only guess who might be in charge of judging suitability.

This man with the rotten teeth? Lucius Malfoy directly? Anyone with a stake in seeing the legend of the Boy-Who-Lived broken?

The Ministry was a stinking cesspool right now. Their building had been overtaken by a waterfall and a kind of jungle environment and new species of animated stone figurines. People were flocking to stare at the

Crystal Tower, at a feat of greater magic, at aspiration for something greater than a jug of firewhiskey on a Saturday night.

Harry could picture it in his mind. Snape casting a deadly spell. Yaxley exploding against the wall.

He could do it.

He wouldn't.

Both Yaxley and Snape were staring at Harry.

Harry scrambled for a sensible question that didn't involve asking Snape his favorite spell for disemboweling people he hated.

"How will you investigate?" Harry asked.

"Investigate?"

"Find them."

"Ah."

There was no interest.

Harry would have been surprised a year or two earlier. Hadn't Cornelius Fudge once claimed 'he needed to be seen doing something?'

Now the man was dead. That philosophy had also perished.

According to Dumbledore's book on power, the Ministry had existed for centuries by being useful to the masses, making a point of keeping its tax burden low, providing services that people would be compelled to pay for, alcohol and transportation and regulation of sporting events.

The New Ministry didn't even pretend to be useful. It sent out men with bad teeth to cause crime, not solve it. The New Ministry decided upon using fear to cement its worth.

The first lashes of the dying Ministry fell against Harry or, more precisely, the Dursley family. Harry heard from this unreliable source that they were missing. Missing could mean hostages, could mean ransoming, could mean dead and hidden away.

"Your next actions?" Harry pushed.

"Our investigation has been inconclusive."

Of course, you carried it out. That's the benefit of investigating yourself and your friends.

"What do you know?"

"We are quite sure magic was involved. After all, the sensors that monitored the area for underage magic began pinging. You were almost sent a letter expelling you, until a junior assistant realized the letter would be sent to you at Hogwarts. You couldn't be committing a violation of underage magic laws if you were tucked away here."

"Right."

"You were here?"

"He was," Snape affirmed.

Yaxley hadn't expected a different answer. "There's no blood on the premises. No sign of where they were taken."

"What will you do now?" Harry asked.

"Do? I'm afraid we've done what we can."

They were Muggles after all, the wizard didn't bother to say. Muggles he had a hand in disposing of. A full service Ministry: we murder your muggles and then bungle the investigation into the murder.

"Except for settling your summer arrangements." He flashed his rotten teeth again. "Your temporary custodian and all that."

'Temporary guardian.' Harry now fell into a land of loopholes.

There were probably different procedures if his relatives were known to be dead. Known to be missing...there had to be a reason that people like this Yaxley had taken so much care.

Perhaps this didn't trigger wills and estates.

Perhaps this allowed the Ministry a much fuller voice in what happened

to Harry during these 'temporary' times of emergency.

"You didn't think to ask, did you? About what the Ministry will do now that you're temporarily without a guardian."

"No." Harry had been thinking about it. Nothing good.

"Of course, the Headmaster of Hogwarts will serve as his guardian,"
Snape said. Meaning himself.

No great relief to Harry.

"During term time, yes."

"What do you propose for the school holidays?" Snape asked.

"Well, the Ministry will take a deep interest in the young man's welfare."

Harry had never heard more bland, more chilling words. 'Deep interest.'

"Upon his return to London in six weeks, a Ministry representative will collect him."

"And take me where?"

"To the Ministry for a hearing. We'll assign you a temporary guardian."

Harry bit his tongue. His first impulse had been to remind these people that he had a guardian, Sirius Black. Of course the Ministry would never admit fault in anything. It would rather clean up its messes with a Dementor than an apology.

Harry suspected if he arrived at the platform and went with the Ministry representatives his life would become nasty, brutish, and short. He would be dead or disappeared, too. In the best case, merely signed up to a dozen different oaths that left him able to breathe and use the toilet. Everything else would be based on gaining permission first.

No, Harry thought. He wouldn't let the Ministry do as it wanted. He wouldn't accept a temporary guardian.

If he had to drown every person who worked in the Ministry, Harry was preparing himself to do it.

At a time of his choosing. Not theirs. He would make sure he left behind no evidence of his involvement.

"Well, that's what he needed to know," Yaxley said. "Do you have any other questions?"

"Please find them." Harry even meant it. It also happened to be the typical, expected response. Useless here because of this man's culpability, but Harry said it because he might be expected to say it.

"Well, we've exhausted all our options."

Harry realized how pointless it was to keep asking questions.

Snape looked between Yaxley and his student. "I'll see you out," the Headmaster said to the ministry man.

"Potter, keep your seat. I won't be a minute."

The men left Harry in the small, cramped office. Snape had his pick of an entire castle and he picked a room without a window. It wasn't even a dungeon room, but it still had no window. As if brewing potions for so many years left him unable to tolerate the sun.

Harry looked at the walls. Unlike Dumbledore's office, there were no portraits on the wall here. There was little decoration as it was.

The door flew open and the Headmaster returned.

Harry stood up.

"Sit."

Snape got behind his desk and looked out at his student. There was no sneer. There was no anger on his face. Harry couldn't tell what the man was thinking.

"I knew your aunt. She was a dreadful person."

Harry didn't nod and didn't say anything. Harry knew better than to ask questions of this man. He was surprised Snape was talking to Harry the same way a person might talk to another person. No looming, no

potential violence lingering just below the surface.

"This 'disappearance' won't be an improvement in your situation."

"I realize that," Harry said.

"You have six weeks remaining at Hogwarts this year. I suggest you use the time well."

Get a mind, Potter. Get a plan. Get a clue. Harry could read the words this polite Snape wasn't saying.

"Yes, sir." Harry took the comment as dismissal. He stood.

"Stay, Potter."

"Sir?"

"Sit down."

Harry did.

"You have no way to know this, but I have changed how the wards analyze the castle and the grounds."

Harry shook his head. He had no idea what Snape was trying to say.

Snape eyed the student under his charge. "I'm aware of your leaving the Hogwarts grounds."

"Sir?"

"The castle wards watch you and any others who venture into the forest."

All those times Harry felt eyes on him. He'd felt the Hogwarts wards trying to protect him?

"Did Dumbledore do the same?"

"I couldn't say what the...Headmaster did, how he had his wards arranged. I chose to batten them down, as if a storm were coming."

Snape was a very different person since his promotion. Harry chose to sit and listen.

"The world is changing. Traditionalists, such as someone who would introduce himself as a Lord as this Yaxley just did, his family were hedge

wizards just one generation back. No lords from such poor stock, in galleons, in brains, in magic, in nobility of purpose. Traditionalists won't sit for the changes they can see coming - or the fear they have boiling inside them for the changes they suspect lurk in the future. They are terrified. Those in terror react in predictable ways. Some pretend it isn't happening. Some flee. Some try to make some advantage of the terror they know that they and others feel. They push past their fear to inflict more fear, more terror, in the hopes of profiting by it."

Harry nodded.

"This Yaxley is a hungry man. I won't say that I don't know him. I do, a bit. Not well. But the only characteristic that I remembered about the man was his aggressiveness and ambition. He sees something in you or the legend of you that he can profit by. You will do well to remember that magic can make good things better, Potter. It can also make bad things much worse. Yaxley falls in the much worse side of the line."

"I understand, sir."

"Take care if you venture into the forest again. We haven't yet dealt with the acromantula problem out there. It's planned for this summer."

"Thank you for telling me."

Harry waited. Snape said nothing else. Harry got up and left the room.

He walked slowly down the hall. Harry had the impression Snape knew something of what Harry was doing. That the man approved. That the man wished Harry to go even bigger. He was trying to get Harry to go big game hunting.

He took a turn and another, walking in circles, turning every leaf of the conversation over. The man with the rotten teeth. What he said, what he implied.

The Dursleys might be missing, but they were also certainly dead.

Just legally held in limbo to give the Ministry more claim to Harry.

By the time he got to the portrait guardian of Gryffindor Tower, Harry had a sketch of a plan in mind. He would go hunting. Very big game.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Harry looked around the common room. He saw Hermione reading. He walked toward her. He must have made some noise.

Hermione looked up. "You're late."

The room was full enough, loud enough, to have a brief conversation with his friend.

"The Headmaster needed a word."

"Have you been put into perpetual detention until you graduate?"

Harry smiled a little. "No, the Headmaster is a different person from the arse they had teaching potions here."

Hermione shrugged, not agreeing.

"There was this horrible man from the Ministry present. He came to tell me my relatives have been attacked..."

"Oh, Harry..."

"...and have disappeared." Harry was almost whispering the last words.

Hermione had a tear roll down her cheek.

"Don't cry for them."

"I'm not. I'm crying for you, Harry."

Hermione always had been smarter than anyone Harry knew. She understood at least some of what Harry had spent some time guessing.

Hermione pushed some of her books to the floor and pulled Harry onto the couch. She didn't try to hug him or cry on him. She just sat next to him. She cried. He sat stony faced. Still, he didn't get up. He didn't move away.

He sat and listened to Hermione cry the tears that he couldn't.

"It's okay," Harry said.

"I should be comforting you."

"I'd accept it if I stubbed my toe. But...the Dursleys..."

The only reason Harry was as upset as he was: 'what happened to Harry.'

This Ministry plot to gain control of Harry.

His words, his lack of concern for his aunt and uncle, all that Hermione could imagine about their treatment of her friend (and maybe more someday) just made Hermione cry a bit harder. He let the moments slip past them. Eventually the tears receded and the discomfort Harry felt retreated.

"I might need your help," he said.

"Anything."

"I need to get off the grounds. I need someone to cover for me while I'm gone."

"Where are you going?"

She hadn't said no.

"Little Whinging."

"Their house?"

"I need to see it."

Hermione nodded. Her head slowed before it stopped moving. Harry recognized this as how she looked when she was thinking deeply, completely.

"Might this be an ambush?"

Harry paused and turned the question over a few times. It could. Yaxley could be waiting at that perfectly ordinary, perfectly beastly little house.

"Yes."

"You still need to go?"

"I do."

"Let's talk it through. What could an ambush look like? How can you prepare? How can you respond?"

The girl needed to know everything about everything. Harry found, in this case, that he didn't mind.

She was concerned for him.

He humored her. He also sharpened his own wits before walking into something dangerous, a place wizards with decades of experience might just be waiting.

Still, Harry needed to see. He needed to have a chance at being close to what had happened.

He stayed longer with Hermione than he needed to.

Some closeness just then suited him fine. It was...nice.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Harry arrived and crouched on the grass a moment. He patted himself down, counting fingers and ears and wiggling his toes inside his shoes.

His first experiment with apparating went fine. No splinching.

He moved rapidly to some hedges a few doors down from Number Four.

He waited and he watched. Could the Ministry trace his apparition?

He didn't hear anyone else apparating in.

Were there people already here, waiting for Harry? Hermione's ambush hypothesis.

Harry sat and watched and listened. Cars moved around the not-too-busy street. People were outside talking, a few with grills. Harry got a bit hungry from the smells.

As the last strains of the daylight vanished, Harry felt more confident. He hadn't heard any sounds he associated with wizards.

Unless, of course, the ambush had been set up before Harry arrived.

He waited until the night was firmly in control before he stood up and

walked down the sidewalk. He took a slow pace toward the house. He walked around it once. Nothing to see.

He peered in a window at the side.

There were still lights on inside, the collection of appliances in the kitchen with little lights or clocks. The television with a red power light.

Harry did see much, but what he did notice suggested nothing out of place in Petunia Dursley's perfect little sphere.

Harry stepped into the backyard again. Even though the attack had to be hours or days past, Harry thought he could still feel magic all around him.

He pushed out with his own.

He felt the lingering magic more intensely.

He thickened the magic he sent out.

He felt an inclination to form his magic in a particular way. He'd never used this arrangement before. He wasn't even sure where the idea came from. It was just a sense Harry had, like some kind of magical sensor informing him of things. Perhaps it was his magic itself trying to give Harry the information he wanted.

A wonderful and terrifying concept that Harry's magic was trying to talk to Harry.

Harry reformed his magic. He pushed outward again. Light appeared from inside the house.

He saw a ghost figure inside. An apparition. Harry looked in the window.

His Aunt Petunia, a color washed, flickering, translucent Aunt Petunia, slaved over the cutting board. He watched her make herself a salad while turning four pork chops over in a pan on the hob.

Harry stepped back. Looked at her from a different angle. The resemblance was shocking.

The whole experience, even for a boy who was around ghosts many times a month, was hair raising.

The 'how' boggled his mind. He'd just pushed his magic into the lingering traces of the attack. How was he now seeing what non-magical people had done?

The only thing that he could think of was this: magic persisted. It had a memory. It remembered. It wanted to speak to those who wanted to ask it questions. All Harry had to do was to form up his magic in the correct configuration.

He didn't even know this was possible.

Harry had heard none of that in the drips and drabs of magical theory he'd gotten from his classes. Nor from the hand-written volume Dumbledore had gifted Hermione and him. Nor the books Dumbledore left for Harry in his will.

This was magic beginning to tell Harry how to do magic.

He shook his head. He'd have to consider this later. Perhaps he'd first have to talk one of the Weasley twins into selling him some firewhiskey.

He might just need to be a touch tipsy to really think this through.

Harry returned to his earlier vantage. He watched ghost-Petunia some more.

Eventually the food made it to plates. The salad and one chop to one plate. A few pieces of cut tomato and three chops on the other. Harry could guess who was to receive which.

The ghost-Petunia called out and ghost-Vernon appeared. They sat at the table and didn't speak to one another. Vernon worked double-time with his fork and knife, slamming through chop after chop. Ignoring even a few bits of tomato.

He was almost at the end of his third chop when he slumped forward into

his plate.

Harry had an idea of what was coming, but he still jumped a bit. He looked around. He was alone. This entire experience creeped him out.

Harry watched Ghost-Petunia open her mouth to scream before she slumped forward.

A moment later a ghost-Yaxley followed by a ghost-Malfoy and two other translucent figures entered the kitchen.

Just like that.

They'd walked right onto Privet Drive and into the house.

Even with all the assurances of the late Dumbledore. It had been so simple for these men to arrive.

The ghostly attackers proceeded to use spells on the stunned Petunia and Vernon. Harry saw a vague purple color to the spells. He watched their bodies mummify, water pulled out of the tissue moment by moment, killing the still living in the worst way possible.

Harry had to look away more than once.

The process wasn't instantaneous. It took minutes to do what deserts took months or years. The magic was fast, yes, but it was gruesome to behold.

The kitchen emptied for a few moments save for the mummies at the table.

The four returned.

They'd been searching the house, Harry assumed.

Malfoy said something. Harry couldn't hear the words. Then Ghost-Malfoy vanished the remains. Then did the same at the plates of food. He sent cleaning charms, shocking that he knew any, at the area where Petunia had prepared the meal.

Leaving no evidence whatsoever.

Malfoy had some experience doing things like this. Harry wondered how

many people had disappeared just this way during Voldemort's first rise to power?

Harry watched the men. The four wasted little time once the kitchen was clean. They left and the vision ended.

Harry looked at the table. The table where they'd sat eating dinner.

Vernon and Petunia were dead before they'd known a thing.

It was something close to what Harry expected.

It was horrible to witness, but it was final.

Harry only had to wonder about Dudley. He supposed there was Aunt Marge as well.

Harry didn't know what to do with them.

But Yaxley, Malfoy, the others. He needed something spectacular for them. Awe-raising and memorable and permanent. Painful was good. But something that wouldn't be forgotten for decades. Something to make Malfoy a reminder about the penalties of evil.

Harry had been a fool in his early years in the magical world. He was no longer anyone's fool.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

By the first of June, the Ministry employees had become inured to their working conditions. New spaces had been found for most of the staffers whose work was on the bottom two floors. Of course, much of the material in the Department of Mysteries was still below water so there wasn't much work for the Unspeakables to perform, except for attempts to reclaim their domain.

Magical pumps failed. Manual pumps couldn't keep up. They'd even run in electrical lines so they could use Muggle pumps. But the traditionalists had thrown a fit at the only thing that really seemed to work.

The Ministry was still a humid pool and there was nothing likely to

change that.

At least that was how Philip Greengrass looked at the situation. He was still manning the security check in the Atrium. That is, when he wasn't fighting off the damned animated rock gnomes that would occasionally steal some visitor's wand.

He had survived the inquiry into That Day. Constance Pettigrew, who'd gotten her position from the influence of a relative who once ran the Wizengamot, a man long since dead, had not survived. Tossed out. The Ministry had cleared out the woman's Gringotts accounts, too, to help pay for some of the damages.

The woman had spent much of her life angering people.

When her fall came, many wizards and witches enjoyed helping to jump on her neck.

Since then, policies were tighter.

Greengrass sat at his desk and wished he were permitted to read the Daily Prophet. Instead, he was supposed to be vigilant for his entire six-hour shift. Not supposed to look away or let his attention wane or appear bored.

In short, the policies were fantasy. Philip was considering looking for new work. The constant rushing of water was beginning to weigh on him. He looked at the one functional floo when Amelia Bones, the former director of magical law enforcement, stepped through. Upon Cornelius Fudge's assassination, she and several others had taken the blame. Even though Fudge had handled all his own security arrangements and prohibited others from assuming any control.

The common guess was that the man didn't want anyone seeing just how he conducted his business affairs. Strange how his widow left Britain with more than three million galleons to her name. The Fudge family,

until they stuffed an idiot into the Minister's office, had never been a wealthy one.

So Fudge had been the one who made it easy to kill him.

But he'd been dead at the time people needed to assess some blame.

The blame couldn't accrue very well to the dead. It was left to the still living to feel the stabbings. Like Amelia Bones.

"Ms. Bones?" Greengrass addressed his one-time superior.

Technically she was a citizen and allowed into the Ministry. However the terms of her parting meant that she had almost no privileges to enter or move around the building.

"I'm not going past your desk, Greengrass. Just waiting for one of the Aurors to bring me a box of my things."

It had taken them two weeks to go through her possessions and decide what to return to her. If anything.

Philip doubted much would make it back. Perhaps photographs of no particular value. Any other personal items had probably been parceled out. Philip had taken a ruler that had once belonged to Constance Pettigrew. Not the he needed one. Just that it was a reminder of what happened to foul people.

Bones stood and waited.

"What time was your appointment?"

"Five minutes from now."

Greengrass nodded. They'd keep her waiting some time. If for no other reason than because she now lacked power after wielding it for so long in her climb up the promotion ladder.

He sat and looked and waited for anyone else braving the Ministry.

Fewer did these days. People seemed to be far more interested in the Crystal Palace. Free liquor, a beautiful view, stop by and chat with the

Lovegoods or the Weasleys, too. Not that a Greengrass would do such a thing.

Philip had taken Polyjuice before he made a visit.

A most impressive structure. He just wished he understood what it was for. When a wizard built a tower, he usually meant it as a fortification.

This one had no door, just an opening that anyone or anything could use.

No living spaces. No furniture. It was just a beautiful structure.

"You can conjure yourself a chair, Ms. Bones."

"I don't mind standing."

"As you wish."

The squeak of a cart interrupted the day. Philip looked behind him.

Norton Banglehuss was pushing his cart. Norton was the last remaining wizard in the mail department. He'd been there at least sixty years, if not longer. He'd been the last remaining wizard in the department for at least forty five years.

They'd tried to phase the man out many times, but they never seemed able to fire the man. Guilt about letting go such an old wizard? No, probably not. No one who climbed that high in the Ministry suffered from guilt.

Norton was a collector of secrets. The only mail guy in a building this monstrous would come across many. Secrets about a person, his wife, his parents, perhaps even his grandparents. The man had perfect job security until the day he became a ghost and haunted the place. He'd probably even be able to keep the necromancers far from him.

"Anything good?" Greengrass asked the mailman.

"Goddamned newsletter."

"Didn't care for it?"

"I counted nine lies on the first page."

"Lower than last month."

"Hah!"

The man handed over the newsletter and the rest of Greengrass' mail.

Things that were too large or bulky to be folded and sent flying under a bit of magic.

Of course, Norton probably had something to do that. Keeping his own job intact.

"Has this package been through a security check?"

"They handed it to me."

Norton Banglehuss turned his cart around and returned to the one elevator they'd managed to get working again. He disappeared off the floor.

Greengrass pushed the package away from him. He remembered That Day when Constance Pettigrew opened some prank item and did thousands or tens of thousands in damage to the Ministry. Greengrass opened no packages in this building now.

No, sir.

He hated his job, but he needed one to keep receiving his Greengrass Family stipend. So he'd sit and serve as a security wizard, no great strain on his mind or his magic. His nights and weekends were for pleasure.

Greengrass tore into the rest of the mail he'd just received.

A letter from the Payroll Office?

He tore into it. He pulled a piece of parchment out and was too slow to notice when a ring fell out of the envelope. It plinked against his desk and skittered toward the floor.

Greengrass had a paranoia about packages in the Atrium. Like wrapped books that began crumbling when a sacked former librarian opened them. He leaped across his desk and wound up merely sprawled on the

surface.

He watched the ring hit the floor, roll through a thin slick of water, and continue rolling. Speeding up, even.

It only stopped once Amelia Bones stepped on the ring.

Philip waited. Nothing strange, or stranger, began to happen. He remedied his awkward position and chased after the ring.

"Might I have that back?" Greengrass asked.

Bones smiled. Not a happy one. "Perhaps I should take a few weeks to examine it?"

"I think I might have to call the Aurors."

"That's fine." She lifted her foot. "You think Norton has blackmail. You should see what I know."

"If that's true, why did they sack you?"

Bones laughed. "It plays as a sacking."

"That's the story."

"They paid me a million galleons to leave."

"The Ministry doesn't have a million galleons."

"No."

"So you just lied to me."

"The late Cornelius Fudge had a couple million galleons."

"I heard three."

"By the time we were done with his estate, his widow had about fifty thousand. I got the bulk. I knew the most that could hurt her."

"You have to be kidding."

"Part of the deal was they could label it how they wanted. The Widow Fudge is now a millionaire while I'm thrown out on my badge. Not the truth, but it sounds good."

"That can't be..."

"People do some horrible things sometimes. Enough to get an entire family proscribed. A million galleons was cheap for the widow Fudge."

"Huh."

"Can you keep their secret?"

"You didn't."

"I wrote the agreement. Bound them to pay. Didn't bind me to keep quiet. Did you know I did time as a Ministry oath writer a long while back?"

Greengrass nodded. He knelt in front of his ring and picked it up.

As soon as he did, the gold began to flake to the floor.

"No. No, I didn't mean it," he shouted.

He didn't even know what 'it' was.

"Get out of here," Greengrass yelled to the room.

He threw the ring and where it landed in some water it quickly dissolved.

Greengrass wasn't fast enough.

A tree began to grow at a furious pace. Up to the level of the Atrium ceiling, past it. Up and up, through level after level. The foliage on the tree produced tiny flowers. The flowers unfurled and then the petals fell. A small...yes, it was a piece of fruit began to grow where each flower had been. They looked like tiny apples.

The apples began raining down.

Amelia picked one out of midair. She looked at it. Sniffed.

"I wouldn't eat it. Crabapple."

She dropped it. She also noticed that the apple exploded when it impacted the floor. Into some kind of dust.

She'd keep her part of this mess to herself.

The floor heaved. Philip and Amelia Bones crashed into each other before they both landed on the floor. The walls bent inward at impossible angles. The entire building shook as though a volcano were underneath, a

very angry volcano seeking a few simple paths upward so that the magma had somewhere to go.

Amelia disentangled herself first and ran for the side of the Atrium.

Apples continued raining from the sky. Some of the stone in the ceiling worked itself loose and joined the apples in reproving the principles of gravity. (Not that a wizard would know.)

Moments later all the elevators engaged, even the ruined ones. The floors that had been clogged with plant material cleared themselves and green flames lit inside each.

The building continued to rumble and jostle and then a vibration joined into the terrifying mix.

Greengrass looked across the room. There was a box at the staircase, next to the elevators. Then a dozen. Then they formed up into a line. Finally the boxes began to walk across the Atrium. None of the apples or falling bits of stone impacted into the boxes. They just walked, sometimes detoured around a large piece of fallen stone.

More joined from the stairs that came from the upper floors.

Finally boxes began to disgorge from the elevators.

Some of the boxes - with legs - were wet but the water poured off of them. There was every kind of material inside. One box contained a half-dozen brains. Another was filled with vintage stuffed animals, several that waved as their box-transport passed by Philip Greengrass and Amelia Bones.

A mirror, also on animated legs, emerged from the elevator.

A collection of desks made their way carefully through the carnage.

Every item or device under the sun emerged from an elevator or walked off the stairs.

Amelia pushed herself against the still rumbling walls of the Ministry.

She watched the procession. She cataloged some of what she saw. Chairs with legs. A massive box with five oversized, talking portraits. Glass-fronted cabinets crammed with books. A bed frame, no mattress, that was swirls on top of swirls of iron.

Amelia eventually turned to see where they were going. The answer astounded her: into the green flames of the floor. Where could they be going? What could be driving all of this?

She watched and wondered until a box crossed the Atrium and stopped at her feet. Its little legs disappeared and became just a box.

She took a step away. The box didn't follow.

She took a careful inventory and immediately recognized several of the items. Things her father had crafted and enchanted. Things willed to her. Things retained by the Ministry. They were now resting in front of her.

She snatched up the box and began digging through it.

A necklace that enabled one to get into the second, deeper level of Bones Manor, a space that had been lost to her since her father's death and the Ministry rabble came for his possessions.

She, herself, had joined the Ministry in order to see how she might recover some of these possessions. Of course, her good intentions died as she got deeper into her work and higher up on the ladders of responsibility. But she had wanted all of this back.

A second box stopped at her feet. She set down her father's belongings to look in the new one.

Her things from her office. What the Aurors were supposed to have delivered ten minutes ago. All her office belongings including several rare tomes she'd had on her shelves. Her picture of her niece, another of her late brother and parents. The frames in silver and gold filigree, quite valuable heirlooms. She'd expected that all of it would have disappeared

on her.

She waited until the exodus of boxes and items on animated legs ended.

The building gave one more tremendous rumble.

She stacked one box on top of another and made for the still-functioning floos.

"Bones Manor."

She disappeared.

Philip Greengrass could hear people yelling on the higher levels. Through the hole the crabapple tree had made he could see people from above looking down on the Atrium. He could feel more rumbling throughout the building.

He wasn't taking the blame for this. No way.

"I quit," Philip Greengrass said.

He walked to the Floo. Tomorrow he'd go and apply for the most worthless job he could find on Diagon Alley. Let the Ministry fall to pieces. He was tired of being hit in the head by crabapples and chunks of stone bigger than bludgers.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

At the end of dinner at Hogwarts an odd thing occurred. A box full of books and fancy quills walked into the Great Hall and made its way over to the Slytherin table.

It plopped itself down behind Draco Malfoy. The boy was slow to catch on but people sitting next to him pointed out the new arrival.

Malfoy twisted and stared into the box. "My grandfather's quills."

The boy then proceeded to loudly describe each one of them, when his grandfather had purchased it and where. What kind of animal it had been plucked from. No one sitting near the blond was listening.

Harry did, for a while.

He supposed he should have known that his actions would benefit people he didn't like.

Harry didn't like the little Malfoy. However, it was the older one - the leader of an assault on the Dursley house, for one crime he'd committed - who Harry was ready to battle.

It was a good evening's work. The Ministry further battered in a very public way. Its theft ring at least temporarily ended.

The public return of all of the things the Ministry collected would cause an uproar. Individuals knew things had been withheld from them. How many guessed at how systematic the theft was? Now they would know.

Each box or large item walking on little legs through the floo to its rightful owners.

All the chances of muggles seeing boxes walking on legs was going to keep the Ministry tied up for a day or longer. They wouldn't have a chance to keep people from talking about this feat of magic or the acts of theft that necessitated it.

People would get what they were owed under wills and testaments. Years or decades late.

That might just drive Yaxley and Malfoy and that collection of the rancid leavings of society to do something more toward inflicting fear on the society.

Harry had little at risk now. He hoped their anger wouldn't fall too hard on another person or family. He wanted the Malfoy-Yaxley group to expose themselves, their whole organization, so that Harry could scrape up as many of them as possible in one instant.

Not let them recede back into malignant hiding.

Harry watched more boxes walk in. Then a few pieces of furniture. Some to Hufflepuff, one to Gryffindor, three to Ravenclaw. If his plan was

right, they'd exited the Floo in Hogsmeade and made the walk up to Hogwarts.

Harry wasn't expecting a box for himself. Two arrived for him.

He looked down, ignoring Snape's impromptu speech urging calm and quiet. Harry dug through one box. None of it was his. Especially not the wand at the top of the items. Harry had his wand on him. But there was a wand in the box. Another in the other box.

Ah.

Tears sprang into his eyes.

A box of James Potter's belongings held back by the Ministry. Another of Lily Potter's. Both of which were meant for Harry. Both of which had been denied him without his even knowing.

Harry was a lot more interested in these boxes once he placed the contents. He took care and some reverence looking through them.

He finished a survey of both boxes before he looked up. The walk ways between the tables were clogged with walking boxes and furniture. The area around Slytherin had more gold leaf than the other tables. But each table had a shocking amount of items being returned.

Harry hadn't expected this when he'd built his enchantment. He hadn't known how deep the theft went, for how long. He was sad. He was angry.

He had also never been quite so happy.

Things owned and treasured by his parents.

Another box stopped in front of him.

Five minutes later, two more.

He got up from his seat and moved to the back of the room. The boxes regrew legs and followed him. God he loved this enchantment. He thought the leg-growing ability might just last for weeks, if not two months. If only people realized they could think a command to the boxes

and make them follow along.

Magic was excellent.

He was less enthused as the night wore on. Harry was collecting a stack of the boxes. A very large stack. It seemed that every twentieth box through the door sought Harry out.

Belongings from his grandparents. Great-grandparents. Great uncles.

Second cousins whose names weren't even Potter. All of this now came to him because Harry was the last of the line.

He walked outside the Great Hall. His boxes trotted behind.

A few others, like Neville Longbottom and Susan Bones, were forced to do the same. Harry had a sizable stack of materials coming his way. He was already back to belongings from people who died in the 1720s.

He was trying to get things in some order. Harry was the new owner of at least nine pensieves, the construction of which Uncommon Magics said was incredibly taxing. No wonder they were rare these days. The Ministry must have been sitting on a thousand of them. Unable to sell them, unable to use that many. It was just some damaged bird that flew after every bit of sparkle, dragging every glint back to its nest, never letting a bit of it go.

Harry saw a line of desks enter the castle. Two of them broke out of line and began heading to Harry.

It was going to be a long, wonderful night.

He was going to bring down every brick of the Ministry, too. But on his schedule. When it would hurt them the most.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

That weekend Harry did his walk through the forest. Sirius was waiting for him at the Shrieking Shack.

"Do you know how insane my family is?" Harry asked.

"Hello to you, too."

"I'm talking insane."

"I knew your father and grandfather. That's all," Sirius said. "They were good people."

"Okay, let's talk five generations back."

"No idea."

"Well, I can say for sure that they didn't invent time turners."

"That's good. Right?"

"No, they got interested in them after the first models were crafted. I own seven second generation models and four third generation time turners."

"That's a bit much." Sirius grinned. "I had quite a few of those walking boxes track me down. I was under wards when they almost crashed through the door. How did you design your tracking component?"

"It's not a spell."

"They found me just fine."

"It's a desire," Harry said.

"You've explained all this before. I still don't understand."

"Raw will?"

Sirius stuck out his tongue. "A better answer?"

"That's the best I can say."

"Well, could you have left the boxes after boxes of house elf heads in the Ministry? Apparently, the House of Black only bothers to mount the very best ones. The rest get bequeathed."

Harry squirmed at the idea of a box of elf heads. Why the House of Black would pass them on? Why the Ministry would hold them back? This hoarding mentality wasn't just the exercise of power by a bunch of the weak who feared everything outside of themselves. There was something else going on to make sense of all this thieving.

All these magical items...

Perhaps the weak were simply afraid of magic or magical items in any form? Did stealing magical items also steal magical potential in some way?

Harry would continue to think it over, just as soon as he managed to stop pondering boxes and boxes of house elf heads.

"What'd you do with them?" Harry asked. He thought this might help put the image out of his head.

"Buried them. What do you do with your house elf heads?"

"I didn't get any." The Potters were crazy about time turners, not about chopping off the heads of their dead servants. Harry preferred his family's kind of craziness if those were the only two options.

"Want some?"

"I thought they were all buried."

"I might have gotten tired after box seven."

Harry laughed.

He and his godfather set to walking inside the fenced yard of the Shrieking Shack in Hogsmeade.

"Anyway it was great. I can't imagine how loud they must have screamed there."

"It's fun to fight terror with whimsy," Harry agreed.

"You've used enough magic to dig a new Ministry building in this whimsy. It's serious magic, Harry."

"When it's this fun, it's hard to think of it as work."

"They'll be angry about this wizard they can't find. You're a person, but you're also a symbol."

"I know what's coming."

"Assume it will get worse."

"You're right."

"So..."

"Yes, I had an ulterior reason asking you here."

"Which is?"

"Would you mind returning to Ottery St. Catchpole?" The location of the Crystal Tower.

"In my dog form, you'd be shocked by how much liquor I can tolerate."

"Try to stay sober a bit. You'll want to watch."

"If you say so." As if watching a feat of greater magic wasn't worth laying off the pool of free booze.

"What will this part do?"

Harry weighed how to explain this to Sirius. "You expect them to attack me?"

"Yes."

"I think they'll also get around to the tower itself. This is some incentive to do that."

"Oh?"

"It also gives the Tower...let's say, some defenses."

Sirius laughed.

"Remus was cagey like this whenever he contributed something impressive to a prank."

"This is more than a prank."

"What is it?"

Harry wouldn't answer the question. Not yet.

"Can you go today?"

"Well, in between my busy social engagements... Yes, I can go today."

"I think the Ministry just might pay the location a visit. They'll be nervous."

"About something that walked from the building?"

"No. The items still there."

In Dumbledore's handwritten book, there were several references to objects of power. Objects of binding, like the Goblet of Fire. Also objects of compulsion. Objects of restraint that might be used on prisoners. Objects designed to break wards, others designed to bring down the walls of castles.

Harry expected that those objects, built by Ministry workers over the centuries and paid for by Ministry galleons, were still under Ministry control. For now.

But they'd be worried, Malfoy and Yaxley and the others. The new question: Would these precious enchantments also grow legs and toddle off?

Someone somewhere was making the decision to use these weapons before they lost these weapons.

It was a good part of the reason Harry had settled on looting the Ministry. Returning everything to the people who deserved the items was just a wonderful bonus.

"You're not going to say," Sirius said.

"You want information, get your canine self a good viewing spot."

"Fine. Another goblet?"

Harry pulled a piece of parchment from a pocket.

Sirius snatched it away. "House of Magic?"

That was the only thing written on the parchment.

"Just slap it onto the structure. Outside, inside, it doesn't matter."

"But what will it do?"

"Be sure to stick around. I expect a full report."

Harry turned and began walking back to the forest.

"Harry!"

Harry just laughed.

He knew his godfather would get him back, but that was a bit of fun for the future.

He was still trying to guess about Malfoy and Yaxley. What, where, who, and when. The why was clear enough.

He tried to enjoy the walk back, but the trees couldn't compete with the things on his mind.

When he burst onto the grounds, Harry was slow to notice.

Also slow to see several Aurors on the grounds. And one familiar face.

Yaxley, the man who'd murdered the Dursleys, stood near a tree, between Harry and the castle. He lit up when he noticed Harry. He raised his hand and waved Harry over.

"Mr. Potter, I am glad to run into you. Do you remember me?"

Murdering Petunia Dursley. "Yes, I do."

Harry thought the battle had come much earlier than expected.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

A/N: Yes, another cliff hanger.

5. Magic Is Possibility

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Chapter Five (Magic is Possibility)

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Harry tugged on his robes against the wind that just struck up. He was standing on the Hogwarts grounds facing a murderer.

"Were you looking for me?" Harry asked.

Yaxley, a senior figure in magical law enforcement, shook his head. "No, actually. I am supervising a team of Aurors."

A supervisor. A figure of the law. Harry knew the man to be a

confederate of Lucius Malfoy. He and Malfoy had murdered Vernon and Petunia Dursley in order to force Harry under Ministry protection. That was some law.

"Has something happened?"

"No, nothing at all. It's just a precaution." The man smiled. His teeth were, if anything, more rotten in the light of day.

"There was this much activity when that man broke out of Azkaban..."

Harry had to work not to smile.

"The Sirius Black case? No, nothing like that. This is just a precaution."

He's said the word twice. Obviously Lucius Malfoy had driven it into his head with some force.

The man wouldn't be moved to do a thing unless it benefited him somehow...so either his target was at Hogwarts. Or Lucius Malfoy was up to something else far away from Hogwarts.

Harry began to walk away. The man hadn't come to pick a fight. Harry wasn't going to do a thing to this man in the light of day on the Hogwarts grounds, several Aurors moving in and out of view.

"There was a further development in your aunt and uncle's case."

Harry was surprised to hear the man say that. Harry had seen a magical recreation of this man murdering his aunt.

He paused and turned around.

"Did you find them?" Harry asked.

"No. We were copied on a report from the Mud-...the Muggle police.

Apparently your cousin, one Dudley Dursley, disappeared from his boarding school? Smellings?"

Yaxley and Malfoy were thorough. Harry hadn't thought they'd go to the effort of tracking Harry's cousin. They had.

Harry hadn't even thought to warn his cousin. He should have. He'd

underestimated Malfoy and his team.

"Smeltings," Harry corrected.

"Correct. He disappeared from his school."

Harry took the news hard. He had no particular love for Dudley, but the young man's death felt like it belonged at least in part on Harry's shoulders. He'd done nothing, not even written that he'd heard Vernon and Petunia were missing.

"Did you go there to..."

"Certainly not. There was no magical spells recorded in that area. The Ministry of Magic did not respond. I'm informing you of a report I came across."

Harry wouldn't be going to Smeltings to look for evidence. He could imagine what had happened.

"Well, thank you for telling me."

Yaxley didn't seem to want to fight. Harry did, but not in front of a half dozen Aurors within shouting distance.

"Have a good afternoon," Harry said as he turned back toward Hogwarts.

"Hold up, Potter. Perhaps we should have a longer conversation."

Harry did stop. He turned. He kept a watch out the side of his eye. There were witnesses, Ministry witnesses. Perhaps they'd help Harry if Yaxley did something. Perhaps they'd been selected by Yaxley because of their ability to reinterpret what was legal and what not.

Harry was in a familiar, safe place feeling as unsafe as he ever had.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Lucius Malfoy had always been a thoughtful person. Not nice, by any contortion of the word. Not pleasant. Ambitious, but there was no crime in that. He had set his family's fortune on the virtues of tradition.

He had been worried about tradition ever since Halloween 1981. He was

more worried since someone had defaced the Ministry and erected a glimmering tower in the countryside. Malfoy had no doubts both were connected.

Lucius had delivered the post of Minister of Magic to another, a minor bureaucrat, but few in the upper echelons of the Ministry didn't know that Malfoy controlled everything. For this next action he was undertaking, he had weighed his own involvement over the course of many days.

He'd decided to shed some of the caution he'd shown up to this point.

He was at the head of a group of Aurors, a large group, everyone not assigned to Hogsmeade, Hogwarts, or Diagon Alley.

They approached the monstrosity on the hill after they'd Floo'd to Amos Diggory's house. They could have just apparated, but the Ministry was cautious about powerful magical sites. No one knew just what might happen when two forces - the site and some wizard apparating onto it - collided.

Sucked for the Aurors who were tasked with dragging along the relics and the enchanted items they'd rescued from the flooded floors of the Department of Mysteries.

By the time sunset came, that tower would be in pieces on the ground waiting for a team of Ministry wizards to study the magic used before they vanished the destroyed rubbish.

Malfoy looked at the lead Auror, Proudfoot, not one of his crowd.

However, the wizard followed orders he was given. The Ministry - guided by Lucius Malfoy's hand, tongue, and coin purse - had decided this tower had to go. The Ministry had approved the use of ancient relics and enchanted objects.

There would be no problem accomplishing it. Even with Proudfoot in

charge of these Aurors.

Malfoy had himself appointed as Ministry Observer. A good role as he intended to do none of the work himself. As befit his station.

He had only come because he wanted to see some of the relics in action.

Some of the books in the Malfoy collection discussed the things the Ministry had secreted away. It would be worth something to know how the devices worked. Particularly if they were ever turned against the Malfoy family in some future generation.

Malfoy looked at Proudfoot. He nodded at the man.

Proudfoot barked orders to his people. This device had to be a certain distance from the tower. That device had to be elevated off the ground.

Another one required its components be set up in the shape of a hexagon.

All these fiddly details. Proudfoot had done his preparation.

Malfoy stood well back as the work got under way. He walked around the roughly horseshoe shaped staging area called for in the plans.

He stopped at the oldest of the relics currently approved for this operation. The ward suppressors. If the wizard behind this tower had enacted passive protections into his building, not that those who had surveyed it for the Ministry had detected any, these three enchanted stones would keep the wards from coming into power.

The four Aurors working with them knew what they were doing... Well, Malfoy had no way to confirm that. They weren't asking questions. They weren't asking for help. That was something, wasn't it?

He assumed they knew what they were doing.

With what Malfoy and the deal-makers of Malfoy's father's generation had done to Ministry, perhaps he should be more concerned.

He nodded at the men working the fiddly bits. Perhaps it would give them some confidence, whether merited or no.

Malfoy walked to the smasher. Once it was started, the last of all the devices they planned to operate, it would lob magical bolts at the tower until they broke off the peak. Then they'd work down, all the way down to whatever foundation the monstrosity might possess. They'd blow it right out of the ground. They'd go deep into the ground if they had to pull up every last support.

Symbols were far more deadly to a man with a plan than real opposition. The Boy-Who-Lived had caused more problems for Malfoy as a three-year-old child hidden in the Muggle world than the boy had after he'd arrived at Hogwarts.

Malfoy was excising this symbol, this tower, early.

Malfoy walked away from the devices. He noted the witches and wizards visiting the site had been corralled off to one side. Wouldn't they get quite a show?

The daylight was beginning to thin. He wanted these wizards to hurry up. If they were going to bring down this affront today, Malfoy wanted to see it happen. He didn't just want to hear rock smashing down on rock. He wanted to see the crystal falling.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Harry stood on the Hogwarts grounds. Yaxley was looking at him, perhaps weighing whether he needed to wait until Hogwarts ended for the term. He'd already made it clear he was going to use Ministry rules to scoop Harry into some form of Ministry-appointed guardianship now that Petunia and Vernon Dursley were 'missing.'

"Tell me, Harry...," Yaxley started. He looked and paused and drew out the silence a moment.

Harry wished he could read minds, but he didn't need the skill to read this man's.

He was weighing, considering.

Harry was also considering.

He was a powerful, if young, wizard. He believed he could take one wizard, any one wizard. He wasn't sure if he could take more than seven, the number of all the Aurors within visual distance of Harry and Yaxley.

"...what kind of guardian do you think will be best?" Yaxley finally asked.

Harry wondered why the man wanted to know. It was obvious Harry wouldn't last long if he let this man, and his partner Malfoy, organize anything.

Perhaps he wanted to know what Harry would want...to ensure Harry got exactly what he didn't want.

"I haven't thought about it."

"At all?"

"Not really, sir."

"That surprises me. Severus, Headmaster Snape, says you've matured.

This is one place where maturity would be most appropriate."

"Would you think clearly if you were told your guardians had disappeared - or would you prefer not to think about it for as long as you could manage?"

"You're not wrong, but you should be careful of such a sharp tongue.

You'll need friends in the Ministry."

This wasn't a straight threat. Was Yaxley seeking a bribe of some sort?

Harry would never consider it, unless the requested bribe was a spell straight to Yaxley's rotten teeth.

"Perhaps."

"Yes, you've been alone for a long time, Mr. Potter. Now you're alone again. It's a difficult world to float in. There are waves, big waves. Long waves. Sudden storms. It's not that many orphans that manage to float for

long."

Harry was out of patience.

"What are you asking?"

The man smiled. "Yes, a sharp temper. As I was told. Perhaps not as mature as you were supposed to be. Keep a civil tongue on your head."

He left unstated this threat. Or I'll see it ripped out.

"If we have nothing else to speak about..."

"I haven't dismissed you, young man. Stand right there."

A petty man, a murderer, who enjoyed the torments he could inflict.

Harry was ready to turn the man into moss. A bit obvious. A lot problematic, trading in one very obvious problem for perhaps a far larger one.

When would he ever be able to get Yaxley on his own? A nice fight witnessed by no one to put the maniac down.

"You will have a hearing at the Ministry the day you ride the Hogwarts Express. Important people will discuss your situation and make a decision. Where you're to spend your summer. You need to think of what you're going to say, what you're going to request."

"Who is on this hearing board?"

"I am."

Malfoy, too, Harry guessed.

"The head of Wizengamot Administration. Several others."

Perhaps every Death Eater who worked for the Ministry of Magic?

"I'll think about it."

"You won't often have such a critical meeting in your life."

He wanted to see Harry sweat.

Harry wanted to see the man buried alive. Or perhaps hit with the dehydration spell he's used on Aunt Petunia. A Muggle would have had

no defense. Harry would like to see this man struggle for his life and lose.

"I understand," Harry said.

"Good. Run along."

Harry didn't hesitate a second. He didn't run, of course, as that would have suggested fear. He walked, a fast walk, back to the castle. He kept his eye on the Aurors about the grounds. He still didn't know why they were here...

Unless the Ministry was already trying to take on the Crystal Tower. Soon to be the House of Magic. Harry smiled.

He arrived at the castle and turned around. He wouldn't know for some time what the precise results were. But he might be able to judge by how these Aurors reacted to calls for assistance. Distress calls.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Sirius, the big black dog, was late. Very late.

He had the piece of parchment Harry had given him in his mouth. After he ran through the brush around the Crystal Tower, Sirius skid to a halt.

The Ministry was already here. Damn. He wasn't 'very late.' He had missed the deadline completely. He could blame it on Harry who hadn't given him enough time. But... But Sirius hadn't come straight here, had he?

No.

So, Sirius would leave it at the idea that he was very late. He wouldn't bother filling in just why, or why he was a dog that smelled so strongly of perfume and expensive wine.

He tried to see his way clear to the tower. He guessed he was lucky that the wizards running the show hadn't ringed their devices around the entire tower. There was a narrow window near the back of the structure...

Sirius jumped and almost barked when one of the devices started. A huge bolt of lightning slammed into the tower. The ethereal spire cracked and shattered.

Damn, Sirius was way too late.

Harry was a much better reader of people, even incomprehensible groups like the Ministry, than even Sirius had given him credit for being.

He set off on a run parallel to the tower, curving around through the undergrowth until he could approach the tower without being seen.

He just hoped he could time things so he wasn't at the tower when the next bolt struck. There must always be a next bolt, right? There must always be excess danger to the hero, even a four-legged pedigreed mutt.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

"More men," Malfoy howled. His blood rushed. He could care a damned house elf about propriety at a moment like this.

The first bolt had been impressive. But as the tower got closer to its foundation, it was a damned sight more sturdy. The bolt that worked on the little wisp at the top wouldn't do shit as they got down a few dozen feet.

Proudfoot nodded. He rearranged his men. He assigned thirteen to the smasher. That was what records of old indicated was the proper number. Of course they'd been stronger in previous centuries before all the mud-, muggleborns were allowed in, marrying in to the old families, diluting their purity.

Thirteen modern wizards might work. It might not.

Lucius wondered if the Ministry had held back any stronger devices? He knew they'd kept back a few stronger wizards. They might have to be compelled to join in even if they weren't Aurors.

"Malfoy, we're out of men. Want to help out?"

The device was a stone with four arched, metal handles protruding out of the top. This was the device they'd had to get six feet above the ground, so it rested on a rickety, conjured wooden platform. Malfoy couldn't see how he'd cling to the thing and get his hand on a handle.

Proudfoot was already up there, organizing. He wasn't contributing his magic. Yet.

"Get on that thing, Proudfoot. I'll yell out a countdown."

Proudfoot scowled. But he did as he was ordered.

"Aim it ten feet below the last blast."

Proudfoot took the lead on making that happen. It wasn't a fast device. It wasn't an easy device. The thing just worked.

Perhaps he'd get to see them succeed with this blast. Perhaps he'd see them fail. Might they troop back to the Ministry and return with a more powerful artifact the next...

What was that?

Lucius thought he saw a blur of black near the side of the tower. His head snapped to look at the tower. He'd thought he'd seen something the color of a Dementor's cloak. Lucius carefully examined everything. He saw no Dementor. His busy mind wasn't busy enough. It had time for tricks.

There was little Lucius feared so much as a Dementor.

"Blast two, are you ready?"

"We're set," Proudfoot called back.

"Three, two, one, fire!"

They did whatever they needed to. The device fired a substantially larger bolt at the tower. It struck...and absorbed into the crystal.

The entire building began to coruscate with the captured energy.

Lucius knew enough about magic to obey the nervousness he felt. He backed up. He paused. He backed up some more. Some might say he was

running. He would say it was mere prudence.

Others saw him.

Others began jumping from the conjured platform.

The first lance of lightning from the tower obliterated the conjured platform. It blasted the men into the air. It dug a trench underneath which the heavy device fell into.

Malfoy watched the wizards not only flying through the air, but changing. Becoming less solid. Becoming frozen. Becoming the same material as the tower itself. They were crystal wizards with veins of silver and gold rather than blood.

Further lances of magical potential shot out and hit every other manned artifact or relic. Those wizards, those Aurors, flew through the air and became clear, solid, unmoving.

Lucius Malfoy ran. His grand idea, for now, was smashed.

He ran toward Diggory's house, perhaps the only survivor of the debacle.

The tower had allowed itself to be hit once. It didn't permit a second attack. It knew how to protect itself while hiding that it could protect itself.

Now the Ministry would have to determine how to bring down the tower and reclaim its fallen Aurors.

As he ran, he thought to signal for help. He recalled the contingent at Hogwarts. The ones at Hogsmeade. He didn't send up the signal for the ones in Diagon Alley.

There was going to be a lot of discontent in very short order.

Malfoy ran and thought of the warding scheme on his manor. He'd bring it up to full power shortly after returning. He'd sit behind his wards and let this chaos work out its fury.

He could send letters to the Ministry for the next year until the world

settled.

A Malfoy protected himself first, his family second. The rest of the world was mere target for plunder.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

The big black dog hadn't moved from its spot opposite where the entry inside the tower existed. He just looked at what had happened. Slowly the magic that rippled along the surface of the crystal slowed, became less violent, then drained away.

Sirius tried to take in what he'd seen. He'd dropped the parchment Harry gave him against the crystal along the back of the foundation just moments before the second blast. His view had been obscured by the veins that ran through the tower, but he'd seen enough, heard enough, felt everything he needed to know. The tower caught the second attack. None of the crystal exploded.

His fur was still standing on end. He'd felt the energy cascading over the structure.

He looked up where the tip had once been. The building hadn't regrown what was destroyed. The disfigured tower looked more distinguished.

It had seen battle. It had survived mostly intact. At least Sirius hoped Harry would see it that way.

Almost all the noise from the other side had ceased.

Sirius knew he'd need to make a full report to Harry.

He stuck to the bushes when he looped around the tower. He stopped when the first clearish figure came into view. No, not clear. Crystal.

Sirius noted that the devices they'd operated had also turned to crystal.

He tried to take in as much detail as he could. The men, hands raised, faces locked in pain or horror, were in a grouping around the furrow in the ground. Some were on their backs on the earth. Some were standing

or in the pose of a runner. There were carvings on thin pedestals that erupted from the ground.

Sirius concentrated on the pedestals for a moment.

One man's said, 'Thought He Controlled Magic.'

Another: 'Hated The Beauty of Magic.'

Another: 'Refused To Understand Magic.'

Sirius shivered before he continued his route around to the front of the tower. There was no one here. Any of the onlookers must have already departed carrying fear and tales and shock.

Sirius felt confident enough walk up to the opening. He noted there were words now etched into the crystal. "House of Magic."

So that was what the words on the parchment had meant. The tower defending itself would terrify the Ministry. These words appearing on the tower would infuriate it. They considered themselves arbiters of magic, the House of Magic. The Ministry would regroup and be back. Sirius wondered if there would be new figures standing in the crystal garden outside?

He traipsed on four nervous legs inside the tower. He could see that the floor was dirty and gross next to the pool where the free alcohol flowed. But the crystal all around the pool where Sirius had swum off the wear on his body, the damage to his mind, the havoc inside his own magic - that crystal flooring was clean, unused, almost spotless.

No one had figured out what the Crystal Tower - no, the House of Magic - could do. Sirius wondered if they would learn. Or if the ones not scared off would only venture inside as far as the hooch.

He hoped Harry could make this place stand up to its new name.

Sirius had tarried long enough. He ran outside and into the bushes and beyond them. This place was fiercely magical. He'd get far, far away

before he attempted to apparate. He didn't fancy a dog or a new human in the semicircle of statues.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Harry watched Yaxley scrambling to gather up his forces. He'd been on a tear for five minutes. He was still on the Hogwarts grounds so he wasn't that good at organizing things. Still trying to find some of 'his' Aurors who had wandered off.

Harry wondered what exactly had happened in Ottery St. Catchpole. They'd been faster out the gate than he'd expected. He thought he'd have another day or three.

Harry kept a confused look on his face, rather than a smile.

Sirius had come through. The tower had come through. Harry hoped there were pictures in the paper tomorrow. He hoped the Ministry had been excessively stupid. Not just risking its people but some of its collection of powerful enchantments. Very old devices cobbled together with runes and potions and rituals. Things that no one today knew exactly how to create.

The present magic was a more formal magic. The magic back then a lot more intuitive, like what Harry had done at Number 4 Privet Drive. Just having a feel for what magic wanted him to do in order to accomplish his goals.

There was no formula to recreate the magical items the Ministry might have risked. No way to remake a Goblet of Fire, although that had been done by a group of wizards using relatively formal magic. Definitely no way to recreate things much older than the Goblet.

He looked out. Seven minutes or more since Yaxley got a communication.

He was still under the Hogwarts wards.

The man was good at yelling. He wasn't good at securing compliance.

Harry both hoped and feared that the man might become so angry at the House of Magic he'd lift his wand against the tower. Harry wouldn't mind Yaxley turned into a statue. Harry would rather make it happen where and when he could watch.

"Harry?" Hermione asked.

He turned a bit and smiled at his friend. "Yes."

"What are you looking at?"

"The future of the Ministry of Magic."

Hermione joined Harry at the door. She looked out and saw the red-robed Aurors looking as competent as a first year assigned to lead the seventh years in Arithmancy.

"Not making a good impression."

"Well, we could hope they were always this incompetent."

"Did you have a hand here?"

Harry smiled. "I think I did."

He and Sirius did. Perhaps Harry would tell Hermione later. He didn't know how she might react to the permanence of what he'd done. No more stunning. No more hints and gestures. Harry was going to build a garden of evil so that no one would ever forget. Ever.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

One might have mistaken the Great Hall the following morning for an apiary of bees bringing in news of vast new discoveries of flowers. The individual words of people speaking competed and turned into this kind of low, insistent buzzing that echoed in the vast space.

All thanks to the Daily Prophet. The editor and writers were nervous, that much was clear by the quality of the reporting and the quantity of pictures they ran. They were bowing and scraping towards power, toward greater magic unseen in the Isles for centuries.

Trying to cement favor with the creator of the Tower, now renamed the House of Magic.

Harry sat at the table and read the front page being held up by another student.

He looked at the pictures.

Forty-seven statues in his garden. He hadn't expected so many, not yet.

He picked at his eggs. His mind more interested in thinking than in fulfilling the demands of his unhappy stomach.

He thought about Yaxley. Malfoy. He also thought that he was getting distracted and angry at horrible symptoms of a much larger problem. He was attacking the Ministry in ways that made it ridiculous. He attacked its employees. He hadn't yet worked out a way to attack the mentality that drove all this insanity.

How does one change hearts and minds?

He could use the force of an oath gained under duress. Naturally, he loathed that option.

He could imprison the wrong-thinking types. He hated that almost as much as the oaths.

He could force them to change. That was impossible. The idea hung around in his head even though he knew there was no power on earth to make a person give up what he believed until his beliefs changed from some internal-seeming decision.

So, he couldn't force people to change.

Might he trick them into changing how they thought?

The House of Magic was supposed to have been awe-inspiring. Now, in order to protect it, he'd made a thing of horrible power. Perhaps some might be curious about the days of old, about greater magics.

What else could he do along the lines of tricks. Convince a person it was

his own idea to give up long-held beliefs?

Harry had no ideas, as yet.

He just knew it was a critical question for him to consider. It might take years or decades to come up with something. He needed to handle the immediate problems much sooner. What to do the day the Hogwarts Express arrived in London?

Harry scooped some eggs and found them rubbery and cold. He dumped them back on his plate and reached out for a scone. There was honey butter and two different jams. He made something of a game of mixing and matching the flavors.

His mind was vastly unsettled. It was churning up and over and around a problem.

Perhaps there was an equally hard problem he could substitute for changing hearts and minds. Perhaps there was a way to unravel and invalidate oaths and binding magic. If Harry couldn't change the people, change the tools and weapons they were able to wield.

People were people. They were their habits and unlikely to change them.

So Harry needed to work on ways so that the habits might no longer work. The habit of enforcing an oath through magic. The habit of playing with dominance magic like the Imperius.

Harry could do nothing about mental laziness, but he might be able to dull or destroy the tools necessary for that kind of horrible laziness.

Harry shook his head and popped more scone in his mouth.

Changing the tools was as hard, if not harder, than changing the minds.

They were connected. If people had no desire to dominate, there would be no domination magic.

However, the two questions were different in one way. One was a question of changing the makeup of a bunch of minds. The other was a

more technical question about how to spike or damage, over a wide radius, the ability of a few bits of magic. They were both hard. One just seemed a touch less hard.

Harry had no idea where to start.

Perhaps with the secret books he possessed. He'd never thought of the broader problem he faced in just this way. Perhaps a rereading of what he possessed, with a view toward this question, might find him a starting point. Even if everyone else considered it impossible, Harry thought that deconstructing domination magic had to be easier, technically, than tricking the bigoted into changing their minds.

If he had sufficient confidence that he could do this, Harry thought he would find a way to do it. This wasn't just building an enchanted tower or making a jungle grow inside the Ministry. This was re-writing existing magic, voiding and canceling it.

Harry couldn't make the arbiters and enforcers of the law enforce the law fairly. He could remove their most horrific tools for defiling justice.

What he contemplated was true greater magic. In a sense, unthinking a thought. Unmaking something that already existed.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Harry stuffed his book and his notes into his bag. He tucked his wand into the holster he wore on his forearm. "You beat me again," Hermione whispered with some pride.

"I'm not a dolt."

"I prefer this Harry to lazy Harry."

"I don't think I was lazy. I just didn't have a good idea that I could do more than I was doing."

"I think that's a part of lazy," Hermione said.

"I call it misinformed."

She laughed. They walked into the hall together. Headmaster Snape was standing just outside the door.

"Potter."

Harry remembered the last time Snape had wanted to speak with Harry.

There was a lump in his stomach. Sirius?

"Granger, Potter will be with you later." It sounded slightly better than 'get lost,' but not much.

Snape tore down the hallway. Harry had to trot behind to keep up. Harry knew where they were going a while before he got there. He just didn't know why they were going there.

"You will undo what you've done to this wall..."

Snape pointed to the one-time entrance to the Headmaster's Office, the one Dumbledore had been the last to use. Harry, in a fit of pique, had blocked off the entrance some time ago.

"I'm a fourth year student. How would I do this?"

"Potter. I told you that I listen to the Hogwarts wards. I was aware when you did this."

That Harry didn't believe. If his body were chopped up and stored in little sample jars, Harry might have changed his mind.

"It was an acceptable and sly form of punishment. I did not object. In fact, I deserve worse, I suppose, for my years spent playing a particular role."

Harry just pulled his wand, made some random motions, and pronounced a made up phrase. "Ghool Da Driel."

The stone blocks that had melted to block off access to the formal Headmaster's Office retreated. The way was opened once again.

"The Headmaster's portrait has awakened. He wished to speak to you."

"If it's in there..."

"He is there. Along with the other portraits. I understand there was a rather spirited round robin to get the message out and off to me. A portrait in there had another in St. Mungo's. That one passed a message to a portrait in the Ministry on one of the above-water floors. And so on. And so on. I believe the Headmaster awoke several days ago. I just received his summons today."

Snape sounded unhappy to a significant degree.

"Will you be moving your office..."

"No. This is a very out-of-the-way space. I prefer an office that the students pass on a regular basis. I might accidentally talk to a dozen of you a day. I wonder how many decades it was since Dumbledore could make the same claim."

There it was again. Harry was sure that Snape hated Dumbledore. Harry had plenty of curiosity, but he lacked the bravery to stick his head in a dragon's mouth or ask Snape a deeply personal question.

"Do you know what he wanted to talk to me about?"

"I do not."

Snape spoke a password, the name of a sweet, and the stairs twirled them up a floor. It was impressive magic but it was also imposing. Perhaps Snape was right to prefer a different office space.

Snape opened the door, ushered Harry in, but did not go in himself. As if he were the son of a beloved man who'd died, a man the son couldn't stand.

Another mystery regarding Snape.

Snape closed the door and walked back down the stairs. Harry was alone with the dozens of portraits.

"Harry?"

"Professor Dumbledore."

Harry walked to where the portrait was on the wall. He craned his neck to see that high. Finally he climbed up on the Professor's desk and was able to look eye-to-painted-eye.

"You're younger than I expected."

"Oh?"

"I last updated this portrait the summer before you started Hogwarts."

Harry nodded, disappointed. That was long before Dumbledore had written the book he'd given to Hermione. The book called 'Power.'

It had started Harry on his journey to oppose oath-magic and dominance magic and the Ministry. It had helped settle this part of Harry's life, give him a framework to understand the world, give him a purpose. It had also helped to push Harry into a secret war against the Ministry and several of its more dangerous representatives.

He would never get to ask Dumbledore about the book. This portrait couldn't possibly remember what had been done long after it had been imprinted.

"Did you receive the books I left for you in my will?" the portrait asked.

"Yes and no."

"Ah, the Ministry holding back items."

So Dumbledore did know. He'd been a part of the Wizengamot and had done nothing to end or curtail the practice.

"You could have helped with that," Harry said.

"Not the way my oaths as Chief Warlock were worded. I was a figurehead, at the command of the majority vote of the Wizengamot."

Harry thought there had to be more subtle ways to work his will. Hell, if he knew a particular wizard were going to introduce a distasteful piece of legislation, Dumbledore probably could have done something indirect to make sure the man missed the meeting.

If attacking the front door doesn't work, look for a window, a way into the basement, a way through the roof.

"You don't believe me."

"I think whatever oaths you spoke were possible to work around."

"They've been refining them for a couple hundred years."

Harry shrugged. He found that he'd desired to talk to Dumbledore since the man's passing, but being here with an avatar of the man made the desire dissipate.

"Politics is something I never got to teach you?"

"No."

Harry didn't know the Headmaster still taught students.

"What do you understand of magical combat?" the Headmaster asked.

"Not much." Hogwarts didn't teach much, if anything, of that discipline.

"Good. Then you'll listen. Magical combat is out of the reach of at least 70% of witches and wizards. Mentality is some of it. Spell proficiency the next largest chunk. The last is magical strength. So wizards with some magic, but not enough or not the right kind, engage in other kinds of battle. Politics. Battle for the weak and witless."

"I'm friends with a person who reads a lot. I've heard of Machiavelli."

"I was more alluding to Clausewitz, but each culture does rediscover similar ideas."

"Why did you ask to see me?"

"I had thought I would live longer. I don't suppose you know how I..."

Died? "No, sir."

"I understand that you still have to face Voldemort."

Dumbledore and his hinting and implying.

"You want to know how I'm preparing?"

Harry wasn't about to say he already had Voldemort in his homunculus

form thrown to the bottom of a well he couldn't escape. He couldn't die, but boredom, cold, and pain were all feelings available to him.

"Yes."

"I may be convinced to tell you."

"Good."

"But I have a question of my own."

"Ask it, Harry."

"What did you do to Snape?"

"Professor Snape?"

"He's been completely different since your death."

"Why do you assume I had anything to do with that?"

Because Harry had been studying the kinds of oath-magic Dumbledore had warned him about.

"Call it an educated guess."

"Perhaps the oath I took from him..."

Harry hated that he'd been proven right this time. "You made him swear an oath."

"Before he commenced teaching here, yes."

Dumbledore had told the truth, but not all the truth.

"I know that your future self abhorred dominance magic. You yourself hated these techniques."

"Yes, I do, or did. Did we ever discuss oaths?"

"In a way."

"How curious. In what context?"

"It doesn't matter now, sir."

"So, it is possible that Severus Snape is now a different person because my oaths binding him are released. Yes, it's possible. I didn't think the wording I had him swear was that intrusive..."

The laws of unintended consequences. "Know that the oath was more intrusive than you thought. I don't think he cares much for you."

"Why do they only tell you these things once you're dead?" the portrait asked.

"Can't say."

"So, Harry, your Voldemort issue..."

"I did promise you an answer." Since Dumbledore had spoken some of the truth, but not all, Harry felt he should return the privilege.

"I would like to be of help if I could."

"Well, there was something odd that happened to me not so long ago. I was told about a bit of magic happening somewhere and I so went there and could feel the magic lingering."

"This wasn't at Hogwarts, I take it."

"Assume as you wish."

"Continue," Dumbledore said. Or demanded.

"I was there at this spot. I could feel the lingering magic. I pushed my own out to see if I could feel..."

"You pushed your magic out?"

"Yes."

"Not in a spell, not with your wand?"

"No."

"Interesting. What happened?"

"Well, I had a...sense, I suppose, about a better way to form my magic. A different way to push it. It worked. I saw a replay of what had happened at that spot."

"Something bloody?"

"Yes."

"Voldemort."

"His people, but not him."

"You weren't..."

"I was well away when the danger actually happened." Although the attack was meant to later impact Harry quite hard. Act I of a bloody, five-act play.

"I've never had this happen to myself."

That was disappointing. "I see."

"But I was a reader in my prime. I think. Yes, third shelf."

Harry turned to look where the portrait indicated along one of the office walls. "It's empty."

"Lay your hand on the third shelf. I suppose I knew all too well about what the Ministry was, what it did."

Harry jumped off the desk and walked to the shelf. He put his hand on the third shelf from the bottom.

"Now push in."

In?

Harry pushed his hand forward. He heard a tiny click. A panel just to his right flopped open.

"Is that a muggle lock?"

"Yes. Isn't it great?"

Harry moved the panel out of the way. There were two books stashed back there. Harry wondered what they were. He also wondered if he needed to test out all the other shelves in this office for more hidden caches. Wouldn't that be rude?

"Pull them both," Dumbledore said.

Neither had a title. Harry took the books and closed the panel. The seams blended in so that Harry couldn't see where they were. Real artistry in cabinet making or illusion magic? There was so much other magic in this

room Harry couldn't tell.

Harry climbed back up on the desk with them. "They're about what happened to me?"

"Not exactly," Dumbledore said, not exactly answering the question.

"So..."

"They're about intuitive magic."

"I've never heard of it."

"Most wizards and witches don't believe in it. They have no problems with children and accidental magic, but they can't quite believe in intuitive magic."

"Is that wandless magic?"

"Definitions vary. What these two books agree on is this: sometimes in need or sometimes when planning something large and grand witches and wizards have flashes of inspiration. They ditch the established formulae. They come up with something that few if any others ever manage to replicate. It wasn't magic as the theory suggests it works. It was some other kind of magic."

As unhappy with Dumbledore as Harry was, he still found himself nodding. These books could be very helpful.

"Thank you."

"If you have the other books I left you, I assume you know how to hide these."

"Yes, sir."

"Come and see me again if you have questions. Remember, Voldemort was halted in his progress. I do not believe we have seen the last of him."

"I believe you, sir."

"Do you dream of him, Harry?"

"No."

"No? No, that's good. Thank you for coming. Persevere with the books.

They're dense, but they may well help you."

"It's a precious gift."

Harry got off the desk, looked at the vacant, large perch where the headmaster's phoenix once rested, and left the room. Headmaster Snape was at the bottom of the stairs.

"I don't wish to know what you discussed," Snape said.

"We had a helpful talk."

"Good. I will also pretend I don't see you carrying two books out of his office, an office reputedly scrubbed of its books."

"Will you see him?" Harry asked. Perhaps pushing further than he should.

"In time."

Snape made a crisp turn and shot down the hall, as if he had a desperate appointment on the opposite side of the castle, as far as he could get from Dumbledore's office.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

It was late before Hermione finished her revisions for their upcoming exams. Harry was doing his although as a former Triwizard Champion he was still technically exempt from needing to sit them.

Better to know and not need...and all that.

He watched her shove books into her bag. She might be ready to chat for a few minutes.

"Sit," she said. She was on a couch. Harry was at a desk a few feet away.

He could revise surrounded by a dozen books as she seemed able. He needed a flat surface and a single book open and something to write with.

Harry cleared his own mess and sat next to Hermione.

"Did you notice that even Ron is preparing for exams?" she asked.

"You're an excellent bully. It only took you four years to succeed."

"Well, you said three things to Neville and he's been grinning like a loon."

"He has magic, a lot, I'd say. He just needs to remember he has magic and he needs to not fear it."

"He'll get there." Hermione looked around the common room which was now mostly broken up save for a few clumps of people talking to each other. "So talk."

"So obvious, am I?"

"Like a favorite book."

"Dog-eared pages and all?"

"Very much so."

Harry smiled.

"So what did Snape want?"

"It's what Dumbledore wanted."

"Oh, his portrait awoke?"

Harry tried not to be surprised when she put things together at a frightening pace. Still, he was usually surprised. "Yup."

"He said what? Obviously you want to talk it over."

"Well, he mentioned, in passing, just why Snape was so mean for so many years."

"Did he?"

"Dumbledore took an oath off him."

"Really." Her mood had gone flat, perhaps even sour, just that fast.

"I didn't ask the terms. I just asked how he could use a technique he hated when applied to himself. He didn't have a good answer."

"Do as I say, not do as I do."

"Yeah."

"Was there anything useful?"

"We talked about the ghost-scene I watched on Privet Drive. Have you ever heard of intuitive magic?"

Hermione looked puzzled a moment before she was distracted. As if she were paging back through a few hundred volumes she read from the Hogwarts library. "No," she said finally. "I don't think so."

"He gave me two books to read."

"How..."

"Yeah, he's dead. Still full of secrets even if he's dead. Don't forget that."

"Have you..."

"I've started. The one I picked up first is old. Very old."

"You want some help?"

"I think so. Maybe I can push a bit more tonight and give you one tomorrow?"

"Keep it secret?"

"Yes, I think so. Dumbledore hinted the books wouldn't be popular if the Ministry learned of them."

"I can. I want to help, Harry."

"Good. Thanks."

"A summary so far?"

"It's like a long diary entry. He's talking about some miracle of magic he performed in order to save his daughter from some magical plant that bit her."

"Bit her?"

"Yeah, I'd never heard of it. A bit shocked Sprout doesn't have two. She likes the dangerous ones. A bit like Hagrid that way. Dangerous plants rather than dangerous animals."

"Well..."

"Second year. Mandrakes. Could have killed us right?"

"Yes. Then there was the Devil's Snare. But we were breaking rules..."

Harry laughed.

He got off the sofa and walked away. "I'll have one for you tomorrow afternoon once you're free."

"It sounds fine."

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Harry didn't notice when he stopped reading and started sleeping. He couldn't even tell he was dreaming when he awoke. He was in his bed in Hogwarts. He got up, put his book away where he kept his other sensitive volumes. He wrapped himself in a robe. He walked down to the common room. The fire had sputtered out. He walked out into the main portion of the school.

He found he didn't know where he was walking. He just had to walk.

He left the castle.

He left the grounds.

No one saw him. No one noticed him. No one stopped him.

He apparated near Ottery St. Catchpole. He saw, for the first time with his own eyes, the tower he had crafted. The House of Magic.

He continued walking.

He climbed into the water pool inside, not the alcohol one. Once he was floating in the water in his robe, Harry felt there was someone else close by. He twisted in the water. There was a young woman. She moved, but her skin in the moonlight wasn't like human skin. It was clear in places, in others silvery or golden. Like the texture of the House of Magic.

Exactly that texture.

"Who are you?"

He was surprised he'd asked the question. He hadn't thought the question. He hadn't made a conscious decision to ask the question.

"I never liked to sleep, Harry."

He wanted to ask her if he knew her. He couldn't open his mouth.

But then he knew. He just knew who this was.

This was the magic he'd invoked when he'd crafted this tower. Or, more correctly, awakened. She'd put on a more human form, with a face that lacked a lot of clear distinction and a body that was mostly translucent. This woman who had summoned Harry here was magic or an aspect of magic.

"I'm sorry I took so long to wake you," Harry said.

"Don't be. I'm glad to be in the world again. Please make sure I can remain that way for some time."

"I will."

She walked over to the entry, to the new words cut into the crystal. She touched each letter and Harry thought he saw each one sparkle briefly.

"This is now the House of Magic. Anything difficult someone wants to do will be easier here. The pool you're swimming in will restore a person.

You are experiencing it just as your godfather already did. Some reason people seem more interested in the other pool. I just don't understand the people who call on me. Better a restored body than a bit of tipsy..."

"I didn't mean to presume."

"You called it House of Magic. I allowed this to happen. I was glad to make it happen, Harry. Thank you for giving me a home. Now I will see people, few at first, come and attempt difficult magic here. Heal a sick person: just float them in that bath. Already it's washed away the taint of death upon you, restored the brittleness and thinness of your body. Now a wizard or witch can come and more easily express their intentions and that should be enough to allow me or my sisters to craft it for them."

Harry wasn't asking these questions. She was. She was using his mouth to

ask what she wanted him to ask. Harry was supposed to learn. The books Dumbledore had given him, that he'd asked Hermione to read, were useless. This was the lesson he needed.

There was no intuitive magic. There were only magic users who were able, or willing, to listen to magic. It knew how to do all things. Perhaps this avatar was right. One need only ask.

"If people misuse it..."

The woman looked out the opening to the crystal garden, the Aurors turned into a collect of crystals. "You settled on the punishment already."

"I was angry at what I thought they might try."

"You were correct. I like my home. I want my home to remain. I approve that these men who attack magic should find a place forever in the Crystal Garden."

Harry swallowed some of the water in the pool. It tingled and burned as it went down his throat. He could feel the healing, the changes to his body.

"I want an end to magical oaths," Harry said.

"Then work for it."

"Can you help me?"

"I will help anyone who asks, Harry. My first thought is that some oaths are necessary."

"It's the surprise nature of them that angers me."

"Yes. People fighting each other by lying to each other. Tricking each other and forcing magic to bind up people in ways they didn't intend."

"It won't be an easy line to draw."

"Almost impossible. Doesn't mean you shouldn't start."

Harry floated in the water for a while before he noted that the avatar had gone. He realized he wasn't dreaming. He wasn't asleep. He was here,

now. His body was healed.

He touched his forehead. He couldn't feel his scar.

He was healed.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Harry wouldn't know for some time, but magic didn't just live in the House of Magic. He wasn't the only thing magic began to heal. The trees began growing taller, stouter in the Forbidden Forest and the few other magical preserves in the British Isles.

Hogwarts changed, its stones gleaming for a few minutes, their age and dirt and grime diminishing. Even the ghosts became a touch more solid. Diagon Alley changed. Old magical houses changed. The house elves throughout the country changed. All just a little bit. Not even noticeable as yet.

Everything that touched magic or was touched by magic began to change. She was waking up once again. She was curious and interested and hungry to see what had happened over the centuries. Some things amused her. Some considerable number angered her. Some just confused her. Some made her take a tiny bit of action. Along with a plan to take more action on each of the subsequent evenings. People wouldn't notice most change if it was gradual.

She cloaked even that much. No one would notice a thing until she changed her mind. Magic preferred grand surprises. Let people wake in a few months to find that everything they knew about magic was different. The trees, the plants, the land, the buildings, the creatures and beings. Even the spells.

Magic was awake. She was going to remain awake for quite some time.

She had missed so much.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

6. Magic is Temperamental

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Chapter Six: Magic is Temperamental

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

A/N: I realized after posting chapter five that I introduced a bunch of unexpected complications into the story that I will need to handle. I had previously planned, and posted a note, that chapter six would be the end of this story. I have to retract that comment. There are a couple more chapters to come. (I expect people who've read this far into the story are heart-broken that there will be more on the way.)

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

The weekend came and Harry ventured through the Forbidden Forest. It was quieter than it had been. Something was shifting in here. Harry wondered if it had to do more with spiders than centaurs. He hoped he wouldn't find out this particular trip.

He made it to the Shrieking Shack, the building he'd turned into something of a jail house. He unlocked the rickety gate and was shocked when he saw dozens of boxes standing on little legs around the well. How did they get inside the fenced, locked backyard?

Magic. Some form of magic Harry didn't know or anticipate. As much as he learned there were still vast swaths he was ignorant about.

He looked at the well where he kept Voldemort. There was nothing wrong with it. Harry tugged at some of the possessions in the boxes. He looked at quite a few and identified things from the Slytherin family and another called Gaunt. Lots and lots of things kept away from a man who later went on to become a dark lord.

He left off his examination of those boxes. He looked at the tilting, leaning building behind him. He wondered about his other guest, the rat

Pettigrew.

Harry opened the door to the house and had trouble making it into the basement. There were more boxes on little feet near to where Harry kept Pettigrew.

Harry shouldn't have been surprised that the Ministry stole from even the evil people of the world. It was equal opportunity in how it dealt with everyone; poorly and cruelly.

Perhaps Pettigrew's sister, once the Ministry librarian, had diverted books meant to pass to her 'late' brother. She was the type of enjoy a mean trick of that nature. Perhaps all of her former colleagues were of her caste or worse. Pettigrew or Yaxley or somewhere in between, prerequisite number one to work in the Ministry.

Harry poked through several of the boxes that clustered around Pettigrew's cage where he slept as a rat. More books and magical objects. Harry never saw any gold. The Ministry knew how to spend that.

It was a shame to horde the rest. What the Ministry retained could have been something for a young wizard making his way at Hogwarts, like the young Tom Riddle. Something of a family he never knew, something to give a person a past and hope for a future.

It could have meant a lot to an undecided young man named Pettigrew before he'd tossed his choice to the Death Eaters.

The Ministry had betrayed even them and later had been almost sunk over the rage in the attacks by Voldemort and his Death Eaters. Cause and effect. Harry let the feelings of sympathy for Pettigrew and Voldemort linger a moment before they dissipated. They had been wronged but had done much greater wrongs themselves.

Harry walked out and looked at the well where Voldemort was imprisoned. He'd come here to speak to the one-time dark lord. But Harry

had changed his mind. These boxes finding him and Pettigrew now made Harry somewhat more than nervous.

If boxes could find them what about other enchantments? Other spells?

Could a Death Eater stumble across this well?

Harry thought the answer wasn't no. It might even be a firm yes.

He hadn't actually been here to talk with Riddle in quite some time, hence why he was surprised by the boxes on little legs. Perhaps it was time to make a permanent end to the dark lord. Harry stood and blinked. He had come here to talk to Voldemort and now he was thinking of how to get rid of him.

Harry shook his head. Where had that come from?

He had no idea. He half thought it wasn't his own idea. No, it had just popped into his head and stuck. Harry was fighting to make the idea go away.

He was sure now. It wasn't his idea to finally take care of Voldemort. The homunculus was completely contained. It would never escape the prison Harry had fashioned. Why did he have this overwhelming urge to do...something?

A force had pushed the idea into his head. A compulsion of some sort.

If there was one thing to make Harry angry it was compulsion and binding magic. His anger spiked and his ability to think crumbled.

He fought the anger down. He took a moment and tried to get his breathing back to normal. Lack of control wouldn't do him a bit of good.

He hadn't been cursed. No one else knew about Voldemort in the well, except for Snape who might have guessed. But no one knew. Harry hadn't seen anyone today who could have tampered with his mind...

Now that he had a moment to reflect he had one idea about where it had come from.

Magic. A silly idea.

But he thought of it. It was now an insistent idea in his head. It was almost like the Magic wanted Harry to know, wanted the credit.

Yes, it did want the credit. Harry now understood that clearly. The House of Magic had just made a suggestion in his mind over how to handle Pettigrew and Riddle. This was more than just magic having an active dialogue with him. No, not magic, instead Magic, with a capital M.

It seemed to insist on that.

Very unnerving how it just rummaged around inside his head. Harry had only had that kind of unnerving interaction with the Sorting Hat before.

But that time Harry had been able to convince the Hat of what he wanted. This time Magic wasn't taking suggestions.

She - Harry didn't know why he thought she, save for the first appearance he'd seen of Magic's form at the House of Magic - was a lot more demanding.

Once he got used to the idea that he and Magic were speaking, he calmed a bit. He'd just have to be more careful, wouldn't he? What were his ideas? Which were the ideas that came from outside his head? Yes, if he knew that much, Harry could continue to make good decisions.

He considered his Riddle and Pettigrew problem. He considered the requested solution. Harry smiled at the idea, in fact. He wouldn't need to continue coming to the Shrieking Shack if he listened to the whisper in his mind.

He levitated all of Voldemort's boxes, tucked them inside the derelict building near to Pettigrew's. He canceled the legs that could get them up and moving. Perhaps he would just donate all of this material to a good cause. Did wizards have charities?

Harry had no clue. Maybe Hermione would know.

He took his time sealing the house up. It might be some time until he returned. The end of term was almost upon him. Then he'd ride the Hogwarts Express and have his showdown with the bigots and murderers at the Ministry of Magic.

Harry looked at the Shrieking Shack once more. He'd have to come back in the fall to deal with all the boxes, get their contents new homes. He felt a twinge of guilt, that he would be doing to Pettigrew and Riddle what the Ministry of Magic had done to them.

Of course, the feeling passed.

They had cost him his family, his childhood. They were both dangerous wizards who would do more dangerous things if left unchecked.

Disposing of their belongings was...well, it wasn't horrible. It was necessary.

That wasn't my idea, Harry thought. Yes, it was, another part of Harry thought. There was a war on in his mind and he was sure he had already lost.

He pulled up the crystal sphere into which he'd trapped Voldemort from the bottom of the well. He let it drain before he clutched it in one hand.

He could hear Voldemort choking and coughing and sputtering out swallowed water. Enough to kill a person, not anywhere near close enough to kill a homunculus.

In the other hand he grabbed up the cage in which he kept Pettigrew in his rat form. Harry apparated to the Crystal Tower. The House of Magic. The intensity of the...suggestions in his mind increased. The House of Magic was quite happy he'd come, quite happy at what he carried with him.

He could feel a pressure in his mind, instructions for how to plant the two new permanent additions to the Crystal Garden. Where exactly they

were to stand. None of it related to the magic of making a crystal statue.

That the House of Magic would take care of.

Harry looked at the place a moment. There was no one else here. Plenty of evidence lots of people still came, even after the spike of terror at Ministry wizards being turned to crystal.

Harry could see trampled grass and the like.

But for now, for at least a few minutes, Harry had the place to himself.

He had the sense that the House of Magic had cleared away the people who'd visited just so Harry could do what the House of Magic wanted.

Unease returned to him, but it didn't last long.

It didn't go away naturally, Harry thought. Yes, it did, the other part of Harry responded.

Harry walked to one end of the 'horseshoe.' He set the rat's cage on the ground and opened the door. Pettigrew ran for it. Once his feet touched the ground, two things happened.

His animagus form failed him. He began to grow large.

His skin went translucent with hints of silver and gold.

Half-man and half-rat became a permanent addition to the garden.

The pedestal on which he rested said, "Traitor to Magic."

Harry thought it fitting, but also horrible. At least Pettigrew would never hurt another person. Happiness hummed inside Harry's mind. It wasn't his own happiness, but something alien living in his mind.

He walked, with the crystal sphere in his hand, to the opposite end of the horseshoe.

He set the ball holding the Riddle homunculus on the ground. Before Harry could crack it, the whole thing began to change. The ball broke on its own. The babyish Voldemort grew as he went translucent. He didn't become human, rather a hybrid of man and snake. He looked more

terrifying than the drawings Harry had seen of the wizard in the few books that had dared to print them.

The pedestal read, "The Only Magic He Loved Was Death."

Voldemort was defeated for all time. Harry should have been happy. The emotion that lived inside his mind was confusion accented by a small part of glee, savage glee.

Harry was angry at doing all this, at something else dragging him here. It was right that Voldemort was no longer a danger, but Harry hadn't liked being controlled by the Goblet of Fire. He definitely had no love for the House of Magic living partially inside his mind and issuing instructions to him that he couldn't refuse.

He looked the half-man, half-snake. It was awful, the stuff of a nightmare a person would spend years forgetting.

The Magic inside Harry loved it like an artist adores a particularly gruesome, but personal, expression of art.

He had the impulse to head inside the House of Magic. This one he gave into without a fight. He walked inside and felt it was different, far different from the last time he was here, perhaps a week earlier.

He noted that the crystal had begun partitioning itself into different rooms, like a house might possess. There seemed to be chairs growing upwards in different places. Along one wall there seemed to be shelves large enough to hold books. It was a different place, more refined and beautiful.

His anger softened a bit. He also recognized he wasn't softening it. It was that something inside him.

"I've done what you asked," Harry said.

This time there was no human-shaped woman to talk with him. He merely felt a bit of happiness ping a response in his head.

"Why are you talking to me in this way?" It was less insulting to ask that question than 'why are you living in my head?'

"I promise to come visit you here. You don't need to stay with me all the time."

The Magic settled into his mind for a good long stay. Harry received a poke that he should look at everything before leaving.

He felt compelled to examine the emerging shelves flowing out of the crystal. Perhaps that was an unsubtle hint to Harry and the other people who came here. 'I've made the shelves, now bring me the books that will make this place attractive to witches and wizards.'

Harry had the inclination that he would bring the Pettigrew and Riddle books here.

No, he thought. You wanted a charity, here it is, another part of him said.

No. He relaxed. He still knew he was going to donate the Riddle and Pettigrew materials to the place where they were 'buried.' Magic had a charity in mind and it wasn't going to let Harry make a different choice.

He calmed himself. He agreed. He felt the pressure of the Magic relent.

Harry heard people coming toward the area. He was being released from this place. Whatever Magic had done to get the people to leave it had released. People were returning.

He tapped the sleeve of his robe and he vanished from sight. The magic was different from how his invisibility cloak worked, but it was natural enough to him now that Magic told him things, made him do things.

Useful things, horrible things, flashy things.

Before he made it outside the House of Magic, Harry heard a scream.

Someone must have found the Voldemort statue. It really was terrifying.

He apparated away and vowed he wouldn't return. He knew it wasn't a promise he'd be able to keep. The Magic inside his mind would have its

way again.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

The rest of the week passed in an unhappy blur. One thing made it tolerable. If Harry did boring things, the Magic that lived inside him didn't pay him much mind. It was still there, but it's attention went elsewhere in the world. This aspect of Magic was easily bored.

So Harry concentrated on being boring.

He read the books he'd gotten from Dumbledore's portrait. No help. He hadn't even been able to make sense of what Dumbledore had said about intuitive magic. Harry began to suspect that the House of Magic had been helping Harry even before it was a house. It had just been magic and had wanted someone to build it a house.

Harry spent little time thinking about Magic (too irritating) so he'd prepared for year-end examinations.

He still hadn't told Hermione what had happened, what morass of bad luck he'd managed to fall into now.

Perhaps it was time to do so.

How was the question. Would Magic pay close attention if it liked the words Harry used? Did it make a difference if Harry spoke about his concerns versus writing them? Would Magic make a second home inside Hermione's mind if Harry opened up the secret to her?

He didn't know.

In all of his agitation, he hadn't even thought of his impending hearing at the Ministry. It wasn't far off now. When he did think of the Ministry, Magic uncurled a bit in his mind. He could feel it was angry, defensive, protective of Harry.

That was a tiny wedge of comfort against a large chunk of anger he felt at the violation.

He looked up and saw Hermione inside mounds of books. He walked over to her and pulled over a chair.

"Trouble with Potions?" she asked.

"I'm doing well with Professor Peele." Snape's replacement hired by Snape but nothing like the old Snape in the personality department.

"So, what has you stumped?" Hermione asked.

"You want to take a break from your books?" Harry nodded to the common room exit.

"A break from my books?" Hermione leaned over her table. "Don't listen to him, my books. I love each one of you. I always will." Hermione patted several volumes and stood up. "I'll return for you. Have no fear."

Harry was glad that Hermione had something of a sense of humor at a time like this. In years past, she was a wreck right before exams. "Not going to pack up?"

"I charmed the books immovable by magic. Unless a person wants to pack them off by hand, these will all still be here when I get back.

Considering how lazy most wizards are... They'll be fine. Why don't we take a walk around the castle?"

It was no surprise Hermione could read Harry's mood. He found he didn't mind when she did it. He did mind Magic paying him undue mind.

They made it out of the common room and began wandering. Once they found a corridor that was otherwise unoccupied, Hermione nodded for Harry to start.

"I think I've made a huge mistake."

"Adding Voldemort to the Crystal Garden was dramatic, but I wouldn't call it a mistake. The Prophet still doesn't believe it's him."

Harry hadn't told Hermione any of that, but she still put the pieces together.

"Magic is alive."

Hermione stopped walking.

"What?"

Harry tried to make himself feel uninterested in the conversation. He needed to keep the Magic inside his mind dozing. "It's alive. It was sleeping before. I think I woke it."

He spoke quickly, ramming his words together.

Hermione looked baffled but she started moving again. "The crystal tower - or House of Magic?"

"Yes."

"How do you know it's alive?"

"It's inside my head..."

"Oh, Harry." She didn't doubt him. She was sad for him, unhappy for him.

"One thing after another."

"I think it went back further. I don't know how much further."

"You're saying it put Voldemort in that garden?"

"Worse. It made me put Voldemort in that garden."

"How?"

"Irresistible compulsion magic."

"You could feel it?"

"Like it's another lobe of my brain."

"It's inside you?"

"It's listening. But I'm trying to make this feel like a boring conversation.

It's got a short attention span."

"At least there's one weakness."

Harry heard that and realized it was important. He had to tamp down his excitement. He'd been doing this as a survival technique without realizing it could be more. It could be the way to handle the problem

entirely. Just keep his mind on an even keel, keep the magic from finding him interesting. Do ordinary, boring things. Wither Magic by being unmagical.

"Thank you," Harry said.

"Did that help? You already knew it."

Harry nodded. "You gave it the name 'weakness.' I'd been thinking of it differently. You helped."

"Well, words are powerful. What's it feel like? In your mind?"

There was the curiosity he'd come to expect. So he told her about the discomfort of having thoughts in one's mind that weren't one's thoughts. Having something worse than an oath applied to him. Having a greedy force inside him, pushing him, almost mocking him.

Hermione listened. She didn't know what to do and said so. Still they spent the next thirty minutes wandering the castle, talking. Harry came to no great new insights, but he'd also managed to keep Magic at bay. It hadn't found even a spark of interest in what Harry and Hermione talked about.

He couldn't guarantee Magic hadn't been listening, but it seemed a short-tempered thing so far. It didn't seem to be able to plan. It had a notion and then planted it in Harry.

So far nothing. Hermione had helped Harry with no cost to herself. There were small favors still in the world.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

The exams were over. Harry had done well, though he heard a lot of grumbling around the Gryffindor table. Harry picked at his sandwich a moment. He kept looking away from Ron. The boy had been at school for four years now and he was still basically unable to eat at table.

He was a good friend to Harry, but Harry wished the boy would learn

how not to put others off their meals. There was plenty of food. No one was going to reach over and steal what was on the serving platters. There would be more than enough. Trying to out-compete five older brothers at the dinner table had left Ron needing to relearn a lot, yet unwilling to start.

"There's plenty of food," Harry said.

"Ib huggry."

Harry took that to mean, 'I'm hungry.' Unfortunately there was quite a bit of food in Ron's mouth at the time.

"I'm going to look over here."

It turned out Neville was sitting beside him.

"Good exams?" Harry asked.

"I think so. I actually did okay for Defense."

"Well, I finally got my problems with Potions sorted."

"Not me," Neville said.

Hermione sat down across the table. She was still frazzled from the tests which Harry was sure she'd aced.

"You did fine," he said.

"Maybe. But I'm worried about Arithmancy... Ronald, could you stop trying to shove three chicken legs in your mouth at the same time."

"Nuh."

Hermione scooted down the bench so she was further away from the sight.

"I've forgotten all about why I so concerned."

"Like an Obliviate spell," Harry said. "Except you remember him eating."

"Hey," Ron shouted. More than a little food flew out of his mouth.

Then he went back to eating.

Hermione filled her plate. Harry noticed she didn't take any chicken.

Harry let Hermione babble on about several wrong answers she was sure she'd submitted. She was more tense after the exams than before them this year.

She was a funny girl.

Neville tried to reassure her. Harry didn't. He knew Hermione just needed to speak about her doubts and work through them.

Harry realized he was having fun listening to Hermione complain and trying not to watch Ron eat. So ordinary, so simple. Merlin, some days Hogwarts was so wonderful. Harry had come to appreciate these moments more and more.

In fact, Harry would admit he was plenty happy. He hadn't felt fresh urges from Magic in quite some time, more than ten days. He had three days left before he needed to commit to a method for handling the Ministry people after him. Malfoy and Yaxley and their ilk.

Of course, the Ministry was about the least popular institution these days.

Harry could almost stand to read the newspaper again. The Prophet couldn't write enough articles about the contents of the walking boxes, what some new family had had returned to them. Who had gotten what? How far back had the thieving stretched. The story still had legs weeks after the mass breakout from the Ministry.

They'd found a vein and were pumping adrenaline right up it.

The general apathy among the witches and wizards of Great Britain had taken some time to dissipate. Now it had, but in a limited way. People cared about boxes of trinkets decades or centuries old. Harry had looked for something to rally people and found nothing, but this he'd stumbled onto. Who knew people could get so angry about a box of old books?

Harry wished people cared more than just about their possessions. He wished they'd extended their anger into some impetus for changing the

Ministry. It was still all spouting of anger and steam venting. No one had proposed a thing about the ending or changing the secret practices.

No, their concerns were more narrow. The Prophet reported that people were digging 'probated' wills out of old records and trying to ascertain how much gold the Ministry might have diverted into its own coffers.

The official tax rate was very low, but if the Ministry took whatever gold might reside in a dead wizard's residence...well that might just pay for a low tax rate. This unofficial estate tax might just be the biggest secret the Ministry had kept - for centuries. The Ministry had no way to break into Gringotts to do the same, but with the way some families regarded goblins there could have been millions of galleons hidden in homes over the years.

The other major topic in the paper was the back-and-forth about Voldemort and Pettigrew. Someone on the Prophet had dug up the citation the Ministry had made in giving the rat an Order of Merlin. People were actually asking if Pettigrew had even died in the early 1980s. People had even written in to wonder about Sirius Black.

Wonder of wonders. Wizards thinking.

People thought the Voldemort figure might be a statue. Others thought it might be the dead wizards missing body. Lots of letters from every kind of insane viewpoint, none of them as crazy as what the real answer was. That Harry kept to himself.

Visits were up to the House of Magic. That had probably helped Harry out with his mental problems. He had a sense, though he couldn't say how he had the idea, that this aspect of Magic was very...vain. Into itself, its aggrandizement, into people venerating it and visiting it and praising it.

More and more people had gone to the House of Magic. The Prophet had

printed a picture of the growing magical library there, people were visiting and donating. People were touring the Crystal Garden, impressed at what they saw. Had they already forgotten they were people? Had they left off their horror so easily? Or was Magic living in more than one skull?

Harry felt some responsibility for that particular horror, the Garden. He had come up with the idea. He had given the House of Magic the idea even if it had already possessed plenty of power to carry it out.

A mistake, a huge mistake. He tried not to think about that. The good he'd done being weighed against the bad. The benefits he'd gotten - his freedom from the Goblet of Fire, for one - versus what price he had paid - the voice of Magic that lived in his mind and sometimes planted ideas and made Harry carry them out.

Harry was glad enough for the Prophet's flip-flopping. Now it was driving people to visit the House of Magic. The vain Magic that dwelled there and in Harry's mind lapped up the attention. He wanted Magic distracted. He wished it were three times as vain.

"Harry, pass me the Brussels sprouts."

He blinked and did what Hermione asked. He looked into the bowl. They were boiled. No thanks. Harry didn't care for boiled sprouts.

"Planning an end of year prank?" she asked with a smile.

"Leave me out of it," Neville said.

"No pranks. Not my style." Just look at how well the Crystal Tower / House of Magic had gone. Harry had unleashed some kind of monster and now dupes of the Ministry were forever turned to crystal.

No, Harry thought he might be out of the pranking business...

Although. He did have upcoming Ministry troubles.

"Puttaty."

Harry looked at Ron and wished he hadn't.

"What?"

The boy swallowed. "Potatoes, please."

Harry reached for the bowl and moved it toward Ron. He served himself most of a plateful.

"How do you not weigh twenty stone?" Hermione asked.

"I'm growing. Up, not out."

"You were cursed with a vanishing charm in your throat?"

"Nuh."

Ron was already eating again.

Harry transitioned back to asking Neville about his exams. Of course, the more he talked about them, the less confident he felt.

Harry ate a bit and thought of a prank he could play on the Ministry. Not for laughs, but for securing his life.

He felt something waking in the back of his mind.

He turned and watched Ron eat for a couple of minutes. The Magic in his mind went back to sleep.

"Thanks," Harry said.

"Whu?"

Ron opened his mouth and some of the potato almost fell out.

"Nothing. Go back to lunch."

"You're strange, Harry."

"Yes, I am."

What kind of prank? Harry tried not to get too excited. He just needed to make a plan without alerting the dangerous part of his mind. Not so easy to do.

Nothing violent, he decided.

Nothing that captured bystanders. He would have to do it on the

platform or very early in the visit to the Ministry...if they even escorted him to the Ministry. He couldn't count on his enemies doing what they said they were going to do. So, it had to be the platform at King's Cross. Or perhaps the platform in Hogsmeade if they came for him earlier. Always be prepared.

There would be families at either site, though more at King's Cross. Younger children coming to help collect their older siblings. Mother, fathers, uncles and aunts who weren't miserable people, grandparents and great-grandparents.

Harry had to be very careful with whatever he did.

In fact, Harry only had a couple of bad choices available to him for when the train arrived on Platform 9 $\frac{3}{4}$. He didn't like any of them, but he would sooner do it than turn himself over to be tortured or murdered. He wouldn't be able to unravel the Ministry or its abilities with oaths or its penetration by evil people. All that was a far longer project, perhaps requiring one lifetime or more than one.

"Harry, you've dripped gravy all over your tie. Aren't you paying any attention?" Hermione asked.

"None," Harry said. He didn't think he'd put any gravy on his plate. She pulled out her wand and vanished the mess. Then she applied a cleaning charm. She was thorough.

"Thank you. Now I was thinking we could go to the library after you're finished pouring sauce over your clothes..."

Harry smiled. Neville laughed. Hermione had the innocence of an angel on her face.

Worry could come later. Now it was time to be ordinary a bit longer. A few months earlier in the year and ordinary would have seemed a let down. He had had missions to accomplish. Now Harry wondered about

the costs he was accruing.

No more. For now he was a student. The Ministry and rather pesky Magic could wait for him. It was time for ordinary fun.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

"Did you pack?" Hermione asked.

The Hogwarts Express ran the next morning.

"Yes, Auntie Hermione."

"I'd hope I wasn't your aunt. The things I've heard about the one you already had. It's not wonderful to speak poorly of the dead, but I might make an exception in her case. You don't think of me that way."

"No," Harry said. "Just a joke that went splat."

"Well, you push back when I'm being too pushy. Promise?"

"Alright."

There were times when he liked a little Hermione mania.

Harry was feeling even better than he had in the last two weeks. He finally had a solution (temporary) to his Ministry problem. It should be enough to protect Harry and not endanger anyone else, at least not permanently.

"You coming Ron?" Hermione asked.

"I'll be the first one there." He was out the door as the last word filtered back into the common room.

Hermione looked to Harry. "Whichever end of the table he takes, I say we go to the other side."

Harry smiled and nodded. Let someone else see Ron's performance.

Maybe the twins, perhaps Fred and George could encourage their little brother to better behavior.

A bunch of people spilled out of the common room but Neville, Hermione, and Harry walked a bit slower than the others. They'd all get

to eat at the same time. What was the rush?

"I've never seen the floor look this clean," Hermione said.

Harry looked down. He hadn't noticed before, but, yes, something was different about Hogwarts.

"You should see Greenhouse Four," Neville said. "It's like they replaced all the glass in there."

"I wonder how..."

Cleaner places, more beautiful places, then there was the strangeness in the Forbidden Forest. Harry had an idea, a good idea, where the change was coming from. Magic wasn't just living in the House of Magic and inside Harry's head. She was apparently also spiffing up Hogwarts and the Forest. Merlin only knew what else he/she/it was doing.

Harry kept his realization to himself. He had kept a lot to himself this year. But he had barely scratched the first layer. Harry was having quite a bit of difficulty weighing how to do various things, trying to guess at what might happen if he did A versus B. He didn't want to be a thoughtless Dumbledore, very smart but very stupid. Trampling on people in his attempt to help them.

For now Harry had three things on his list. Get out of the Ministry's trap. Figure out how to quiet or tame this aspect of Magic inside his head. Work on the hearts and minds of the average wizard - or at least the more coercive tools wizards and witches had available. Make people want to be better people.

Not a shy sort of to-do list, was it?

Harry looked at the rest of Hogwarts. He spent a few moments trying to test out the magic of the place. It didn't feel as...musty as it once had.

He nodded. Perhaps Magic lived in Hogwarts, too. He, she, or it was a very busy entity with all too many home.

Harry shivered as he walked.

"Keep up," Hermione said. "Getting lost again?"

"Just looking at very clean stones."

"Yeah, it's pretty strange."

Hermione hadn't, as yet, connected up their conversation about magic being alive with the changes inside Hogwarts. If she didn't make the connection, Harry would clue her in. But after the Leaving Feast.

The sound coming from inside the Great Hall greeted Harry on the second floor. By the time they were at the door, it sounded like the Quidditch World Cup rather than Hogwarts.

Harry wondered why everyone was talking.

Then he stepped inside the room and he knew.

Headmaster Snape was wearing silver and black robes. His hair wasn't greasy. He actually had a smile on his face. Harry was about to point all that out to Hermione but she waved him quiet and moved them down to the end of the Gryffindor table nearest the head table, well away from where Ron would be demolishing bowls of food.

Hermione looked up at the Headmaster. She shook her head. Harry listened to what people were saying around him.

Some of the Ravenclaws were exploring the idea that Snape had been Imperiused. Or that he'd botched a potion and inhaled the fumes.

Harry looked at the man once. For the first time in a public setting, Snape was happy. Visibly and undeniably happy.

Harry wondered if that meant good news or bad for everyone else in Hogwarts.

Eventually Snape stood and waited for the room to quiet. He waved McGonagall back into her chair when she rose to make an attempt. Snape stood and let the noise of the Great Hall ebb and flow, eventually

condensing into silence.

He nodded in appreciation. Only then did he address the room. "Thank you for an exceptional year. This is the best possible way I could have ended my association with Hogwarts."

That got a lot of people muttering.

Snape stood and waited them out. Once the room was silent again, Snape said, "I have been asked by the Board of Governors to move onward..."

Louder muttering. Another pause. Another resumption of silence.

"And I agreed with their request. I had the privilege to teach a generation of future potioners. I didn't possess the teaching skills to match my subject matter expertise, however. For that I do apologize."

Even Harry was knocked back somewhat. Snape happy to apologize for being a bad teacher. Had one of the twins slipped him an experimental potion today?

"If you'll indulge me for a few minutes, I'd like to make one last attempt at this. Potions are demanding and precise, but they are a kind of power in our world that we must have. Our medicine depends upon strong potioners to repair damage and save lives, our system of laws and law enforcers upon their ability to recognize and neutralize dangers. Our curious potioners ask questions and experiment in ways that advance magic forward and give us all new opportunities. Please learn the basics of the craft. See if you are gifted and might become an artisan or a master of the potions world. I didn't make it easy, but I hope you will at least pause to reflect now. Those of you in the younger years especially. Those who are older or recent graduates do have other resources for continuing your potions learning. Just send me a letter via owl and I will be pleased to make them available to you."

This time no one was speaking. Harry half thought Snape was being

impersonated by someone else. He checked. Both Fred and George were seated at the table. There were no other prominent pranksters known around the castle.

"As for the school, I have been here almost continually since I was eleven years old, as a student and a teacher and now as headmaster. I love this building and what it represents. For the future, I hope they will bring in an outside witch or wizard to help guide the next decade of Hogwarts. Perhaps someone with experience at another of the great schools of the magical world. We all know we have some catching up to do here at Hogwarts. We have a few areas where we could do much better and I know that we can repair this damage with good leadership. This school was always great and will be greater still in the future. I thank you all."

Snape nodded before he sat down. The professors were the first to applaud, though not McGonagall, at least not at first. She had apparently not enjoyed his musing about the school needing an outsider to clean up whatever messes he alluded to. Whether he referred to her as the problem since she was the presumptive next Headmistress or she reacted to his slights against Dumbledore, Harry didn't know.

The food appeared on the table.

There was no announcement of which House won the House Cup.

None of the banners changed.

It took people near Harry a few moments to begin filling their plates.

"What was that about?" Hermione asked.

Harry shrugged.

"He actually grew on me," Neville said. "Once he wasn't looming over my shoulder."

"Neville saying something nice about the Professor, the world's ending,"

Harry retorted.

Neville blushed and sputtered a bit.

"They just installed him," Harry said. "It hasn't been that many months."

"The Prophet. Lucius Malfoy is still refusing to leave his manor, wasn't that on the gossip page?"

"Skeeter's replacement, Gubbleworm. I thought she'd learned better than that. Isn't her whole column just slander?"

"Some days, yes."

"So we know Malfoy twisted arms for Snape. The way he gloated when he announced Snape had become Headmaster. Then when he's tucked away cowering, he can't bully the rest of the board into retaining Snape."

"Exactly," Hermione said.

"It was disturbing seeing him in silver robes," Neville said.

"And the smiling," Harry added.

"Yes, the smiling," Hermione said.

Harry got back to his meal, roast beef and potatoes and green beans to start, but he listened to the conversations around him.

No one admitted they would be trying harder in Potions. People near Harry were just shocked at the words Snape had uttered without obvious coercion.

Some few mocked the clothes Snape wore. Others, the girls from younger years, thought him handsome. That almost made Harry gag on a potato he was trying to swallow.

Neville spoke about his plans for the summer. The greenhouse he would tend. Hermione was excited about her parents' plans to travel. Harry also had plans, but he didn't share them at the table. Too many inquiring ears. Harry dug out his meal. He ate slowly and listened. He was turning over what Snape had done and said tonight. It made him begin compiling a few questions. Ones he had just one last chance to ask.

Harry waited until he saw the head table breaking up. He excused himself from Hermione, Neville, and the others near to him and made his way out of the Great Hall.

Harry waited until he saw Snape.

"Professor, do you have a minute?" Harry asked.

"Walk with me, Potter."

Snape led Harry to his office. Harry held his tongue until he was seated and the office door closed.

"You didn't fight?" Harry asked. "The Board when they sacked you."

"Sacked. What I said and implied in my speech was not exactly accurate. I could have retained my position with no problem. I find I am not happy here."

Harry could have told the man that after their first class years ago.

"I apologized to the school tonight. Obliquely. I must now apologize to you, Harry. I am sorry for our years together. I hope you will attempt to make a closer study of potions."

"You're a different person now."

"My oaths were attached to my position teaching potions."

Harry had already guessed at something like that.

"Dumbledore was careless with what he had you swear?"

Snape didn't seem surprised that Harry knew that much.

"The man was willing to do things the wrong way. He hated oaths, but used them all the same. I hope you've learned through the pain you've faced?"

Harry recognized something of himself in that indictment. He loathed binding magic, but had come to rely upon it. He realized anew that he needed a wider base of magic from which to fight his battles. Of course, that assumed he didn't fall into another mess. After all, he had Magic

telling him what to do at inconvenient moments. Sometimes his magic just wasn't his own to use as he wished.

"You agreed to Dumbledore's oath?"

"My choice wound up as taking the oath and coming to Hogwarts or making a home with the Dementors. I made the only possible choice," Snape said. "Either Dumbledore plucked me out of the meat grinder or I wound up insane before I died."

Harry had to do better than that. He couldn't treat people that way, making choices that choked others half to misery or death.

"What will you do now?"

"I'm free, Mr. Potter. I will leave. I believe someone ended the threat of Voldemort's return. I wish I could thank the person who did that." Snape didn't even look at Harry as he said those words. "I've felt drawn into the Forest for some time. There are places I would have hesitated to go in there, even as a trained wizard, until recently. Now, I think there is new magic to find. New potions. Or knowledge to reclaim."

Harry was somewhat nervous about that. Perhaps Snape was being poetic. But it was more likely he was feeling the draw of Magic. He might just find himself becoming interesting to Magic and having a little 'voice' inhabiting his head. Snape knew some of what Harry was up to, but far from all.

"Best of luck."

"I believe in a future now. It's been a long time since I could say that, since I was a young student in school perhaps. Your future is less clear for now. They won't ever stop hunting you."

The Ministry, the surviving Death Eaters, now even an aspect of Magic that traveled constantly with Harry. He wasn't yet fifteen and already had an astounding collection of 'friends.' "I think I'm ready for them."

Sheer bravado. They both knew it.

"You won't be. Just stay aware," Snape said.

"Don't let an acromantula sneak up on you. Or a centaur shoot you with an arrow."

"No, never."

"You'll keep what you know about me to yourself?"

"Ah, I should have guessed about why you wanted to speak. Your visits through the Forbidden Forest. The castle wards telling me about your travels."

"Yes."

"There will be a new headmaster or headmistress. I suggest you not have a reason to make trips into the woods before the new term."

There were still boxes and boxes of materials that the Ministry had stolen from Riddle and Pettigrew and that Harry had unknowingly allowed to return. He wouldn't be able to dispose of it all before the Hogwarts Express left Hogsmeade, but he could do something about it this summer. After all, Harry had no plans to return to Privet Drive, not with all the Dursleys dead. He also had no plans to cooperate with the Ministry and people like Yaxley and Malfoy. The older Malfoy might be hiding behind his wards for now, but that wouldn't always be the case.

Snape hadn't promised anything, just given Harry a way not to be noticed by the next Headmaster. The man had changed, but not entirely. There was still a core of snark inside him.

Harry now tried to determine how to ask his real question. In his conversations with the conquered Dark Lord, Harry had stumbled across the idea of a 'safe list.' Pettigrew had confirmed the idea. Harry had long wondered about the strangeness of Voldemort trying to offer his mother Lily a chance not to be killed.

There was no gentle way to ask the question so Harry just asked. "Did you put my mother on your safe list?"

Snape sat up straight. "Excuse me."

"When you joined the Death Eaters, did you put my mother, Lily Evans or Potter, on a safe list?"

Snape had recovered from his surprise. "I did."

"Why?"

"She had been my best friend before our estrangement. There was a lot of history I wanted to protect. I'm complicated that way. Joining the Death Eaters but trying to save one particular Muggleborn. Voldemort laughed when I asked. He should have killed me for daring. But he needed my skill with Potions."

"He killed her anyway."

The retiring professor nodded. "He died for it, too."

"Not because of his oath to you?"

"No. There was no firm, magical oath to me. All oaths flowed to him."

The bitterness hung in the room a moment.

Harry thought back to an earlier comment. "You know about the statue in the Crystal Garden."

"Oh, yes."

"Why do you say Voldemort died for breaking his oath to you?"

"Strange choice of words. I don't know who placed him in that garden, of course." He looked away from Harry. "No one does. Call it wishful thinking, I guess. There's a muggle term. Karma. He hurt so many. Me, for one. You, for another. I think he reaped from what he devastated."

"He did," Harry said.

Harry was confident in what Snape knew. He was also confident Snape would keep his knowledge to himself. That was the last of the things

Harry had needed to clear up.

"Thank you, Professor."

"I'm not a Professor any longer."

"Consider it a term of respect."

"Well, perhaps I can do something to earn that. Some day. Good evening, Potter."

Harry left the room. He had the coming day to face, the Ministry gearing up to snatch Harry and make his life a hell. He was ready. He had an elegant temporary solution in mind.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

The compartment was filled to bursting at the moment. People were up and out. Snape was a prime topic.

Also the House of Magic along with plans to go and visit it this summer.

People were more interested in it than afraid of it, even after the fate of so many Ministry wizards. That was excused by several commenters as the fault of people taking weapons to a magical structure. They attack a tower built by another wizard, they should expect an attack in return.

Wizards, after all. Wizards love their towers.

Harry had come to understand that most anything in the magical world could be explained away with some gesture to history.

Why's the economy so weird? Wizards went to war with goblins. And again. And again. Almost always to a draw. The wars seemed to stretch on to infinity until someone proposed a solution. Give the gold to the goblins to guard and let the wizards muck around with other forms of creativity.

Why's magic so Roman? Native wizards went to war with Roman wizards. The Romans won a few decisive battles. The native magics stopped being taught and the Romanized ones eventually came to be the

centerpiece of a school for magic in Scotland.

In fact, why is Hogwarts in Scotland? A wizard built a tower and then three of his friends convinced him to expand his tower into a proper castle. Then the four of them began taking on students. Because the tower came first and then the purpose.

So the answer to history was, often, a wizard built a tower or a wizard got in a fight with some creature or a wizard made a mistake (portkeys and apparition and the floo all had their starts with screw-ups).

Of course, Harry was still learning about the way that history made his friends and fellow students the way they were.

For now he was listening, not saying anything about Snape or the House of Magic. He knew too much not to be careful on those topics.

"You haven't said what you're doing this summer," Neville said.

"Don't know," Harry said. He regretted lying, but he needed this secret to hold a bit longer. "I'm supposed to have a hearing about new guardians."

Of course Harry had no intention of attending the hearing. He had once dreamed of a big solution to this problem, but right now the Magic in his mind was an enemy of big and flashy. Harry had gone for a smaller, quicker fix. Harry had a much bigger problem with Magic taking him over than he did with the Ministry.

Of course, which was Enemy #1 and which was Enemy #2 could change if Harry weren't careful.

For now, one enemy at a time. Especially when his mind was a handicap, when his magic might not respond just how he wanted when he needed it.

"I'd forgotten, Harry. I didn't help you prepare at all," Hermione said.

"I think it will be all right."

"But what if..."

The girl had a morbid imagination. Harry just nodded through her laundry list of all the bad things that could happen.

Harry just nodded. "Any of that could happen."

Hermione paused because of the surety of his tone of voice. She realized her friend had resources she had forgotten about. Skills with magic, for instance.

"Alright, Harry. You just tell me if you need my help."

"Mine, too," Neville added. "My Gran has dirt on just about everyone in the Ministry."

"Given the way it's a jungle now, trees and vines and a little river, I think everyone has dirt on everyone else," Harry joked. "Everyone's just completely dirty."

He wondered now if that idea, making the Ministry into a jungle and a locus of ridicule, had been his own or someone else's. It hurt not to know. Harry had delved deep into magic, but it was possible he hadn't done any of it himself. He had been corralled into thinking a particular way. It more than bothered him.

Harry looked out the window. He saw they were now in the outskirts of London. He pulled his wand and shrank his trunk and Hedwig's cage. His owl had flown ahead.

He put both his belongings into his pocket. Hermione and Ron looked at Harry with a bit of surprise.

"There's a whole trainload of people. They're not going to pinpoint underage magic to me."

Hermione frowned but shrank down her down trunk.

"How are you two going to be able to unshrink them?" Ron asked. "My mum could help me."

Hermione frowned. She unshrank her luggage.

Harry didn't.

"Well?" Hermione asked.

"I fully expect I'll be set up somewhere with a magical family."

She shrugged. She looked concerned again, but Harry's calm lent her some calm.

She had decided to accept that Harry knew what he was doing.

"I'm going to go walk around for a few minutes. My legs are sort of stiff."

"Have a good wander," Neville said.

"Ta."

He walked up and down the train once then he took up a position in the second car at one of the windows in the passage. He opened the window just a fraction. Enough to slip out a few sheets of paper. Which was exactly Harry's plan.

As soon as they pulled into the secret portion of King's Cross, Harry could see the gathered crowd. It wasn't hard to pick out the red robes of the Aurors. Harry could even see Yaxley smiling.

He made one final check of the sheet of paper he'd enchanted. It should be just enough, but not too much, to allow Harry to escape.

The train slowed and came to a halt in the station. He let a piece of parchment flutter out of the train car and gently pendulum through the breeze, rocking back and forth, swaying its way to the paving stones.

A bright flash from the floor caught the attention of everyone in the hidden platform.

Harry moved to the exit and was among the first to disembark. He was halfway to the platform exit when he heard the first scream.

The affected people should now be realizing they were temporarily blind.

Harry had almost forgotten about this simple trick. He'd used it once on Rita Skeeter. He'd used it to greater effect on a number of Aurors who

had come to attack Harry even before Yaxley had become as prominent in the Ministry. Harry had performed an enchantment on anyone holding a wand on the platform. For the next hour their eyes, specifically their lenses, were opaque black. The enchantment would end well after Harry was gone; the vision of everyone effected would return to normal, not one of them the wiser as to how it happened.

A temporary, elegant solution. An hour was plenty of time to make good his escape. Then the Ministry could have as many hearings as it wanted. If they had no Harry they could enforce no decisions. Perhaps they'd try. Perhaps they'd give up for a time. Harry had the summer to plan something more permanent for Yaxley and Malfoy.

Harry heard more screaming. A lot more than he expected. Had there been hidden Aurors on the platform? Many people with drawn wands? He turned to look and see how many were effected.

He slammed to a halt.

He didn't see people acting like they were blind, some even comically flailing about. He saw...he saw a continuation of the Crystal Garden on the platform. He saw people frozen or freezing into gold- and silver-veined crystal as he watched.

He saw Aurors turned to crystal. He saw fathers in the middle of family groups freezing. Here and there, people were turning solid and unmoving. Harry turned and began to run for the exit. He bumped into a frozen wizard and fell to the paving stones.

The crystal wasn't completely solid nor cold. In fact, it was crystal colored skin. Harry stood up and touched the former Auror. He could feel blood rushing under the man's / statue's skin. He wasn't dead, Harry hoped. He just wasn't alive.

Harry tore out of the platform.

He knew he hadn't botched the enchantment. He knew how he'd given the Crystal Tower the idea to fight back against Ministry wizards. The enchantments he'd prepared for today were far simpler. It had taken him just a few minutes to construct it.

To make an enchantment do what had happened would have taken Harry hours, more than hours.

So...he hadn't done this by accident.

Harry heard more screaming as he disappeared off the platform.

He'd called on magic, but Magic had responded. He'd asked for blindness, but Magic had decided to make a second Crystal Garden. Harry hoped this one would be temporary, just an hour. He had no idea if that would happen, though.

Magic, with a capital M, had been watching all along. She / he / it decided what Harry was planning was plenty fun. She / he / it had added a few personal twists. Apparently, this aspect of Magic enjoyed terror as much as admiration.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Harry stepped out of Gringotts with enough muggle and magical money to last past the summer. He made his way back to the muggle side of the world. He'd had directions from Sirius about how to find a particular house.

This had been his plan for some time. Say no to the Ministry, say yes to a summer with his godfather.

Sirius hadn't promised much.

Harry couldn't even think of a dark, cobwebbed home. He was still back on the platform looking at a young girl scream for her father who was turning opaque and stiff.

Harry realized he was running. He'd almost had a taxi smash into him.

Harry needed to get a grip before he was a smear on the road. The hijacking of his enchantment terrified him, but he needed to get to safety in one piece.

He slowed down. He started breathing more normally.

He made the turns he needed to and was soon looking for Grimmauld Place. The houses here had seen better days.

As soon as Harry walked up the steps to Number Twelve, the door opened and Sirius pulled Harry inside.

"Welcome to the House of..."

"Sirius."

"Black," Sirius finished. He paused and looked at Harry. "Did you almost get eaten by a dragon out there? You look like you're dying."

"Worse."

"Worse?"

"Can we sit down somewhere?"

"You have luggage?"

Harry took a few shrunken items out of his pocket. Sirius set them on a table. Harry took a bit of a look around. He didn't see cobwebs. He didn't see the promised dust. It looked like an antique, of course, but clean.

Sirius had been busy.

"Kreacher."

A being popped into the room.

It was tall, almost taller than Sirius. It was thin and pale of skin with long, blond hair. Harry immediately thought of Tolkien and elves, the long-lived elves he wrote about.

"Take Master Harry's possessions to his room."

The being, not creature as his name seemed to imply, waved a hand and he and the items disappeared without a sound.

"What was he?" Harry asked.

"That was a house elf."

"I've seen house elves. That, or I should he, was something else."

"I've known Kreacher since I was old enough to talk. He'd belonged to my miserable father even before that. Kreacher is a house elf."

Apparently magic was changing more than Harry, more than Hogwarts.

More beauty for the world, even the elves. Two Crystal Garden, house elves taller than humans, a cleaner Hogwarts, and so much more.

What had Harry done? What had Harry summoned into the world?

"I need to talk to you," Harry said.

Sirius pointed to a door. "Sit, let's talk. I've had more than one realization in the last few days."

Harry went into the room, a sort of stuffy parlor. He sat down but Sirius hadn't come into the room yet.

Harry didn't have enough power to fight the fight he was in. He didn't possess anywhere near the knowledge he needed.

He needed to understand this aspect of Magic.

He needed to know his enemy before more people were hurt, temporarily or permanently.

He didn't have even the first clue where to start with an opponent that could hijack or preempt his magic.

Sirius came into the room with two glasses and a crystal decanter of an amber liquid. Alcohol, something strong.

"I think we both need a drink, Harry."

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

A/N: For those who are following my original stories, I've just posted the second story in my espionage series Green Scale. The new story is called Prisons Forged From Lies. I think it's a lot of fun, full of double-crossing

spymasters and lies-packed-inside-lies, plus more than a few plot twists.

All the details about books 1 and 2 of the series are on my website (a link to my website is on my FFN profile page). Happy reading.

7. Magic is Boundary

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Chapter Seven: Magic is Boundary

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Harry sat on a formal, uncomfortable chair inside the House of Black and told his story to Sirius, all of it. He focused on the last ninety minutes, how he'd planned a temporary prank on the Ministry wizards and witches designated to fetch Harry for his 'custody hearing.' How it had all gone so wrong with quite a few wizards turning to the same kind of crystal that the House of Magic was made from.

Sirius blinked at the last detail. "Turned to crystal?"

"Yes. Yes, crystal."

"Was it really the same as your..."

"House of Magic, yes."

Sirius took another drink of the amber alcohol.

Harry had only taken a sip before he put the tumbler down. The burn in his throat had warned him off. Now he wished he liked whatever it was Sirius had given him.

"What does this magic in your mind feel like?" Sirius asked.

Harry found it difficult to put the sensation into words. He tried. He recounted where he'd noticed the effect. He just couldn't make himself clear. How does one describe the base components that might otherwise be paranoia? 'I felt this heaviness.' 'I wasn't making my own decisions then.' 'It was all mind control, I swear.'

"That's good enough, Harry. I understand."

Harry wished that were true. "You don't. You can't."

"I'm pretty sure I have that oddity living inside me, too."

"What?"

"I have since I swam in that pool inside your Crystal Palace. Gave me back a healthy body, but it added a little something extra, too."

"Oh. In your mind? Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"I'm so sorry..."

"You didn't know. I didn't either." Sirius turned his head toward the door.

"Kreacher."

The very creepy being that Sirius called Kreacher walked into the room.

Harry just didn't believe it could be a house elf. The thing was blonder and paler and taller than a Malfoy, not green and short. Perhaps magic had been dabbling, perhaps Harry was hallucinating. It was a very significant change.

"Bring the Wizarding Wireless into this room, please," Sirius said.

Kreacher nodded, turned, and left.

Harry, however, went from morose to angry in just a moment. "The Wizarding Wireless?"

"Yes."

"You need to listen to some bad music now?"

"No, I want to listen to the news."

Harry clamped his jaw shut. A blush appeared on his cheeks, embarrassment. "Sorry for leaping to a conclusion."

"You don't have to apologize to me for being rash. God, I'd owe a hundred apologies a day for doing or saying...ill-advised things. I'd have at least twenty years of apologies to make good on. If you pretend I'm not rash, I'll pretend you don't have your moments, alright?"

Harry smiled.

Kreacher returned with the wood and brass device. He set it on a table that looked like it could have been created just for the purpose of holding a Wizarding Wireless. Why the actual enchanted device had been stored in another room was probably a Black family quirk.

"The news channel, please," Sirius said.

Kreacher turned the dial and flicked a switch. A moment later the room was filled with a low crackling noise.

"...and Three-Quarters," said the female voice from the enchanted object.

"I repeat, everyone who was temporarily petrified has been restored to life. Approximately one hour after they were turned to a translucent stone, the thirty-seven affected wizards all returned to, well, to normal."

"Thank Merlin," Harry said.

"The victims of this malicious attack are now being tended by Ministry wizards and staff from St. Mungo's..."

"One hour. The prank I was going to play was supposed to last an hour."

Harry had intended to blind the people who came for him for an hour, more than enough time to slip through the crowd, make it to Diagon Alley and Gringotts, and get into the safety of Sirius' home. Of course, whatever aspect of magic had decided to take up residence inside Harry changed something about the plan and Harry had had no clue.

"So the...thing that lives in your head, and my head, changed up the prank."

"We're waiting for a preliminary report from Ministry investigators," the voice from the Wizarding Wireless continued. "The trouble is that so many Ministry and DMLE employees were among the affected. It's taken some time to find Ministry investigators who weren't among..."

"Turn it off Kreacher," Sirius said.

"...the victims of this malicious..."

The room returned to silence.

"Thank you, Kreacher. You may return it to the basement."

"Very good, Master."

The odd being carried out the wood and brass box.

"It unwound whatever chaos it started," Sirius said. "Unpetrified these people."

Sirius couldn't be trying to say it wasn't something to worry about. "It's still a problem."

"I know."

"There's still the chaos in my mind. I can't trust in my magic," Harry said.

"True. Magic is a problem."

Harry nodded.

"It's always been a bit fickle for me, especially the greater magics the Marauders once attempted. I had a hell of a time becoming an Animagus, let me tell you. Then there was... Well, that's a story for later."

That wasn't what Harry had meant about magic being a problem. He didn't think it was always a problem, just since the Magic took up residence.

Harry tried to think through what Sirius had just said about his troubles with magic. Something didn't add up the right way.

"You spent years as a dog to avoid the effects of the Dementors, how was that hard for you?"

"Learning to be an animagus was hard. Once I had it down, I could do it with little difficulty."

"But for the big stuff..."

"Right. A cheering charm was fine. A levitation, nothing troubling there.

But combat magic beyond stunners? Yeah, it can be a problem for me.

You know a lot of people feel that way. That's why, even though we're magical, most of us don't actually do much magic."

Harry shook his head. "I see adults do magic all the time."

"Do you?"

"Yes, Mrs. Weasley..."

"Let me guess. She uses magic to cook?"

"Yes."

"I haven't been in her house in more than a decade. If I remember correctly, she used more enchanted objects than she did wanded spells."

Harry couldn't say that Sirius was wrong. "It's still magic."

"But adult wizards and witches, qualified magicals, are still somewhat nervous around magic. Now you have one dramatic experience why.

Things can go wrong."

"I know that."

"We claim to study magical theory. We even learn to teach it in our schools. To be honest," Sirius said, "we don't really know why this or that works. Why this or that fails. The potioners don't even know why formula A with a set of five ingredients turns out something useful and formula B of the same five turns out a poison. Other than saying it was all experience, trial and error. Magic is all art, not a lick of science."

"That doesn't make me feel better."

"It should make you more cautious."

"But...we both have problems that we should be able to fix with magic."

"I know what my problems are. Tell me yours."

This Sirius was different from the last few times Harry had met him.

Magic was changing him, Harry realized. He could see the man was far more mature mentally than he'd ever been before.

What Harry couldn't see was just how magic was changing Harry Potter.

He guessed he was more timid, more fearful. Beyond that he couldn't tell.

He needed Sirius to help. But Sirius was a fellow victim, perhaps even part of the problem.

Harry decided to try to explain it all. The clearest statement he could make on his fears. "I had thought my enemy was the Ministry. But then I realized how could I do anything against them if I couldn't even trust my own magic. I even think of it as my magic. It thinks of itself as something else. Not so easy to plan when the plans can shift without any warning."

Sirius nodded. "That's what I was saying. We teach magic as a firm set of commands in school. By the time someone is thirty or forty, they realize it doesn't work quite that way. Perhaps at Hogwarts it does. Perhaps in Diagon Alley it does. Go out into the countryside and play with magic.

It's a bit different. I know. I hid out in a couple of caves for a while.

Magic varies, in part based on where the magic is performed. Some things are easy in some places, but harder in others."

Harry had taken the school lessons as truths. Magic was magic; it was the expertise of the wizard or witch that mattered. Now Sirius was adding this complexity into the formula. The place really mattered, too? "What are you saying?"

"Magic is something we use without understanding. There is no one formula to predict what it will do when you call on it to do something important."

Harry could agree with that, disconcerting as it was.

"That means I have no idea what we can do about our problems with magic. About this thing that lives in my head, it's changed me, I know, but it's also remade the inside of what I remember was a much darker, more foreboding home. Then what it's done to Kreacher and to those people on the platform. I don't know how to perform any of those 'spells'

myself. I don't know how to reverse any of it either."

Harry sighed.

"We shall have to see if we can use magic to solve these problems."

"Or if we're stuck," Harry said. "I had no idea. All the magic I've done at Hogwarts and in Hogsmeade..."

"Yes, it's very stable. A perfect place to teach young learners. The world outside is a wilder place and we don't know why. Or we weren't taught why."

"Where do we start?"

"We'll get this, Harry."

"It won't be easy."

"No. It won't. It also won't be much fun. I'd far rather be in some sleazy bar right now. Have you ever been to one?"

Harry smiled. There was the Sirius he knew. "No."

"Some other time, then. Maybe when you're thirty."

"Hey."

"We've got some books here."

Harry also had another cache of books in his trunk. Then there were the ones the Ministry had kept away from Riddle and Pettigrew.

"Fine. We'll lose our eyesight in the library."

"We're not going to read everything. We're going to skim to find the handful of books that might be useful."

"Can't we just read the spines of the books?" Harry asked.

"Some of these are very old. Or hand-pressed volumes done in very limited runs. No titles on spines, I'm afraid."

"Fine."

Living with Sirius was a thousand times better than being saddled with whatever murderous plot the Ministry had been simmering for him.

Harry needed to handle his enemies in order. First, get his magic back in some semblance of order. Then consider what to do with people like Yaxley and Malfoy.

Even if it meant he lived in the library.

Anything was better than being betrayed by Magic again.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Harry wondered if his fingers were permanently stained purplish-black. They'd been through the Black books. Harry had let Sirius skim the special volumes he'd collected. They'd also done a midnight trip to recover the Pettigrew and Riddle books from the Shrieking Shack in Hogsmeade. All of those volumes were now in the library waiting for a skim.

Harry looked for another book to dig through. Something small and thin.

"Travelogue to the Black Forest in Germany?" Sirius asked.

Harry looked across the table. "Any interesting magic?"

"The wizard who wrote it likes to make trees talk. Apparently he enchanted an entire grove. Some recite poetry. Others give speeches on how to be a good king."

Sirius barely restrained a laugh.

"Pass," Harry said. "You screwball."

"It was too weird not to mention."

Harry picked up another volume buried a third of the way down the stack, the slimmest one he could see. He started reading it. It felt like a children's book, but the plot appealed to Harry's current needs.

It was after all a struggle between a witch and some dangerous kind of magic.

Harry hit one line and read it again and again. He decided Sirius had to hear it, too. "The mother cried about the loss of her youngest child and

magic woke up and began to talk to her."

Sirius put his new open book down on the table. "Interesting."

Harry nodded as he continued reading ahead.

Finally there was another paragraph that made Harry stop and read it again.

"In the winter time, when magic came to take its price, the mother asked magic to sit at the table and stay a while. The mother offered bread and soup for a meal. The magic accepted. The mother offered to tell a story. The magic accepted. The mother began to speak, the tale long and full of curves. Eventually the story and the heavy weight of the food lulled the magic asleep."

"Does magic have a stomach?" Sirius asked.

"I don't know. But I want to find out," Harry said.

"It could be part true and part fancy," Sirius cautioned.

"Let me finish reading this."

"Okay."

"Once the magic slept on the floor of the house, the mother took her knife and cut open the bulging stomach of the magic. Out spilled the soup and bread along with the mother's missing, but not dead, young child."

"Definitely taken some license there," Sirius said. "Weren't there children's books that featured you wrangling dragons when you were six?"

Harry shot Sirius a poisoned look. "Weren't you listening?"

"I was."

"The idea."

"I'm still stuck on the idea of magic having a stomach."

"Not that part, the lulling of the magic to sleep."

"I heard it."

"The Magic told me it didn't want to sleep again. That was one of the earliest things I learned about...her."

Sirius nodded. "Yes, that's right. You had mentioned that. That little detail does match up. Interesting. You should read the whole story."

"I did. I read aloud the most descriptive parts."

"Fairly vague. Skim through everything else in that book."

"Yeah."

"Then we'll need to see if there's anything useful at all."

"Good."

"I don't think you should equip yourself with soup and a knife, Harry." He was smiling at his little joke.

Of all the times for Sirius to get his true personality back. "I get that. But this is still the first thing in a week that alludes to magic being alive."

"It's something. It's just not an instruction manual."

"Yeah. Even if it gives us an idea, there's lots of trial and error to follow,"

Harry said, his tone just a bit less eager.

"You got it. Keep reading," Sirius said.

So Harry did. The next story and the next, like darker versions of Grimm's, one of the few references Harry had growing up in the muggle world. The Queen and some fairy tales and sounds of shows he was never allowed to watch plus a zoo and many, many hours in a school he hadn't loved. That was Harry Potter before he'd entered the magical world.

Now he half wondered if he'd have been better off going to a comprehensive and trying for a place in a decent university somewhere.

The coward's way. Harry really noticed how craven he was becoming, how afraid.

It bothered him. It more than bothered him. His mind was changing and he had no say in what was happening or how.

He needed a solution fast. Before there was no way for Harry to return to who he was before this latest thing had happened.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

When Harry woke that night well after midnight he had a sense of what would happen. He dressed himself and found himself making his quiet way down the stairs and out the front door. Once more he apparated to near Ottery St. Catchpole. Once more he stood inside the House of Magic. Once more there was an otherworldly avatar waiting to talk to him.

Harry had been summoned and had had no way to refuse.

Harry felt himself moving to one of the seats, in crystal, that had grown up out of the ground. He sat and the avatar walked toward him. She stood a few feet away.

"Why won't they come here any more?" she asked.

They? Harry wasn't 'in' on this conversation yet. "Who?"

"People."

Harry looked around. The House of Magic was far cleaner than the last few times Harry had come. But in this case he suspected the cleanliness was more because of disuse than of someone's efforts tidying up.

Harry wouldn't come back to this mistake of his unless he were dragged here. He had a good guess why the others, all the others, felt the same way.

"They're scared."

"Scared of magic?"

The entity sounded shocked and exasperated. Incredulous.

"What happened on the train station platform, it scared people," Harry said.

The avatar, while lacking the fine detail of a human face, appeared to be three seconds away from a full snit. Eventually the tension released.

"I don't understand. They liked it when I made the Crystal Garden."

No one had liked it. It had also been frightening. But people had been curious about it, too.

"They were in awe. The building defended itself." Witches and wizards could understand what had happened, cause and effect.

Which was different from what happened on the platform. People couldn't tell themselves a sane story about what turned more than thirty people into crystal for an hour. Why this person and not that one? Why for an hour? What if the change had been forever?

People couldn't make a coherent story out of what happened. They couldn't just say 'oops, one of those things.' The fear had settled in, it was there to stay. Not that Harry was volunteering any of his thinking. He didn't want to receive a tantrum from Magic.

"They should be in awe over the beauty I gave them where they all stood. There aren't many places in the world where lots of witches and wizards gather."

Harry puzzled over the words. He had the sense he was talking to something very old, very wise, but also impossibly immature. It wanted to attract more people to visit it, admire it. So it had decided to advertise. Transforming temporarily some people into crystal so others would come to see the permanent exhibit. Something like that.

It was strange, but Harry knew at once that he'd made an important discovery. He'd known this being, this aspect of magic was concerned with the beauty of things. But the vanity went deeper. Anything that deep could be a weakness. Harry couldn't see how to turn it into victory, yet, but there had to be something to this.

First, beauty was what it looked for. The uninteresting, unbeautiful was what it avoided.

Second, it wanted admiration. It wanted praise and attention and love of people it had no problem turning to crystal. A very strange manifestation.

"Has anyone come here since you showed them what you can do at the train station?" Harry asked.

"No."

Never was a word more filled with pouting and anger.

"They're afraid."

"I don't think I like fear," the avatar said. "How do I make it go away?"

Harry couldn't believe this being was asking him for advice. She was imprisoning him, at least the true qualities of his mind and personality, and now she wanted his help as well.

For an ancient, wise being, this avatar was also fairly stupid.

Harry didn't say that. He sniffed an opportunity for sabotage. He could plant a seed...but for what?

"You don't understand witches and wizards."

"No."

"But you want to."

"I want them to come here again. I don't want to go back to sleep."

Harry had to keep from smiling. There it was. The avatar's true weakness and greatest fear - along with a roadmap of how to make it a reality.

If this aspect of magic kept scaring people, hopefully in temporary, if terrifying, ways, people would stay away. If they forgot her / him / it, the avatar might just return to sleep. It knew that and was already scared of the possibility.

One always knew one's own vulnerabilities. The incautious couldn't help but dwell on them. Harry was glad for the clues.

Harry didn't know how to use the information.

He didn't have time to think it through. Wait a bit, head back, and wait

to be summoned back. This hadn't happened often to him and not on some kind of schedule he could predict. He had to try something now.

"You want them to admire magic?" Harry asked.

"It is the most beautiful thing in the world," the avatar said. "The most important thing. Belief in the beauty of magic."

Harry didn't agree, but he had a plan to try. "Then you must keep showing them magic."

"I have made some of the elves more beautiful. I am growing the trees in a forest bigger. I am cleaning the castle where you live much of the year. Is that not enough?"

"Those are bits of small magic. Witches and wizards admire great magic."

"Like my house?" the avatar asked.

"Yes. What else does the world lack? What else can you do to make it more beautiful?"

"I could..."

"Something for Hogsmeade? Old wooden buildings, some of them falling down? Couldn't they be made of crystal for a week?"

"Oh, that would be beautiful. So beautiful."

The avatar was beyond happy. So was Harry.

"The stones in Diagon Alley are rather worn and dirty. Perhaps you could shift them to crystal for a few days."

"I would like to feel that place as well."

The crystal was not just something she admired. It also gave her / him / it a foothold. Harry wondered if he had a little crystal sphere living in his brain just now.

"There are great summer parties at some of the magical estates, aren't there?"

Harry was making that up. He could imagine Draco Malfoy inviting

people to his family estate, the right sort of course. The question was, how many qualified as the right sort. A handful of people inside a vast mansion wasn't much of a party.

"I should like to go to a party," the avatar said. "I must go to a party."

"Perhaps some redecorating..."

"Fences of crystal," the avatar said, already dreaming.

"Perhaps the stone of the house made more beautiful."

"Oh, yes."

Should be enough to terrify everyone. Keep this corner of Ottery St.

Catchpole deserted, starve this aspect of magic back into a long, deep slumber.

"I would love it."

"They would, too."

Eventually the avatar shook her / his / its head. "No, I don't think I can do that."

"You don't want to?" Harry asked.

"I do, more than anything."

"You don't know how?"

A spike of pique. "Of course I can do it."

"You should."

"I don't like this fear. I think my coming to their parties would send them more fear."

Alright, magic wasn't stupid. It could dream, but it could also reason.

Harry wasn't content giving up. He'd introduced the idea. Hesitation had slowed it. But that didn't mean the idea was dead.

"Beauty is important in the world," Harry said.

"You were very helpful. Beauty is important, we both agree. But I'll have to think of something else. You can go."

Harry stood up.

"Best of luck," Harry said.

He hoped the avatar would do something big. Something that really put the fear of magic into people. He didn't know if this reticence from the avatar would change to desperation and some ill-advised action. He could only hope.

Harry walked out of the House of Magic. He noticed the avatar had disappeared. Harry walked a distance away and apparated back to Sirius' home and a no-longer warm bed.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Breakfast the next morning involved a good deal of shouting. Sirius wasn't angry with Harry being kidnapped - at least not angry at Harry for his involuntary trip - and his older personality, impetuous and emotional, shone out for a few good minutes. Sirius was just plain angry. Eventually the statesman inside Sirius returned. He calmed down and tried to eat something. In the quiet moments he turned over what Harry had said. "So sleeping is the answer. Putting the ancient baby back into the crib."

"I think so."

"It was a good idea. A very good try what you did."

"It didn't work."

"Well, there is that. But it was also a dangerous idea."

"I don't think she would have hurt me."

"I meant the people in Hogsmeade or Diagon Alley."

Harry hadn't even thought of them. "I think it would have surprised them. I don't know how it would have turned dangerous..."

"Unless the avatar decided to take a reasonable suggestion and make it unreasonable. We've seen that before, haven't we?"

Harry had done several dangerous things in the last year without thinking them through. How he destroyed the Goblet of Fire, for one. How he defended his Crystal Tower against the Ministry, for another. Both had solved messes and made fresh ones.

"Right," Harry said.

Sirius pushed a platter of toast across the table. "Want an egg or something?"

"You cooking?"

"I think we both agree it's better if Kreacher does it."

"Two fried eggs, I guess."

Sirius summoned the 'house elf' and gave the orders.

"Can you pass me the Prophet?" Harry asked. He pointed to the end of the table.

"You don't want to read it."

"Why not?"

"Front page is about the Ministry's search for you."

So soon?

"Damn. They weren't disorganized for as long as I expected."

"Nice fat quotes from your friend Yaxley. They need to find you 'for your safety.'"

For all definitions of 'safety,' including the ones where Harry died of safety.

"He was one of the ones turned to crystal, wasn't he?" Harry asked.

"The paper mentioned it."

"He learned nothing from the experience."

"If one has no mind, just a pit of violence, one can't learn," Sirius said.

"We can't wait out the House of Magic."

"You could."

"Says the man who waited for the Ministry to give him a trial."

"Still waiting. Much better waiting in this house than in my previous accommodations."

Harry was sure that much was true.

"I think I liked you better before magic got her claws into your mind,"

Harry said.

"I think I preferred that, too. I was a lot more fun. Now I'm too much an adult."

"I suppose I should read the article," Harry said. "If it's about me."

"Eat your breakfast first. You don't want to curdle your appetite."

"Fine."

They passed the next few minutes eating and thanking the oddly graceful elf / house elf / being that made them breakfast. Harry wound up eating four eggs and a considerable amount of buttered toast.

"Someone's about to get taller," Sirius said.

"Merlin, I hope."

Harry pushed the plate away and collected the Prophet. He read the article on the front page and frowned. It seemed to imply that Harry was about six and in need of serious nursing, rather than a rising fifth year student at Hogwarts. Could wizards remember and apply a single fact? Like, say, how old a Hogwarts student might be.

Harry turned the page and read the article on the 'stalled' investigation into what had happened at King's Cross Station.

Magic had happened, Harry thought. As if it'd never occur to witches and wizards. Real magic, greater magic summoned not by a witch or wizard but by an aspect of magic.

"Your frown is going to break your face," Sirius said.

"They're not going to wait for my handicap to go away."

"I agree."

"I can't rely on magic right now."

"I also agree on that."

"So?"

"What are we going to do?" Sirius summarized.

"Yes."

"That means neither of us knows. I was raised as a wizard. Magic is about the only thing I know. Even if I am cautious around it for non-routine things."

"I spent some years on the other side, but I feel the same way," Harry said. "I don't know what to do."

"Keep playing nice with that avatar if you're summoned again."

"I will."

"Back to the library?"

Harry nodded.

He had to put in the hours if he wanted results. But no one was waiting for him to get his plan in order.

Enemies weren't considerate enough to wait when their opponent was hobbled. Go figure

Harry didn't trust enough in magic to develop a magical plan. He also didn't have the experience or the time to develop something else. He needed to clear the way to use magic again.

Easier thought than done. He was sure that his problem with magic was harder than his problem with the Ministry. So how could he clear up his harder problem in order to handle his easier one?

He couldn't. He had no time. He also had no real clue where he could get started on his problems.

Back to the library. Back to sifting through what other people had

known, had described.

Back to waiting for a white knight to save Harry.

He almost wished Dumbledore were still alive, the man who had such strong values and then proceeded to break them whenever it was convenient. But the old liar had had years on his side and hidden sources of knowledge. He had the appearance, if not the reality, of being a white knight.

Harry suspected - no, he knew - he would have to stumble on a way for saving himself and Sirius.

When or where that would happen, he had no clue. Just massive anxiety.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Harry put the book back on the table. He was fairly sure his eyes were bleeding now. He noted Sirius was asleep, his head resting on top of his particular pile of books.

They were keeping busy but they weren't making any progress.

There were hints in the books, little stories here and there. The most useful material was in fairy tales, nursery tales.

The one Harry clung to now - even though he knew it was likely more imagination than potential roadmap for what to do - was a war between magic, which was how some stories explained the differences between light and dark magic.

"Sirius, read this."

Harry's godfather snored.

"Sirius."

Harry picked a book and lofted it at the sleeping man.

It clipped Sirius on the shoulder. Sirius sat up, blinking.

"Sirius?"

"Yes, Harry."

"I have a book you should read."

"Give me a moment, alright?"

Harry went back to the book that had almost seen him falling asleep.

Sirius made a show of stretching and yawning and being ridiculous. He was so serious sometimes, a gift from the vain magic living inside him, but there were moments when he was still himself.

Harry closed the rather tedious book of stories and passed them across the table. They weren't much worth reading, save for the fact that they discussed a war within magic. Harry couldn't imagine any child enjoying these tales one bit. Perhaps they'd been written as punishment, to be read to a misbehaving child or one who refused to go to sleep at night.

Sirius picked up the book. "Ah, this font. It makes my eyes water."

"Yeah."

Sirius began reading all the same.

"The battle between good and evil. I think I've read that somewhere."

Harry laughed. "But this story is about the formation of light and dark magic."

"It's even gauzier than a lot of the other stories we've found."

"I hate that we have to dig out true magical theory by surveying ancient fairy tales," Harry said.

"Witches and wizards don't have as much curiosity as they should."

"What do you mean?" Harry asked.

"Most people who specialize don't wonder why. They wonder what can I do. Can I transfigure gold? No. Can I transfigure food? No. Very few, if any, ever do investigation into why. Too damned scary perhaps."

Harry pushed over a stack of books. Some landed on the table, some on the floor. "There's nothing we can do about the You-Know-What in Ottery St. Catchpole."

"Nothing we know of, yet," Sirius said. "Kreacher."

The being opened the door and strode into the room. He refused to 'pop' into a space where his 'master' was. He seemed far happier arriving just outside the room and walking in. Merlin only knew why.

"What does Master require?"

"Can you make Harry and I some sandwiches?"

"I can."

He turned to leave.

"Hold. Are there any other books in the house?"

The being turned around but was silent a moment.

"Only the ones in this room, Master."

"I wish we knew more about magic, why it does what it does," Harry said.

Kreacher took an involuntary step back.

Sirius noticed. "What do you know about magic, Kreacher?"

In all their time researching they hadn't broached their subject with the being that shared the house with them.

"Nothing, sir."

Harry wondered if it wasn't Kreacher's secret. "What does the House of Black know about magic?" Harry asked.

Kreacher shifted from one foot to the other.

Harry looked at his godfather. Sirius nodded.

"You can tell me the secrets of the House of Black. What do we know about magic? What secrets?"

This time Kreacher had to answer. "The Blacks have studied magic for centuries."

"Yes," Sirius agreed.

"They own part of a forest."

Sirius nodded. "There are many holdings. What is special about this

forest?"

"Magic comes from magic places."

Sirius nodded.

Harry looked baffled. He'd only just discovered that, or something like that.

Kreacher had known it all the time. The House of Black knew that? Why wasn't it taught? Why wasn't it in these damned books?

"Which forest contains this magic, Kreacher?" Sirius asked.

"The House of Black holds a major portion of Wychwood. It's kept under wards so that Muggles and others cannot find it."

"So, how does this forest enter into the family's knowledge of magic."

"There is something powerful and dangerous that lives there. The source of the greatness - the former greatness - of the House of Black. All the important family magic is done there. Although not in recent times."

"I've never heard that," Sirius said, finally admitting his ignorance to the family retainer.

"Master Sirius might be head of the family, but he was never taught to be head of the family."

Harry wondered about his own family. What had died with his parents and his grandparents? What might Harry never know about his own situation? It was a question he would need to dwell on later.

"And none of this was ever written down?" Sirius asked. "My family's relationship to Wychwood?"

"No, sir."

"My paranoid family."

"The Heads of the House of Black feared the outside world, of course. But they feared their brothers and cousins and uncles more," Kreacher said.

"More hoarding of knowledge," Harry said.

"It kept the lord of the family alive longer," Kreacher said.

Harry realized the being would only respond to Harry when he wasn't betraying family secrets. Good to know. Even better that Sirius could make Kreacher explain himself.

"Do you know any of the family stories about Wychwood?"

"It is a dark place, master. Massive compared to the parts the Muggles had destroyed."

Harry took that as a 'no.'

"A dark place for rituals?" Sirius asked.

"Yes, master."

"To talk to magic? Do any of the stories about the Heads of the House talk about them talking to magic?"

"I cannot say."

Which felt like a 'yes' to Harry.

"Were you sworn not to talk about it?"

"I was."

Harry nodded. Every time he heard more about the Black family, he increased his understanding of their vast, and deserved, paranoia.

"But you can tell me how to get inside the wards?"

Kreacher tightened his pale face. "I can."

"Harry? What do you think? Would you like to see what this kind of magic might know about our problem?"

Most of the troubles of the world might be solved just by the right person asking the right question at the right time. Too bad the timings rarely lined up.

In this case, Harry wouldn't turn down any help he could get. Yes, if they were incautious they could make their problem worse. But...what if they could find a solution to one or the other of their problems?

Just by visiting a hidden part of a forest?

"Hold on, I'm thinking," Harry said.

"We both know we have to do this."

That Harry did know. A place where magic was strong. A place where it might even make rituals work better. Hadn't the avatar at the House of Magic claimed that as a benefit to that space? Perhaps there were more places like that. Harry had no expectation that a place beloved of the House of Black would be gentler.

"Does the magic serve the House of Black?" Sirius asked Kreacher.

"I have heard so."

"Harry?"

"We have to go. We have to try it," Harry said. "But not until we understand at least a bit more."

"Very good. We're both thinking more. A bit of caution is quite useful.

Kreacher, grab us up those sandwiches and return. We're going to have a nice, long lunch meeting. All three of us."

The being was unhappy but it nodded. It walked out of the room.

"It's all a question of dragging it out of him," Sirius said.

"Asking the right questions isn't easy," Harry said.

"No, but we have some ideas now."

Harry pulled a roll of parchment over to him and began a new list.

'Things We Need to Know About Wychwood.'

"If another aspect of magic lives there," Harry said. "Can we use one of them to fight off the other?"

"Write that down. We're not going to find a book on that, but there might be a story we can dislodge from Kreacher."

It wasn't going to be easy to use Magic to restrain Magic. But they had to try. The Ministry was up to its tricks again. Yaxley and perhaps even

Malfoy were moving around causing problems, causing disappearances, causing death.

They needed to prepare, but they also needed to be daring once the planning was done.

They also needed not to die if they got in trouble in the Black Family forest.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Four days after Kreacher cracked open an unexpected Black Family secret, Sirius and Harry apparated to Milton-under-Wychwood, the village closest to the only entry through the Black Family wards covering their part of Wychwood. Sirius suggested they eat something so they took thirty minutes. They didn't talk much and didn't eat much either. Nerves for both of them.

They had what stories they could get from Kreacher. They had a plan.

They expected they were underprepared.

Eventually Sirius tired of stalling. He followed a copy of an ancient map out of the village. Milton-upon-Wychwood was almost on top of the Black Family holdings. It was probably still a village, unable to grow, because of the confluence of the wards. Muggles who were somewhat sensitive to magic had to find the village rather disturbing.

The pair could have easily gotten lost in the forest save for the irony that the secret Black Family path to their ward line had become something of a tourist trail. Harry and Sirius saw a half-dozen other people out and about in the summer morning.

The hike into the forest took them an hour, but at least half of that was unwinding moments spent getting lost. The hiking trail varied from the path for the last third of the map's path and it had taken them some time to determine they had veered from the correct course.

Finally they arrived at the only clue the Black Family left regarding the wards. It was a stack of stones, eight stones in all, that had thick Muggle-repelling wards plastered all over them.

Per what Kreacher had told them, Sirius took out a silver knife and nicked the tip of one of his fingers. Once he got the blood flowing, Sirius daubed a bit on each of the eight stones. Then he healed the cut and tucked the dagger back away. It was a moment before Sirius, but not Harry, could feel a difference. It was almost a minute before he could see anything that looked different from just more trees.

"There," Sirius pointed.

"I don't see anything," Harry said.

Sirius took Harry's hand in his own. "Ah."

There was an arch of stone that now stood perhaps ten feet from the eight stacked stones. It definitely hadn't been visible to them before. The forest they could see through the arch looked similar to what they could see otherwise, but they could also feel the flows of magic inside.

Beckoning, welcoming. Rather unlike what Harry thought about the House of Black from Sirius' stories.

"Ready?" Sirius asked.

"We need something," Harry said. "Yes, let's go."

Together they walked toward and under and through the arch. A few feet inside, Harry knew he was in a truly magical place.

This felt ten times more magical than Hogwarts or even the House of Magic.

It didn't feel dark as he'd expected.

In fact, if anything, Harry felt a lightness he hadn't felt in some time. He could see why the Blacks might have treasured a space like this. Why they would have gone to enormous lengths to hide it.

Harry wondered why Kreacher had said it was dangerous. So far it felt wonderful.

"You are late," a voice boomed.

Sirius and Harry turned and twisted. A pile of rocks, looking more like a stone troll than anything else, shambled through the trees toward them.

"A decade late. Explain yourself, Head of the House of Black."

The magic was still comfortable, wonderful, but both Sirius and Harry were frozen in fear.

"The agreement between us is almost broken. Another year or two...

Begin your explanations now," the being demanded.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Harry put his hand on his godfather's shoulder. It did enough. It didn't calm Sirius, but it did help to focus him.

"I apologize. I knew nothing about you."

"Unacceptable."

"I have no defense other than that. I learned about this forest four days ago. We..."

"You should have come immediately."

Sirius nodded. "I see that now. We were trying to determine how best to come here, learn the lore of this place. Unfortunately the House of Black is much diminished."

The being came within twenty feet before it slowed and stopped.

"It's obvious you know nothing. Sit, you and your companion, sit both of you, we have much to discuss."

Harry wasn't going to argue with something that was so eminently magical. He lowered himself to the ground, but found there was a stone seat waiting for him. He sat on the stone and found it oddly comfortable. Then he tagged on the jacket Sirius wore. His godfather lowered himself

to his own stone chair.

They hadn't been attacked, except with harsh words. In fact, Sirius at least had been expected.

"You have both been touched by Magic, but not mine. You will explain."

Sirius looked to Harry.

He took a moment. "It's my fault."

"Is it?" the stone construct asked.

"I think so, yes."

"Tell me the story, young wizard. But start with your name. You aren't a part of the House of Black, I can tell, but the Head of the House of Black has brought inside the boundaries of this place."

"I am Harry Potter."

"The Potter Family has no agreement with me."

"I am now becoming aware of that."

"Continue," the being demanded.

"I had thought to...inspire my fellow witches and wizards with a bit of a great magic, as we sometimes call it. I created an enchantment that constructed a tower out of crystal, silver, and gold near where several other wizarding families lived."

The being looked at Harry but was silent for some time. It gave Harry a chance to look at the jumble of animated stones. The stone that took the place of the head had no eyes, no lips, no mouth. The sound wasn't coming from the 'body' but from elsewhere. What a mystery - why did the magic do such a thing. To put Sirius at ease. Rather, the stones were more terrifying than anything in the first moments.

"It took on the name of House of Magic?" the being asked.

"Yes."

Harry had no idea how the being knew that. Unless it could read minds.

"It has killed witches and wizards?"

"Yes."

"Attacked others without killing them?"

"Yes."

"It is good you found me, then. You started something far beyond your skill to handle."

"I know."

"There is a cost to be borne for what you've done. Will you pay it?"

Harry took a breath. Could he ask the cost? Was it a cost in magic or blood or even his life?

"You hesitate. At least you have wisdom enough for that even though you started this problem. The price will be paid in homage and time. Can you pay this price?"

Homage and time? What did that mean?

"Yes," Harry said.

The being turned to Sirius. "I would have thought you'd both be aware of this 'lore' as you call it."

"I apologize, but no," Sirius said.

"I sense both of you spent time in one such magical place. Years of your time."

The only place Harry had spent years of his life was at Little Whinging and Hogwarts. There was but one choice.

"Do you mean Hogwarts?" Harry asked.

"Yes. It wasn't the first such...eruption of the wild magic to take on a personality, but it was the first to be tamed with an agreement between wizards and the magic."

Tamed? That sounded like just what Harry needed.

"What do you mean by personality?" Sirius asked.

"That aspect was one that treasured wisdom. Hence why a school for the young was part of the agreement, why four powerful wizards and witches bound themselves to a single place for much of the rest of their lives.

They were forced to give up their wandering ways. The tower that was built there first was inadequate to the purpose so it was expanded into a castle keep. You didn't know, did you?"

"No," Sirius said.

"While people may forget, magic does not. We remember the agreements we make and the ones that bind us."

Taming? Binding? These words would have horrified Harry if they were applied to him. But now...it almost sounded wonderful. Harry had had no idea that magic might consent to be bound. He had heard none of this, read none of this. So many books on magic and none of them touched on a lick of truth.

He had thought he would have to fight magic without the benefit of magic, something impossible. Now there was this other option, perhaps forging some sort of bargain with magic. For 'homage and time,' whatever that meant.

"The longer I'm in contact with you the more I know about you, even the things you do not wish to tell me. You're afraid of this agreement, young Potter."

"Yes."

"Let me tell you the story of another young wizard I once knew. His name was Hydrus Black."

"I know that name. I had to learn about him. He was my great-great-great uncle or something," Sirius said.

"He was curious about the world. He began performing his experiments in this forest. He did enough magic in one place that...well, I bubbled

up."

"What kind of magic?" Sirius asked.

"If you have to ask the question, you don't want to know."

"You seem very unlike the stories I've heard about Hydrus."

"I am not him. I am an aspect of magic."

"Of what temper?" Harry asked.

"I represent guile."

"A pile of stones doesn't make me think guile," Sirius said. "Hydrus was known more for his cruelty. Are you sure you don't represented strength or darkness..."

"You question me?"

"Yes," Sirius said.

The being of stone was quiet a moment. "I cannot lie to the Head of the House of Black."

"The stone? Why choose stone?"

"It got rapid compliance."

It had at that. It scared them into listening.

"You tricked us into thinking you violent?"

"I cannot attack the Head of the House of Black. However, I am not required to correct his misconceptions, either."

Sirius laughed. "We might get along well."

"It's part of our obligation to each other."

"Because of Hydrus?"

"Yes."

"You made an agreement with him?"

"Eventually we came to a compromise."

Harry was sure there was a story there, one he'd likely never hear.

"What name do you wish me to call you?"

"I have never had a name. I do not wish for one, either."

Sirius agreed. "Fine. Now tell me the story of you and Hydrus."

"No. I will tell you of our agreement."

"If that's the most important thing," Sirius said.

"He agreed to homage and time. We would stop our hostilities. The House of Black would protect this forest with its magic, such as these boundary lines."

"Wards?"

"That is the word you use, yes."

"What do you mean by homage and time?" Harry asked.

"Very good, young Potter. These are things you both must know. The House of Black to meet my agreement. The House of Potter to handle its own problem."

Harry nodded.

"Homage requires a ritual donation of your magic to the entity or aspect you have made an agreement with."

On the surface that didn't sound impossible to Harry.

"My family has done rituals here for your benefit, not our own?" Sirius asked.

"If done correctly, it should benefit both sides."

"I owe you several years of homage, don't I?"

"You will be making the first catch-up payment before you leave today."

Ah, that was the reason the entity was so helpful now. It was explaining but it was also teaching for a more immediate purpose. A more selfish purpose.

"What does the other part of the formula mean? 'Homage and time.' The time part?"

"The agreement will last for at least one hundred years. You and your

family after you are obligated to continue the ritual."

A hundred years? Harry could barely think of the coming school year.

Still, he nodded. He'd heard nothing to make him refuse the offer on the table. This being's help...

"Will I owe homage and time to you? Or to the House of Magic?"

"Good question. To both."

"For how long?"

"To me, one hundred years. To the House of Magic you created, forever unless you wish the agreement ended."

Harry couldn't see any good ever coming of letting that vain aspect of magic loose again. He wasn't just committing his family, which he didn't yet have, to a hundred years. He was binding them forever.

"What happens..."

"There will be time for more questions. But now I must instruct the Head of the House of Black on the ritual."

Sirius looked stunned a moment. Then he nodded. "Was the agreement between you and Hydrus ever written down?"

"What does magic need with writing? No, it was never a signed agreement. It was an agreement in and of magic."

Harry realized Sirius was beyond nervous. He was trusting this aspect of magic, of guile, to be honest now. Still, he wouldn't turn some kind of independent source, like a contract. Unfortunately, trust was all he had.

"Tell me what I need to know," Sirius said.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Sirius slept on a bed of stone after the ritual. He was tired and his magic was exhausted. He also looked to Harry more healthy. Perhaps there were benefits that extended both ways.

"May we speak now?" Harry asked the entity.

"I had hoped so. I was very rude before."

Now it was a charm campaign. Harry was alert but suspected he'd succumb any way.

"You had been ten years..."

"Longer."

"Without the ritual. Were the wards, the boundaries in danger?"

"Yes." The entity waited a moment. "Ask your questions."

"What did I awaken?"

"The aspect used that term? Waking up."

"Not exactly. Just a fear of going to sleep or going back to sleep."

"I understand. Let me see what I can explain to you. She's just a baby, to use genders and terms you would understand. She has no perspective, no patience, little curiosity. Just hunger for what she considers beauty. She lives for admiration or screams, she lives for attention."

"Vanity."

"Yes. You'd already guessed?"

"Yes. How can I..."

"You do not have the strength to negotiate at this time. However, you have agreed to my price. For that I will make her agree to what we've discussed or I will lull her back to sleep."

"You have the strength to do that?"

"Easily."

How had Hydrus Black bargained with this entity to bind itself? A trick played upon an entity of guile? What a mind Hydrus must have had. He probably would have been unpleasant to know as a wizard.

"Will she...mature?" Harry asked.

"Yes."

"Will it take a hundred years?"

"It's possible."

"I'm sorry for what I did," Harry said.

"Greater magics done by wizards or witches always possess risk. The effects are impossible to predict."

"I didn't know."

"Especially difficult if you are not warned about the greater magics, about awakening beings you may not wish to give personalities to."

Harry needed to think on that before he was ready to speak to this being more. But he had another question in line with his attempt to clear his messes.

"Can I help the men I or she turned to crystal?"

"No."

"I'd be willing to pay..."

"That price would be much higher. A massive cost to all of us. One you may be willing to pay, but I am not."

Harry nodded. He had helped to end the lives of people who were doing evil but who may not have been evil themselves. Witless dupes.

It would have been easier if all of them were like Malfoy or Yaxley.

People who deserved an irreversible punishment.

"Why were you willing to make a deal with me?" Harry asked. "You didn't have to offer."

"We must have these boundaries or we must sleep. Two choices only. Do you understand that now?"

They were so dangerous, so powerful. Even a matured avatar could recognize that. Now Harry could, too, if too late.

"I do," Harry said.

"This place is fragile. Your people are even more fragile. We must live inside a safe space or we must sleep. We don't like to, but those of us who

have matured realize the necessity. There are some who have conformed themselves better to the world. They can remain awake."

"Like Hogwarts?"

"Like the aspect of wisdom, yes."

"Will the ritual I do for you be like the one Sirius did."

"For me, yes. But not today. Not until we have created boundaries around the tower you helped create. That ritual is different. You must be healthy for it. You must be very strong."

"How dangerous is it?"

"Can you die? That's the question you should ask."

"Can I?"

"Yes."

He had no options but to move forward. He had summoned this mess into the world. Now he had to seal it away. Perhaps it was true that his family would benefit over the decades for the mistake. But now there was only cost and risk and danger.

"What must I do?"

"You must hide the House of Magic as another family has hidden me away. The ritual will take three days during which you may not eat or drink. I will assist you. I will help you tap into the magic that lives within the earth. For those three days, you will be a mortal using supermortal energies. You may be lost to the feeling, to the power. If you do not return, your body and spirit will be lost. Your agreement will not hold. The aspect of vanity will be free once more with no one to bargain with me for assistance."

Harry wondered if he could have asked another of these aspects, like the one that lived at Hogwarts.

"You do not want to go exploring the older parts of that castle," the entity

said. "You do not want to go looking for an entity that is no longer bound, just content with the status quo. If you had to make a new bargain... It is better that you found me, already bound."

Harry found this entity was now able to read what Harry thought. He now had two such entities living somewhat inside him.

He shivered but pushed forward.

"Can you help me prepare?"

"I will. But listen to the rest. You must keep the secret in your family. You must develop a method so that there is never a break in the line as there was between the last and the current Head of the House of Black."

"I may need help."

"Finally, after the boundaries are raised, you must, and your successors must, make an annual trip to the House of Magic to complete the ritual you've already seen. Can you make that promise to me?"

"I can."

"There is also the debt to me and this place."

"I and my successors will pay it."

"You are fully informed and we have accord."

Harry was exhausted. He was terrified, but not just a little curious as to what might really happen. He had a solution to one of his problems.

This was a being that understand magic because it was made of magic.

He couldn't pass this opportunity up. Perhaps he could solve both of his problems.

"Can you tell me how spells are made?" Harry asked.

"I know."

But it didn't agree to say anything.

"Can you tell me how to unmake them?" Harry asked.

"For what reason? Magic wants to grow, not diminish."

"There are types of magic that wizards abuse."

"It is the wizard you must fix. Not the magic."

Harry knew that was the right answer. It was also the harder one, perhaps the impossible one.

"But there is a way."

"None I will share with you."

Almost daring Harry to try on his own. He just might have to.

"Harry?" Sirius called out.

Harry turned to look. His godfather blinked and tried to sit up. He couldn't.

"I'm here." Harry went over to him and helped him up.

"I don't think I can apparate."

"You are welcome to remain overnight," the entity at Wychwood said.

"There isn't a penalty?" Harry asked.

"You are a cautious one. Now, at least. Good. There is no penalty."

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

A/N: A quick note. I've put together a mailing list for folks who might want alerts about my new original fiction, mostly mysteries and suspense tales with a dash of espionage and crime. There's a link on my FFN profile. Happy reading.

8. Magic is Power

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Chapter Eight: Magic is Power

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Harry woke. His eyes, lidded with crust, were hard to open. His throat was a desert, as close to waterless sand as human flesh ever got. "Water," he whispered.

He knew he'd survived the rituals he'd needed to perform. He counted

that he had the right number of hands, fingers, legs, toes, eyes, and ears. Nothing seemed awry. He felt clean and so did his magic. He felt like he'd been washed free from the burden, the magical burden, he'd been carrying for some time.

He was still exhausted and weak, but he knew he'd recover. He knew he was in good condition once more.

He let out a breath of relief.

It was a moment later when the door to the room opened. Something like a house elf came into the room with a glass.

"Here, Master Potter."

"Who are you? Where am I?" Harry asked. He knew he was in a bed, but which one? Where?

"I am Kreacher. We are at the House of Black. Do you need a healer?"

Harry looked at Kreacher. His voice was different now, rougher and lower. The house elf looked like a house elf now, short and green with thin, long arms and large, almost bulging eyes. He was no longer the tall, blond being Harry had first met.

Kreacher had reverted. The magic that made him look other worldly...it was gone, retracted into a magical preserve.

Harry felt a flash of discomfort. He had done this to Kreacher, taken away the magic that had changed the creature. Harry's compact with Magic, the aspect of Vanity that lived at Ottery St. Catchpole, had done this, retracted back magic once extended out into the world.

Harry didn't even know how to ask if Kreacher minded being returned to his old form. He couldn't ask. There was nothing Harry could do to return Kreacher to his former state. Other than freeing the vanity aspect of Magic, which Harry couldn't and wouldn't do.

"Master Potter, do you require a healer?" Kreacher asked again.

"I'm fine. Just the water."

The house elf placed the glass on a side table. "Could you tell Sirius I'm awake?"

"Master Black will be glad to hear it."

The house elf turned and left the room.

Harry got half the water down his throat before Sirius burst into the room.

"He wasn't lying," Sirius said.

"Who?"

"That damned elf."

"He looks..."

"And acts just like he used to."

"He called you Master Black."

"Well, that's one positive change," Sirius said.

Sirius sat down on a corner of the bed.

"It worked? The binding?"

Sirius nodded.

"You've checked?"

"I don't feel that...thing in my head any more."

Harry took in his godfather's appearance. He had benefitted by what the Vanity aspect had done. It had healed the man's Azkaban-broken body.

None of those improvements were gone. "But you don't look broken down any more."

"Hey." Sirius looked down at his torso. "I guess because I swam in that pool those changes are permanent."

Temporary changes for Kreacher. Permanent ones for Sirius. Harry thought he'd get a headache tried to sort one set of changes from the other.

"How long was I asleep?" Harry asked.

"Three weeks."

He sat up. "What?"

"Have you gone deaf, Harry?"

Sirius was smiling, but Harry could see the ragged nerves as plain as the sun out the window.

"Three weeks," Harry said. He'd spent most of August asleep.

"I had to spell the food and water into your stomach."

"You said it worked? What went wrong?"

"Nothing. Just exhaustion."

"How close was I to death?"

"I don't know. I don't think it would have killed you. But it was a ritual not for the faint of heart."

Harry did smile at that.

"How long until I need to return to Hogwarts?"

"You've got a week, Harry."

"Damn."

Sirius nodded, but he didn't say anything. Sirius not talking, not making a joke. There must be something awful he was trying not to say.

"So?" Harry asked.

"Yeah."

"What aren't you saying?"

"It can wait."

"Not if you look like you have to go to a funeral."

Sirius looked miserable a moment. "The Ministry hasn't been quiet."

Three weeks of those idiots doing whatever they wanted. "Oh, no."

Sirius nodded.

"How bad?"

"Ask me later. First you need to eat."

Harry considered argument, but apparently what Sirius just said woke

Harry's stomach. It rumbled and roared a bit.

"I instructed Kreacher to make some soup."

"I feel bad for him."

"Don't. He's back to the old bad ways. Well, some of them at least."

Kreacher came into the room with a tray. Harry could smell the soup. His mouth watered.

"Thank you."

"Enjoy, Master Potter."

Kreacher left the room.

"He's very creepy," Sirius said.

Harry didn't disagree. Instead he started in on the very hot soup. It was slow progress at first. One spoonful at a time, lots of attempts to cool the liquid slightly, and gingerly testing the temperature.

"You call for Kreacher or me when you need to use the loo. I'm going to grab a book and a chair and come sit with you for a while. Be gone five minutes."

"Bring the Prophet instead." He'd been away from things for weeks. He needed to do some quick catch-up.

"I think it can wait until tomorrow," Sirius said.

"Please."

"Eat your soup, Harry."

Sirius smiled and left the room.

Harry worked on his soup. He also realized just how bad that conversation was going to be. Something had happened and Harry wouldn't have much time at all to prepare for it.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

The morning after he woke up from his weeks of coma, Harry finally talked his way out of his bed.

Sirius consented to let him leave, but then banished him to a seat in the library. Not much of an improvement. It was still trashed from the research Harry and Sirius had done on their Magic problem. In the three weeks Harry had slept, neither Kreacher nor Sirius had picked up a thing. Typical.

Harry picked up a book and figured out what shelf it belonged on. He stood up, didn't fall over from lack of strength, and found the book's home. He lost himself for a few minutes reshelving a small portion of the mess.

It felt good to move and stretch.

He touched a volume that stopped him a moment. He'd found the handwritten volume that Dumbledore had given to Hermione, the one that had warned Harry about the Ministry and the Goblet of Fire.

"So much trouble you caused," Harry said to the book.

He flipped through the pages again.

So much wisdom inside. But overshadowed by gross ignorance. The book was titled "Power," but it hadn't once talked about any power other than that used by a witch or a wizard or a group of magicals. It didn't speculate on the origins of Magic - a lesson Harry had begun to learn and would continue learning until the moment of his eventual death.

Harry set the book on the table. He'd need to put this one, and a few others, back into his trunk.

He looked at the rest of the room. All the books in the Black library were worthless. So many words that understood nothing. There had been only the barest hints of what Magic really was, how it really worked.

Harry would need a dozen lifetimes to come up with a true and accurate

understanding.

Time he didn't have. Understanding he wouldn't get. A deep understanding of magic, it was fragile; it was nothing like what Dumbledore had thought magic was.

Harry knew more now, for sure. Knew enough to realize that he was ignorant, that he needed to find a way to become less ignorant.

First he could realize that the best place for the books was back collecting dust on shelves. If Harry wanted to understand, he would have to step his way closer to the truth. Perhaps Sirius would help. Or Hermione once they were back at Hogwarts.

Harry returned to his mindless work. He lost track of time until the door to the room opened.

"There you are," Sirius said.

Harry paused and looked to his godfather. "Just seeing about these books."

"In days past I would have said 'leave it to Kreacher.' Now, though, he's back to some of his old tricks. Why don't I help you?"

"Bonding over dusty books."

"There are some things we should talk about?"

"The Ministry."

"Yes," Sirius said.

"What have they done now?"

"They appointed a new Headmaster."

Harry nodded. He'd gotten a warning on that issue from the departing Headmaster Snape.

"Who?"

"Yaxley."

Harry nodded once. His mind should have been processing, but it was

locked.

"They did this to get at me. Not much safety being at Hogwarts if the danger lives in the Headmaster's Office."

"It's worse. The other appointments..."

It didn't take Harry long. "I need to talk to Hermione."

She would be in danger. Harry, too, of course, but he had methods for taking care of himself.

"Send her a letter. We can't plan to meet up in Diagon Alley, though."

Dumbledore hadn't been dead long, but the world was already a darker place. The Ministry running around unchecked by a known powerful wizard - or by Magic itself. They were busy playing fresh games, deadly games.

"No, nor Hogsmeade. How about a Pizza Hut, nice and dark? Or some place that does a mean spag bol?"

"Well, Kreacher can still cook," Sirius said.

"You'd let her come here?"

"Yes."

Harry nodded. He'd almost forgotten that he could bring people to this place. It seemed more like a haven than a house.

"Let's finish this..."

"Go write the letter, Harry. I think we can use some magic to sort out the room."

Harry nodded. He picked up Dumbledore's book and left the room.

He listened to Sirius cast a spell and then start swearing. Harry had to make an effort not to turn around and see what Sirius had botched.

He had a letter to write.

Everything Harry had done seemed to give him a little relief but a big headache somewhere in the future. Now it would impact his fellow

students, his friends like Hermione.

Knowledge was useful, but power was power. Too bad Harry didn't understand what the power was or how to use it safely.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Harry opened the door. "Good to see you, Hermione."

"Harry." She hugged him.

Harry didn't tense up as he was often wont to do.

"Your parents bring you?"

"I took the Tube."

"Ah." Harry nodded. He brought Hermione in and closed the door.

"Come in, sit."

The house, which had once been gleaming, had retreated to darkness in color and mood.

Hermione noticed, but had the manners not to say anything about the creepy place where Harry was living.

"Sirius here?"

"Sleeping. We both had a late night last night."

Fruitless, too. Trying to figure out what to do. The Ministry was sharpening its knives and Hogwarts looked to be an unsafe place for at least the coming year.

So far there were only questions with no answers. All of them along the lines of 'what should we do?' The suggestions to date fell into two categories: come out swinging or hide.

"Your letter was kind of vague, Harry."

"Let's sit down."

"Can I see the library?"

Harry opened the door to a dingy looking parlor. "Let's start here first.

You know, talking. Not flipping through books."

Hermione smiled. "I do have some self control."

"Yeah, and Ron can hold himself to just a single chocolate tart."

"I'm not that bad."

Harry pointed out a seat for her. He took the one facing.

"Have you been getting the Prophet?"

"No."

"News from anyone?"

"What's happened?"

"I don't think we can go back to Hogwarts, Hermione."

Her eyes got as big as saucers. "What do you mean, Harry?"

"They appointed Yaxley headmaster."

"Oh." She deflated.

"We have to tell the others. I mean just in our year..."

"I'd prefer if we could come up with something better than just warning people. I thought it would be useful to talk it through with someone else.

Sirius and have I have done nothing but discuss this since we found out..."

Harry left out the fact that he'd been comatose from a ritual for so long.

He'd get around to telling her later, much later, but for now he wanted to focus on a single issue. Hogwarts and keeping the students safe.

"Isn't there any kind of magic..."

Harry was a wiser soul now. He had once looked for a purely magical solution. However, he had paid for that decision. Harry had also forced others to pay, the Ministry employees who were killed attempting to destroy the House of Magic. The cost of solving that problem was binding himself and his future family to a spot of land in Ottery St. Catchpole forever.

There was the added complication of Hogwarts. It was a site of Magic

that had taken on a personality. Dangerous, if the Black Family 'Magic' down in Wychwood hadn't exaggerated.

"No, no magic."

"The only thing they teach us is magic," she pointed out.

"I know."

"So?"

"It's hard staring at a big problem and a blank bit of parchment," Harry said.

"Yeah. I wish there were something to start with."

Harry nodded.

"Let's start with them."

After all, Harry and Sirius had spent the past few days starting with themselves. Their resources, their abilities, their plans.

Perhaps it was more useful to start with the enemy.

"Yaxley and Malfoy. They're terrible people. Beyond that, I don't know all that much," Hermione said, frustrated.

"Malfoy tried to close Hogwarts down, tried to kill people. He's not averse to petty revenges, either. How much time and gold did he spend trying to murder the Hippogriff?"

"Buckbeak. It had to have been a lot. He had the Minister of Magic trailing him around. I guess that can't be free," she said.

"So, we know him to be deadly but petty. A planner but not a particularly good planner."

"So, like Draco."

"The flaws of the one generation breed true into the next."

"What can we do with that?" Harry asked. "He was willing to join with the late Tom Riddle in order to get something."

"A return to prominence...," Hermione started to say.

"How could these pureblood assholes be more prominent? That's what I don't understand about this whole war my parents died in."

"Well..." Hermione trailed off. No one had asked that question of her, apparently. It was enough to stump her, too.

"Yeah. Try to think that through. They're in charge of the Ministry, in charge of the courts. Who are they rebelling against?"

"He wanted power for himself?"

"Does that make sense, though?" Harry asked. "Joining up with a stronger wizard in the hope of empowering his family? He made himself a servant in order to become more powerful..."

"This just proves that wizards have no logic."

"I don't get why he thinks he's so threatened."

"The Muggleborn?" Hermione volunteered.

"Maybe. If he's just resisting any change at all. If he wants his culture to freeze and never advance at all..."

"Maybe. I've never tried to think like one of them before. It's almost like trying to imagine breathing with just half a lung. Not very doable."

"Are you insulting Draco's dad?" Harry asked, smiling.

"I think I am."

"Good. Yeah, I still don't get it. He went to war for no reason. His family, from everything I've heard, was powerful before Voldemort. It'd be less powerful now save for all the gold he's spending to get his way. He actually went backwards. The grandfather was respected. The son less so. Then Draco is a kind of joke."

"Can we use that somehow?"

"What part of it?"

"Let's assume he was trying to save his culture. All the things he considers precious. Is there something in there, something in the manners and

rituals he cares about that will make him act like a better person or at least not a piece of murdering scum?"

"Maybe. You're thinking to make him a pariah? I think he's abased himself so much that there isn't anything he wouldn't do. He doesn't think the way you do or I do."

"I think we could look."

Harry nodded. It was worth a look. Figure out what it was that the purebloods actually cared about. Figure out how to turn it against them...

Yes.

Harry liked the idea of looking for a trap that few would suspect was a trap. It might be wasted time, but it was better to think of how to repair the situation rather than just despair over it.

"Let's see if we can wake up Sirius." Harry turned toward the door.

"Kreacher," he called out.

It felt good to bring a new mind into this. He hoped Sirius would think so.

The fully green and very short elf walked into the room.

"Master Potter?"

"Could you ask Master Black to join us here?"

"I will see if he's accepting visitors."

The elf left the room.

"He's a weird one," Harry said.

She sat with pursed lips, somewhat angry there was a house elf in this particular house. "At least he doesn't look beaten."

She was learning to pick not only her battles but also the sequencing of them. Harry was sure he'd hear more of this at some point.

"What do we know about Yaxley?"

"He's also got that pride."

"No children?"

"I don't know," Harry said.

"Maybe we need to find someone who knows these people better."

"How? All their friends will be tied into the conspiracy, right?"

"Maybe."

She had the thinker's look. Harry let the room fall quiet a moment.

The door opened. The elf walked two steps away from Harry and stopped. "Master Black will be down presently."

"Thank you, Kreacher."

The being looked with loathing at Harry before he left.

He was being a proper elf, Harry imagined, but there was hate very near to the surface.

"We need to get back issues of the Prophet," Hermione said.

"You think secret conspiracies make the third page of the Prophet? I admit I don't read it that often..."

"No, they won't report on conspiracies. But these people go about their lives. They go to parties, they donate to charities, they make speeches, right? That stuff might make it into the paper."

Harry nodded. If they could get back issues, Harry saw them spending a lot of time in the library.

"Alright. Maybe Sirius knows how to find that kind of thing."

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

It was an hour later when Sirius dragged himself into the room. Harry had spent the time extracting a promise that Hermione wouldn't return to Hogwarts until the situation was fixed. In exchange, he had to help her warn off the others they could get in touch with. The Creevey family, for one. Finch-Fletchley in Hufflepuff.

"You need to train your elf to lie better," Harry said.

"I said I'd be an hour. Needed a bath."

Harry smiled. "He said you'd be down presently."

"Ah... Trying to get me in trouble, is he? He lied a lot when I was just a kid, too. He's tricky, very tricky."

"Well, Hermione and I had an idea."

Sirius sat down. "Oh?"

"We need to start with two things. Old newspapers first."

"Why?"

"We want to see what people like Malfoy and Yaxley let make the papers.

What do they say? What do they consider respectable? What is the culture they're willing to kill to protect..."

"You want to understand a pureblood mind?"

Harry nodded.

"You won't get that from a Prophet."

"No?"

"We started this conversation once, Harry. Remember?"

Harry shook his head.

"You know why. You hung in there and did the right things and it's just gotten worse. The games they enjoy in the Ministry."

That Harry did somewhat remember. "I said I couldn't leave others to suffer for that. People who didn't know."

"What did I tell you then? Why are purebloods like they are?"

"I think you said it was jealousy."

"Yes. That and paranoia. Plus a lot of ambition."

Sounded like the worst recipe Harry had ever heard. Like for a cake that was dense and thick and burned the tongue when eaten and shriveled the skin when swallowed.

"I never wanted you to get involved with this. I never wanted you to risk

yourself," Sirius said. "But they wouldn't leave you alone."

"No, they wouldn't."

"Alright. You need to know about this paranoia first."

"What do you mean? Paranoia is like what that fake Professor Moody showed, twitchiness all the time."

Sirius shrugged. "What I'm talking about among the upper crust is a bit different. It's not just having suspicions about other people, fearing a spell to the bad. It's a manic paranoia mixed with strange ambitions. Take my mother, for one bad example. One moment she was planning how to conquer her Society of Witches coven. Like she was the most powerful witch in the land. The next she was raising the siege wards. Nothing had changed except a few moments in time. She just went from one direction to another, swung wildly from one mania to the next. How powerful she was, how powerful her children would be. Then it was how weak and terrified she was, how dangerous the world was. She made no sense to me. Still doesn't."

Harry stared straight ahead trying to get a sense of how this might be useful.

"Did she have real enemies?" Harry asked.

"Of course. A nasty witch like her. I think two different people tried to poison her."

"So it wasn't just paranoia..."

"I wish someone had succeeded."

Harry left off the topic.

Hermione had another way into the question, though. "So your house was protected?" she asked.

"Wards. Standard ones, siege ones."

"Would Malfoy and Yaxley and others in the Ministry have those?"

"All the estates, yes, everyone in society. Wards, then there were the house elves, we used to have more than one. There were even special illusions placed over the windows when my mother hosted gatherings. People could flood here but they weren't able to see through the windows where this home was. Wouldn't know where in London the house was. Showing off, bragging but also hiding at the same time."

"There were lots of guests over?"

"A few when my brother and I were young. Fewer as my mother aged and went crazier."

"Were you taught manners?"

Sirius looked puzzled. "Until my backside was sore. Manners weren't taught. They were beaten in. What do manners have to do with your problem?" Sirius asked.

"We're trying to figure out what this pureblood culture is... The manners Malfoy would know and use. We're looking for a vulnerability."

"Manners are one thing. But you need to understand that meetings between magicals are dangerous. If it happened, it wasn't often in someone's home. My mother was normal in that respect, I'd guess. Family could come but even that was somewhat rare. There were fewer than six public parties I can remember, none after I started at Hogwarts. That was the focus, Hogwarts. It was Hogwarts where you met people and then perhaps shopping in Hogsmeade or Diagon Alley. There was also the Ministry."

"Lovely," Harry said. "A whole culture of the paranoid."

"Why would anyone kill to keep this culture alive?" Hermione wondered.

"I kind of think that is the point of this culture. To freeze itself in time, never change, never vary. That is exactly what my mother wanted. To keep it all exactly as proper as she liked. I suppose that's how she

managed to talk Regulus, my younger brother, into throwing his life away."

"You said you learned...well, had manners."

"Yes."

"Well, why were house parties rare? Didn't the rules of behavior cover gatherings?" Hermione asked.

"Of course."

"So why were they rare?"

"Everyone knew the right manners. Everyone also doubted that the others would follow them. Paranoid, remember."

"Right," Hermione said.

It wasn't easy to get at the vulnerabilities of a culture. Even with a willing expert to guide them. Harry wondered what other avenues they had...

"You should see some of the cursed books in the library. Someone not a Black trying to open one - you don't want to see what would happen..."

Books, cursed books.

"...it's gruesome," Sirius finished.

Harry nodded. He remembered the books Sirius had tucked away before their major work in the library. He hadn't even thought to ask about it at the time. Now it struck him as important.

"That's legal? Cursing a book that might hurt someone else..."

Sirius nodded. "That's another thing about the Wizengamot. If you read the laws - and I was forced to memorize them back in the 70s - you'll notice a lot of protection for property and belongings and much less so for people."

"Paranoia institutionalized into the laws," Hermione said with some frustration.

"Yes. The heads of houses cared about their estates and less so about their people. Most injuries could be fixed with magic, I guess, but getting stolen items returned was harder. In fact, you could be sent to prison for breaking through a person's wards, but it took casting an Unforgivable against someone to get sent away for causing bodily harm. We've always dealt more harshly with thieves than killers."

Protection of property. Harry began to nod. Protection of books, cursed books, cursing valuable property to protect it from thieves. Harry thought he had an idea. He didn't have long to let it mature, but he had enough time.

"Sirius?"

"Yes."

His head turned from Hermione.

"Tell me about the curses your mother used."

"On the books?"

"Yes."

Sirius was quiet a while. "Well, she wasn't much of a witch. A lot of that was cursed long before her time."

"But what did these curses do?"

"Some of the books screamed."

"There are books in the Restricted Section at Hogwarts that do that,"

Hermione said.

"Some do much worse. Why are you interested, Harry?"

"I think I know how to handle part of this problem."

Sirius knew better than to doubt his godson, but he still had a lot to be sold on. "Going to throw a house party, hand out cursed invitations?"

Sirius asked.

He smiled and laughed a bit. He was trying to coax Harry into

explaining.

Harry didn't laugh. He started to consider. "Maybe."

"An escaped prisoner as host and the most eligible missing young man in the country as guest of honor?"

"What are you thinking, Harry?" Hermione asked.

"I started with the idea of the book. The cursed book."

"And then?" Sirius asked.

"I need a way to get people to come and see my book, consider it, stumble into its curses."

Sirius nodded. It seemed like a promising start to a plan.

"I guess I will need to throw a party."

"How?" Hermione asked.

"Where?" Sirius asked.

"Not here," Harry said. "Hermione, I'm still thinking up the how. Maybe at the Ministry. They're still looking for me?"

"They want you more than they want a sack of gold," Sirius said.

"We'll throw a party at the Ministry, then. For all my best friends, the ones who want to do my the greatest harm."

"Explain," Hermione said. "Now."

"How about I tell you what I'm thinking and you tell me how I'm going to pull it off." Harry now had a grin on his face.

"Start talking, Potter."

"You should listen to the girl, Harry. I think she's serious."

Harry rolled his eyes at the stupid joke.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Much later in the afternoon, Sirius summoned Kreacher. "We will be eating in an hour."

"Yes, Master Black."

"I want you in the kitchen, do you understand?"

"Yes, Master Black."

"No lurking about, no pretending to dust. In the kitchen."

"Yes, Master Black."

"Be gone with you."

The door closed.

"I wish you didn't have to bother with the Ministry at all," Sirius said in an extremely loud voice.

"I'm not old enough. I'm not of age," Harry almost shouted back. "I'm a little prize to be handed out unless we do this just right. I've been thinking about the problem most of the summer."

"The only thing that can screw this up is if the Malfoys find out," Sirius said.

"He's still shivering in his estate, at least that's the way the gossip is running," Harry said. "He won't come out on the first. Not to see his son onto the Hogwarts Express, not even to attend my 'hearing' at the Ministry."

"Oh, Harry, it's so dangerous," Hermione chimed in.

"The first of September is about as safe a date as I can find. Yaxley is at Hogwarts preparing to welcome new students. Malfoy is hiding in his estate."

"The whole thing has to be a complete surprise."

"Even with Malfoy and Yaxley busy, the Ministry will still be looking for me. They're not very competent but they have the virtue of persistence."

"Bunglers. A bunch of bunglers," Sirius said.

"I'll let them catch me, if they're looking, and I'll have a chance to getting a fair guardian assignment. Or perhaps even emancipation."

The room went quiet a moment. Harry looked around.

Sirius looked at a bauble on a table. "The little bastard heard enough.

Merlin, it's hard to be that obvious."

"And loud," Harry said. His throat kind of hurt.

Sirius looked at the other trinkets he'd gathered up. "All the good spy toys."

"Of course the Black Family would have trinkets to detect when people were spying on other people," Hermione said.

"Never underestimate the power of paranoia. At least twelve generations deep."

Sirius looked at another trinket.

"The floo's active. I don't know who Kreacher's telling, but I have one good hope."

Narcissa Malfoy.

"Think he'll have any time to make us some food?" Hermione asked. She still had concerns about a servant race being abused, but Kreacher was so unpleasant, she knew not to press her views.

"If he can get the word out," Harry said, "I'll be willing to eat tinned beans."

Hermione shook her head. "Do you think Malfoy will spread the news around? Or hoard it for his own purposes?"

Harry found that an excellent question. A dangerous one, too. If Malfoy didn't do what Harry expected...

"He'll need to tell Yaxley at least." Harry was sure of that.

"Two people is just a start."

"The news will get out. 'Harry Potter will be riding the Hogwarts Express on first September.'"

"How?"

"Yaxley has a mouth on him. Malfoy has a lot more cunning, usually. If

Malfoy doesn't do what we want, Yaxley will."

"Let's hope."

Harry did. "They'll all be ready for the hearing at the Ministry. Every one of my enemies at the Ministry will come out for this, even the ones I don't know. They'll identify themselves."

"Well, we better get part two of the plan ready. It's no good to have your enemies prepared and not have the trap lined up."

Harry had just the book in mind, something that no one could say wasn't valuable. Now he just needed to figure out what kind of curses to apply to it.

A light curse at the start. Something to make people curious or jealous of the book. Then as the situation got worse, worse and worse curses, layers of them.

"Are you sure this will work?" Hermione asked.

"No," Harry said. "But it has a good chance. You need to work on keeping the other at-risk students away from Hogwarts until we can clean everything up."

"School's important but it's not worth my life," Hermione said. "After all, I can keep up by reading from the books at least."

Hermione was fully briefed on what kind of people Yaxley and Malfoy were. Dangerous when killing Muggles. Evil at all times.

Harry had expected more of a fight from Hermione over this. He hadn't gotten it. She knew to be wary. She was ready not to go to Hogwarts if Harry's plan didn't work out. A big sacrifice for her.

"Read your books? At least one of us can smarten up," Harry said, smiling.

"You've already smartened up," Hermione said.

Harry wasn't so sure about that. He understood, from painful lessons, just

how little he understood about knowledge and power and magic. He realized he was stumbling around. That was something, a start. He still felt dumb. "At least this plan revolves around other people doing stupid things."

Knowing where the trap was - that was a kind of power, especially if Harry put the trap there himself.

"They'll do exactly what we expect. The bait is just too good," Harry said.

"Me."

"I'm still nervous about that part. You actually expect a hearing?"

"No. I expect never to hear the first word of the hearing. I expect everything to be resolved just after I step into the room."

"If they even take you into a room at the Ministry," Hermione said.

Harry nodded. There was that risk. The bad guys didn't always follow through on what they said they were going to do. He was a fugitive no matter what he did. His summer of freedom had put others at risk, too.

He had to resolve this some how.

He needed Malfoy tamed.

He needed Yaxley and the other Ministry thugs out of Hogwarts.

He needed to breathe free air.

"The way they got the information, they'll lap it up. They don't trust each other, but people like Malfoy do trust spies," Sirius said. "Don't ask me why. Can't trust your family but you can trust a stranger with an ax to grind. Purebloods."

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

"Didn't we just clean this place?" Sirius asked.

The library was trashed again.

Harry nodded at Hermione. Some of the blame lay with her this time. She wasn't really pulling books on curses from the shelves.

She apparently had a running list of books she couldn't find at Hogwarts - some of which she now located here in this library. She delved into the principles of moon phase on the efficacy of potions ingredients.

Harry was glad to let her read. It might have made his eyeballs drop out of his skull.

Harry stood up and fetched down another likely book.

He had found several tomes on curses that could be applied to belongings. But he didn't want the kind that liquefied organs. He wanted something gentle and something a bit firmer. He didn't need to kill anyone, at least not inside the Ministry.

He was really looking for a series of curses that would indebt would person to another. Harry hadn't found the right ones yet.

"This?" Sirius asked. He pushed the book over, his finger holding the page.

"The Jealousy Curse?"

"As the first layer?"

Harry nodded and took the book from his godfather. The description wasn't long. It might just work. No, Harry was sure it would work very well.

He had a different method of enchanting which he could use, a more intuitive form of magic, but his usage of that had created the giant mess with the Crystal Palace, the House of Magic, and all the rest.

Harry was back, for now, with tried and true magic, wand waving and spells in garbled Latin.

"It sounds good. Not hard to cast either."

Harry tore a piece of parchment and marked the spot in the book. He then handed the book back to his godfather and made the man finish skimming through it.

Harry opened a new book.

Then found another book shoved into his hands over top of his existing book. Hermione and her enthusiasms.

"Find something, did you?" he asked.

"Just read."

He did and he smiled.

"We've got it, I think."

"We're not done?" Hermione asked.

"No. We'll keep looking, but we've got two solid items. We've got something. The rest is just cream."

"Good," she said. The stress in her face relented. She took the book back but went to the shelves to select a few more titles. "I think these might be just what you need."

Harry smiled and didn't argue.

He went back to his book and started skimming.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

On the first of September Harry didn't even make it ten steps inside King's Cross station before four Aurors detained him and escorted him to a Ministry vehicle. Everyone fit into the expanded backseat and a dedicated driver hit the gas as if traffic didn't matter.

Within minutes, Harry and Company were at an entrance to the Ministry.

Once inside he was taken to an elevator and pushed out on a quiet floor.

Two of his honor guard accompanied Harry, but not that far.

Lucius Malfoy waited outside one of the doors.

"Wait inside," he said to the pair of Aurors, probably his handpicked favorites. "I would like a word with Mr. Potter."

"Yes, sir."

They opened the door and disappeared inside before Harry could see

much of anything. Was his plan going to work? He didn't know. He hadn't expected Malfoy to want a word before the proceedings started. If the berk did the wrong thing now, he could harm himself but leave the others untouched.

"You played us for fools all summer long," Malfoy said.

Malfoy was always a fool, just too slow to understand that. "I had no idea anyone was looking for me," Harry said.

"You've become a convincing liar, boy. But I still smell the truth from you. Who hid you?"

Perhaps Lucius was looking for another name to put on his list of people to 'visit.'

"Friends. I stayed with friends."

"Well, we'll just have to see about friends in the future."

Harry thought this attempt at intimidation was a waste of time. The longer Malfoy preened about how powerful he was, how devious, the more he might screw things up. Harry decided to baffle the man into complying. "I honestly don't know why you consider me an opponent, Mr. Malfoy."

Lucius almost choked. "You don't."

"How am I a threat to anything you plan to do?"

"Are you that naïve?"

Of course Harry wasn't. But he preferred to control the question under discussion. "I'm asking a question. I don't know the answer."

"You stand for everything that's wrong with the decline of the wizarding world."

Harry should have taken offense at this, but didn't. It should have put him in a rage with Malfoy, but the words didn't sting much.

Harry admitted (to himself) he'd made some mistakes. Not that Malfoy

knew what they were. But Harry was bright, powerfully magical... Ah, Malfoy only appreciated power he served or that he believed served him. "I'm sorry that we're enemies, if it makes it any better."

Malfoy looked baffled.

"You shouldn't be sorry. You should be terrified."

"A wise man once wrote, 'The common witch and wizard fear power - and adore it.'" That was from the book Dumbledore had written. The book Harry carried with him. Just his wand and the heavily cursed book.

"Are you claiming you have this power? Are you calling me common?"

Malfoy blustered.

"I'm known to be resistant to the Imperius. You're somewhat infamous for being so weak-minded you fell to it. Supposedly."

Harry could see Malfoy's hand twitching toward his wand. The taunt worked. Harry was in control of this conversation. He intended to end it soon.

"You'll pay for that."

"There's nothing you will do to me that I do not permit," Harry said.

Boasting and yet not boasting.

Power was power, after all. Magic was all about strength. Strength and will. Harry had known that for almost a year now. Harry possessed Lord-level power. Malfoy was considerably beneath that. Not even a Killing Curse from the man would harm Harry now. Perhaps if the man summoned Fiendfyre or something more indirect...

Harry might be wary of the greater magics, but there was nothing Malfoy could do, not even the Killing Curse, that would hurt Harry. After all, Malfoy was a weaker wizard and Harry's innate magic would overwhelm destructive magics aimed his way.

"Nothing?" Malfoy asked. It was clear he ached to cast something.

"Try it."

Lucius blinked. For a moment he almost thought he was talking with a young Albus Dumbledore, the man who featured in a few of Malfoy's late grandfather's stories.

"You're so sure that you'd let me curse you."

"I am."

"You survived the Triwizard."

Harry nodded.

"You won't survive this."

How stupid did the man have to be to make overt threats. Malfoy obviously didn't fear Harry repeating the comments among his fellow plotters. Whatever Harry relayed to them might get some chuckles, not an effort to help Harry avoid this fate.

Harry really wanted to know who was in the room. How many of them.

There were few people in the world Harry could trust. Sirius, Hermione, probably Neville Longbottom, a quiet if solid bloke. Ron was trustworthy for some things, not others. Perhaps Fred and George, too. Not a long list.

On the other side of the equation, there were probably few Malfoy trusted even if he might have a larger social circle. Harry had to hope Malfoy had drug in more than just his most-trusted confidants. He hoped that Malfoy had gone far out in his social web or that Yaxley or someone else had.

Harry wanted the room filled with people. So he could sweep them up all at once. Harry tried to feel better about what was going to happen. Sure he had lured Malfoy out of hiding, but the man had vile plans he wanted to put into action.

"I won't survive this?"

"That's right, Potter."

"How many times have you and yours tried to hurt me?"

"Not enough."

"You tried to murder me and many of the people I know in my second year at Hogwarts, Mr. Malfoy. I do not forgive that."

"We'll just see what you can and can't do, little boy."

For a man who claimed to live by guile, Malfoy was a very stupid wizard.

"Shall we go inside?" Harry asked.

"Hold the door for your betters."

Bettters. Harry found himself wondering why he felt a bit of guilt at all.

He'd laid a trap, left himself as bait, and at least one of the problems presented himself to be punished. Malfoy's inner qualities would lead him to damnation. It wasn't fair, this ambush, but it also wasn't exactly rigged. Harry was about to let Malfoy and all of the people behind the door really act on their inner values.

Purebloods hated thieves, legislated harshly against them.

Harry had set up what was to follow based on that principle. He thought purebloods hated thieves, but were thieves themselves. Given a chance, given the opportunity not to be punished...Harry expected all of them to reveal what they were really worth.

Harry felt preemptive guilt, but also a lot of relief. He would let avarice topple the ones who had it hidden within their hearts.

"The old and worn out can go first. I'm polite that way," Harry said.

Harry opened the door and let Malfoy go in first.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Harry stepped into the conference room reserved for his hearing. He found forty people staring back at him.

It took some effort to keep the uneasy smile off his face. It was a larger haul than he'd expected. By far. He watched Malfoy take one of the open

seats near the end of the table.

"Search him," one of the men at the table called out.

It was going as Harry had expected. A bit of intimidation to start things off. All was well.

The pair of Aurors moved toward Harry.

Harry held up his hands. "I protect my belongings, as is my right."

Scrupulously following the law. Harry had to provide a warning. It was part of the magic as described in the book he'd found.

The words unsettled at least one person at the table.

"Hold," Malfoy said. He had a glare and a smile on his face at the same time.

The two Aurors who remained in the room did as instructed. As if Malfoy really were in charge.

Harry finally did sweat a bit. Harry and his big, confident mouth. So sure he had to follow the letter of the spell to make the intent of the spell function the correct way.

Malfoy made no further orders. The people in the room just stared at Harry. Eventually he saw the tactic for what it was. A bit of pre-dinner intimidation, make the main course sweat a bit, tenderize the morsel.

The fear released.

Malfoy looked to the Aurors. "Go ahead. Search him. Be thorough."

Harry let out his breath. He struggled a bit when the Aurors clapped their hands on him. They took his wand from him.

"No need to be gentle," Malfoy said.

Harry found himself desperate that these less than competent servants of the Ministry might show an unusual spark of competence. If they didn't touch the book he carried - if they were as useless and lazy

He supposed he could, in anger, fling the book onto the table and mock

the Aurors for how bad a job they'd done.

"Is that all?" Malfoy asked. "Just a wand?"

"We're looking, sir."

The remaining Auror patted him down in a slapdash manner. He barely located the book Harry had on him. The Aurors plucked it away and threw it on the table.

"Just a wand and this book," the Auror said.

One left off after that. Harry was no longer considered dangerous once his wand was out of his hands. The other Auror kept searching. Vigorous, as if for show, but completely ineffective. Harry could have had the Sword of Gryffindor in a scabbard and this dolt wouldn't have noticed.

"Nothing else," the other said.

Harry relaxed finally. He could feel the warm, strong magic emanating from the book on the table.

The curse was active. No one in the room realized it yet, but they had all been cursed, all save for Harry, the moment the Auror touched a possession of the Potter Family.

It hadn't been one of the first curses they'd found in the Black Library, but a more subtle version Harry had discovered.

"What is that book?" Malfoy demanded. "Pass it over to me."

"You shouldn't touch that book," Harry said. His words would do little to keep the curse from having its way inside Malfoy's mind.

"No," Yaxley said. "I'm the boy's headmaster. I will see it first. What has he been reading?"

The fight heated up from there. Harry took a moment to step away from the table and its greedy-eyed occupants. He stood in the corner of the room. He waited to see just how things would proceed.

It wasn't a few minutes later when the tussle broke out over the book.

People were up and brawling almost. Someone punched Malfoy in the side of his head to get him to drop the books.

Someone else picked it up.

Everyone seemed to want to have a hand in the struggle over the book.

The longer they were in the room with it, the more they had to have it.

An effectual, insidious curse. Inspired by a similar kind of curse the goblins used on some high-security vaults. Supposedly.

Wands came out. Curses flew. Several people would up stunned or bleeding on the floor. People withdrew for a moment or reoriented their efforts. Finally Harry watched Yaxley, Malfoy, and a witch Harry didn't know succeed in ripping the book into pieces. From there everyone attempted to get his or her fair share.

Even the folks who were bleeding.

The people in the room didn't feel the second layer of curses settling in, but Harry knew they were. These people had been cursed as harshly as they'd liked planned to do to Harry. As bad as what the Goblet of Fire did, as bad as the most restrictive Unbreakable Vow.

Harry felt the magic of the room. He felt the crescendo until he was sure it was at its peak.

Harry stepped to the head of the table and whistled. The noise stilled the fight in the room. People looked at him, blinking, wondering why they'd just torn up all this paper.

The first layer curse broke just then. The book was destroyed after all. All that was left was bits of shredded paper.

"That was a book dictated by Albus Dumbledore, one of the most revered wizards in the last two centuries. The now-destroyed book contained his wisdom, his interpretations of recent wizarding history. It was one-of-a-kind, a Potter Family heirloom. I curse you, the destroyers..."

A few people knew what was happening. A few people gasped. One reached out for Harry to try to stop him. That one's strength failed him. The words Harry said now were for show. The curse had already fully settled.

"...of this valuable property. I curse you all."

Harry looked around the horror-struck room. He allowed himself to smile. This might just be one reason most purebloods were so cautious about visiting each other, mingling in one or another of their homes. Merlin only knew what kind of trouble one could get into with cursed heirlooms.

Getting wizards together in one spot - a bunch of plotters, a bunch of people with magic and nasty plans - was always dangerous. Fortunately for Harry, he was now out of danger from this group.

He hated to entrap so many, but the people in this room had come here to harm him in some way. To assign someone like Malfoy as his guardian, accept his gold for this favor. They came to legally torture or kill Harry.

He wouldn't go quite that far in return.

But he would break their influence in the world.

"One by one come here and tell me your names. I will tell you how you may work this curse off yourself and your family line." Harry pointed at the stuffed suit closest to him. "We'll start with you."

"Potter!"

"Sit down, Malfoy."

The older wizard found himself sitting.

"Don't speak until I call for you."

The man looked like he wanted to talk. He couldn't. The curse was working.

Harry turned back to the first person he called up.

"Stand. Now, tell me your name."

"I'm the Minister of Magic." He gave his name which Harry didn't recognize.

Harry nodded, half sad and half pleased. A bigger catch than Harry had expected. Still, Harry and Hermione and Sirius had gamed out this remote possibility.

"I accept your service to the House of Potter in partial repayment for the damage you helped commit today."

"I did no such thing."

"The ink on your fingers says otherwise."

The Minister looked at his hands in shock. They were stained.

"Your service to the House of Potter is this: you retire to your home. You do not come to the Ministry of Magic. You destroy all correspondence from the Ministry. You refuse to admit anyone to your home. You do not give advice or order. You do not resign from your position."

"That's insane, young boy."

It was insane, that was the point. A Minister who didn't come into the office, didn't sign orders, didn't keep the bureaucrats busy building something or breaking something. That ought to plug up this sewer of human ambition for a while. No Minister, no decisions, no causing havoc. The Ministry would have a Minister who wouldn't minister. They'd have to get around to replacing him in order to restore normal operations. Of course, Harry intended to make that a mess as well. The Ministry wouldn't be operating at normal levels for some time to come.

"Arrest this monster."

No one in the room moved to help the Minister. No one could. The man was slow, but not that slow. He recognized he wouldn't get his way in

this.

"I can't ever leave?" he asked.

Harry intended to wreck the Ministry for a good long while. At least long enough for Harry to become old enough to have some political strength to match his reputation.

"You can," Harry said. "After fifty years of service."

The Wizengamot might be able to muster a quorum in a few years. But they'd be headless until then.

The old man shook his head. "Fifty."

"Your house elf may fetch food for you. You have an hour to get situated at your home."

"That book isn't worth fifty years of my life."

"Can you replace it? A one-of-a-kind volume from the late Headmaster?"

"No, of course not."

"Then this is what you must do."

"If I refuse?"

"Go to your office. See how you feel in an hour or two. You will repay the Potter Family in one way or another. Magic will see that happen."

Service or death, Harry didn't say. The Black Family didn't mess around with the curses they hoarded.

"This won't stand, boy."

He waved at people around the room. Waved them to their feet.

Three people got up and headed for the door, muttering. They opened the door and collapsed to their knees upon leaving.

Harry glanced at them. He hadn't bothered to mention that everyone was required to remain in the room with Harry until he'd set a punishment.

Those almost paralyzed by pain in the hall now understood it. "It might be that kind of pain. It might be worse."

"I'll have the Aurors skin you," the Minister said.

"On what charge?"

"Cursing the Minister."

"Cursing a thief, a property destroyer? The law is on my side. You should know. I believe you and your predecessors have been submitting these kinds of bills for years, centuries."

Harry turned to the people in pain in the hall.

"Crawl back in here before you try to leave. I have to tell you your punishment," Harry said.

"Do you understand yours, Minister?"

"You will pay for this."

"It's possible," Harry said. "You're dismissed."

Harry proceeded down the table. On average he handed out ten years of house arrest. Some got more, like the Aurors in the room.

Harry saved two people for the end.

"Lucius Malfoy."

The aristocrat stood and walked with a sullen, slow pace.

"Well played, Potter."

"I hope that you will attempt to hire someone to break the curse," Harry said. He knew something he wasn't saying, of course. There wasn't a curse in effect, there were layers of curses. One of which wouldn't react well to cursebreaking. No, it wouldn't react well at all.

"Wouldn't dream of it."

The man was seething underneath his well groomed appearance. But he sounded polite. Harry knew that Malfoy couldn't stand to be out of the game for long. He'd do something he shouldn't. The curses would dig in harder and deeper, perhaps fatally so.

That was on Malfoy.

Harry leaned in and told Malfoy what his punishment. There was still another person awaiting judgment. Harry didn't want Yaxley to have a clue.

Malfoy went pale, but didn't say another word.

He nodded once and left the room.

Harry looked at the middle of the table and then said, "Headmaster Yaxley?"

The man didn't even bother to stand. "I suppose I have to resign from your precious school?"

"Stand up. Walk over here."

The magic of the curse forced him. The man fought every step.

"Headmaster Yaxley, how did you decide to get into education?"

"It's none of your concern."

"I think it was all about me. Trapping me in the school if you couldn't find me elsewhere."

"I guess I'm fired?"

Harry shook his head. "No, to the contrary. You are Headmaster. You may not resign."

As of today, the Hogwarts Board of Governors was gutted and left without a quorum of members, the top leadership of Hogwarts was removed, too, along with the Wizengamot. No one resigning, no one able to fulfill their duties. Harry and his advisors had decided to break the system and see if anything better might evolve in the coming years. Perhaps witches and wizards ignoring their institutions and doing for themselves.

"Are you shuffling me back off to my house as well?"

"Yes."

"Fifty years?"

"One hundred fifty years."

Yaxley frowned. That was a death sentence even for the hardest witch or wizard.

"Why..."

"It's the same as what Malfoy got. Fifty years for the book. Fifty years for Vernon Dursley. Fifty for my aunt Petunia."

Yaxley stiffened, turned, and left.

He was another who would try to unravel the curses laid upon him. He wouldn't succeed.

Harry was done. He felt horrible doing what he had, inflicting so much misery. There was also another emotion, too. He felt somewhat nervous doing what he'd done.

In the past, when he'd been able to hide who was responsible, Harry had produced far more violent solutions to his problems. For example, with the fake Moody, Harry forced the man on a suicide mission and got rid of the fake and that awful Minister Fudge. Two dead problems. He realized he really had racked up a body count in the last year.

Now he'd let this crop of enemies live. He had to. It was too public, this room inside the Ministry, to do anything else.

Some would try to tamper with the curses - that was their own arrogance killing them.

Others, those with the short terms of punishment, might just wait things out before they came for Harry in the future.

He almost wished he had permanently solved these problems.

What a schizoid mind he had now.

Unhappy at causing some harm, also unhappy at not causing enough, permanent harm. Perhaps he'd never be happy. Harry settled on regarding his attitude as a positive. He was somewhat glad that he felt

everything, the pain of too much plus the pain of too little. So long as he felt pain, he might come through all this without allowing himself to easily turn into a monster.

If he felt pain for evil or rotten people, he was still possibly a good person.

He hadn't killed anyone today, even though Malfoy and Yaxley deserved death.

He didn't think he woken up a new aspect of Magic.

He had used a bit of cleverness to strike this blow in his war. Harry had turned pureblood culture, their laws on protecting property, against them. He had guessed correctly at some of what would happen today. He had needed the Aurors or someone else to search him and remove the book from his robe. That was it. He'd done something within their stupid laws and now his actions were shielded from formal punishment. Harry would still have to watch out for private vendettas, of course.

Their bad laws were his gain. He hoped to use them again if there came time for another public response to danger. Sure it was out of all proportion, but the laws of the land set no limits to how one could protect property. Harry knew he'd stretched and abused the hell out of the law. Ripped it intention by intention without breaking it.

The wizards wouldn't learn a thing from what had happened.

They wouldn't close up their privileges written into the law. If needed, Harry could do something like this again. Oh, he wouldn't use a book. But something else, change the setting a bit and make the details a bit different and Harry could do the same thing again if he ever needed.

He took another look around the room. The place creeped him out now.

He picked up his wand off the table. He vanished all the torn fragments of Dumbledore's book, Power.

He noticed a ripple along the back wall when he was casting magic. He cast a finishing spell. Some obscuring spell dropped. Now he could see several devices along the back wall, things so strangely built only a wizard could have constructed them. Twigs and lumps of gold, one had a beaker of feathers as one of its components.

Harry wandered over to them and passed his wand near them. They resonated of magic.

He cast some of the detection spells he knew. The three objects held powerful enchantments, ones that weren't all that dissimilar from what the Goblet of Fire possessed. Artifacts of binding.

Harry was glad to have taken care of his business in this room early. He guessed these devices had been brought to this room in order to secure his compliance. Hidden with a bit of magic until after Harry was dragged inside. They hadn't planned to make him swear an oath or sign a contract. They were going to use the Ministry's devices to secure his compliance.

Not only give him over to Malfoy but bind him first or some rot.

Harry hadn't asked anyone their plans. He had known enough at a high level. He hadn't really wanted to know the awful details.

He used his wand to sketch a few new, temporary runes on each object. Each one would begin charging from the ambient magic residing in a magical building. In hours or maybe days, the excess energy would crush these devices, somewhat similar to how Harry had overpowered and destroyed the Goblet of Fire. Of course, he wouldn't be anywhere near nor would anyone he knew or cared be hurt by the failures of these enchantments.

The Ministry would be down three of his horrific devices, too. Leaving how many? Harry didn't know.

He stepped back and put some new illusions in place. No one would touch these devices until after they'd gone totally wrong.

All in all, Harry had a heavy heart from his victory. He hadn't attacked first, just prepared for what was likely to happen. A real hearing wouldn't have the young wizard being searched, his possessions violated. A real hearing wouldn't have had dozens of important witches and wizards in attendance, many of whom were owned or controlled by Lucius Malfoy and others of his stripe. They were obviously up to no good.

His soul was tainted from what he'd done, but not very much. Not deeply. He was walking the razor's edge and hadn't fallen yet.

Harry was growing up and he didn't know if he liked it. It would have been better for him not to know the peril he was in from his enemies and from his own choices. It would have been better just to be a school boy. Too late now.

Harry took one further look around the room. He turned and left. A minute later he used the Floo to the Leaky Cauldron. From there he set out on foot for Grimmauld Place.

It was time to give the all-clear to those Muggleborns who had held off getting on the Hogwarts Express. They were all in London at a hotel room Harry had paid for. Now they could Floo to Hogsmeade if they wanted. Or they could look into other alternatives. Harry had neutered the Ministry for a time. The Ministry shouldn't have the minds in place to make trouble for at least several years. But that might leave some of them at Hogwarts when the forced slumber ended, when dirty people began returning to the Wizengamot or they found ways to appoint proxies.

Calling for a vote of no-confidence in a Minister required forty of the fifty seats to concur. For the next decade, the Wizengamot wouldn't be able to gather more than thirty-four of its members into the same room. If Harry

hadn't left any loopholes in what he'd done.

Hermione and the others might be safe if they wanted to head back to Hogwarts. Also might not. The last few years hadn't been safe at all.

He had to pass along the news.

Harry still hadn't decided what he was going to do. Not that he'd told his doubts to Hermione or Sirius. Wherever he turned up trouble seemed to follow.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Sirius and Harry walked into the conference center they'd rented in the Muggle hotel.

Hermione was the first to notice Harry. She dropped the biscuit she'd been nibbling and ran for him.

"You won?"

"It's temporary, but yes."

"I'm so glad."

Harry was swarmed moments later. Colin Creevey took a few photographs - alright, many, many photographs to celebrate another victory.

Harry was forced to tell the story. So he took some care with his words and explained what happened. Leaving a lot out, of course.

Whatever he said within this group would make its way out into the wider world with decent speed.

Sirius, under a glamour, ordered up lunch for the group. To this group, Harry was passing the man off as his legal adviser, Mr. Hacke-Blokely.

They figured the group shouldn't leave until closer to when the Hogwarts Express arrived in Hogsmeade. After all, the folks could wait in this nice hotel room or they could stand around a train station or perhaps get a butterbeer at the Three Broomsticks.

No one was up for leaving all that soon.

Many of them were quite nervous, still. Yaxley as the presumptive headmaster. What had people been thinking?

Harry had to go into his theory of corrupt institutions. People no longer thought. They just pursued goals with whatever tools they stumbled across.

What Harry said then didn't reassure many people.

Still, as four o'clock gave way to five, the group of seventeen muggleborns gathered their belongings and began to walk toward the Leaky Cauldron. They were going to Floo to Hogsmeade and join the other students taking carriages to the castle.

All except one.

Hermione tried to tug Harry out the door of the hotel conference room.

He stayed in the room.

He'd decided.

Hermione didn't take long to comprehend.

"Harry?"

"You go," he said. "I'll be here in the summer."

"You need to finish your education."

Harry wished he could. Three relatively carefree years. No Voldemort. No Dumbledore pulling strings. No elder Malfoy. No Ministry. It sounded like a paradise.

"You think I'll be able to study a thing after what I did today. In public?"

"You're going into hiding?"

Harry wouldn't have used that term, but it wasn't wrong.

Harry would finish his education. He would travel with his legal adviser, Mr. Hacke-Blokely. Perhaps find someone to give him formal tutoring in enchanting, after all what Harry knew was an amateur's first cut.

He found he had no appetite for returning to Hogwarts. Because of the building and the secrets he'd discovered about the place, how it was similar to Wychwood or the House of Magic even though it was still used as a school. There was an unbounded Aspect of Magic there.

Harry shivered at the idea of being there with that knowledge.

He was silly, a bit reckless, but he wasn't that reckless, thank you.

"Not hiding," Harry said. "Just a different kind of education."

Hermione wanted to argue. She wasn't much good at hiding the things she thought.

"You go. Finish your exams this year. It's OWL year. If you want, you can come with us on our travels the next year..."

"I might do that."

She wouldn't, Harry knew. Perhaps after she achieved her NEWTS but not before.

They hugged and Hermione left.

"So we're going traveling?" Sirius asked.

"Maybe. If you want."

"Why are you really avoiding that place? Wychwood scared you off..."

"Yes. I try to learn from my mistakes."

"Well, perhaps the best thing is for you to make mistakes in other countries."

Harry took that as agreement and permission.

"Thanks, Sirius."

"She's not wrong, Harry."

"I know. But I can't go back there."

"Well, heal up. We'll travel and relax, perhaps find you a teacher. Maybe you'll send in a note you're taking a one-year sabbatical from school."

"McGonagall would go crazy."

"Better she think it temporary, right?"

Harry thought it through.

"Yes," he said. "I'll send something, some kind of excuse. I don't think I can go back, though. I don't want to do something that will wake whatever lives at Hogwarts. I'm not going to go through that again."

"It's weak, Harry."

It was part of the truth. Not all of it. He wished Sirius were less of an adult than he seemed to be right now. It wasn't all that long ago he was off being a bad, bad doggie.

"Fine. How about I'm tired of classrooms?"

"I think I knew someone else like that," Sirius said. He was smiling.

"I guess it's time to see if I can make any enchanted items that won't backfire on me."

"There's a four decade waiting list for new pensieves. On the black market side of things, there's about a backed-up century of demand for time turners. Take your pick."

Harry laughed.

Of course Sirius would know just what to say to make it all a bit easier, to make Harry just a touch happier.

Harry didn't know what the future held.

The Ministry would become a problem again in a few years, maybe a decade.

The pureblood culture was even harder. That could last with the witches and wizards who knew of it. With someone like Draco Malfoy, how long might he manage to live? A hundred years.

For now, Harry could breath. For now, he had a bit of choice. He would prepare - to live, to fight again, to survive. He had a few years to get ready. He couldn't waste the time. He had to keep walking the razor's

edge. Strength and power without too much strength and power, enough but not too much that he awoke Magic again.

He had a hundred years of it. He had a family to raise. He had children to instruct in how to manage Harry's mistake, the House of Magic. Perhaps he even had a book to write so that no one of his line would ever lose the knowledge Harry had paid so dearly to collect.

Yes, Harry would need to write this all down eventually. For posterity.

For the strength of the Potter Family going forward.

He might not be returning to Hogwarts, but he wouldn't have many lazy days in the near future, either. There was too much to do and not nearly enough time to prepare.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

A/N: Yes, we've come to the end. Thank you for reading my story. It was a pleasure to write this. It may not have wound up being the story it seemed at the beginning, but it was the meditation on power and abuse of power that demanded to be written.

Внимание! Этот перевод, возможно, ещё не готов.

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