

— CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT —

# Villa

*...as James Ackerman points out in his 1990 book, **The Villa: Form and Ideology of Country Houses**....people have been building country places for more than two thousand years....Ackerman identifies only two periods in Western history when thriving urban cultures did not build themselves country retreats: the burgeoning of the communes of central Europe and Italy between 1000 and 1400, and the heyday of the republican city-states of ancient Greece. The reason for these two exceptions is unclear—most likely, life outside the protection of city walls was simply too perilous.*

—Witold Rybczynski, *Looking Around: A Journey Through Architecture*

Harry opened his eyes; he was lying in a hospital bed and could feel restraints keeping him in place. He sensed movement in the room and called out, “Hello? Hello? Where am I? Who’s there? How many days have I been here? Please, I need someone to let me up—it’s very important—”

“*The Lion shall take wing.*”

His breath caught; he hoped that if anyone was around, they hadn’t heard Sandy hissing. Footsteps crossed the room and a face he hadn’t seen in almost a year appeared above him. It was Dr. Clancy, Nita’s senior. It seemed that he hadn’t noticed the hissing.

“Well, I can tell you that you’re not being released from your bed any time soon; we don’t just let murderers wander about....”

“*Murderers!*” Harry cried, forgetting about Sandy. “What are you talking about?”

“You killed that Squib!” Clancy cried. “After you were stunned, one of the guards came to fetch me, and we found him in his bed with his throat slit—”

“I didn’t do that!” Harry said desperately. “Where’s Nita Anderssen? There’s been a misunderstanding—there are people who’re probably wondering where I’ve been—”

“*Stupefy!*” a familiar voice called out suddenly. Harry could only see a bit of Dr. Clancy out of the corner of his eye, but once he’d been stunned, he fell out of Harry’s visual range altogether, landing with a thud on the floor. Nita’s face appeared above him; she removed his restraints and helped him to sit.

“What’s going on?” he demanded, not sparing a thought for her stunned supervisor.

“No time—” she said, pulling on his hand. But he was stronger than she was; he planted his feet firmly and refused to be moved.

“No! Tell me what’s happened! He says I killed Jeffries!”

She turned to him, her face pale and grim. “I was waiting for you outside Jeffries’ room. Clancy insisted on pulling me away to discuss a case that was *months* old. And *he kept jumping up to run into his assistant’s office!* It’s just down the corridor, luckily, and when you came out of the room, yelling, I heard you and came running. Unfortunately, he did, too. By the time we got there, you were stunned, and when we went into the room—” She swallowed, hesitating.

“*What?*” he prompted her, his voice cracking.

She sighed. “Jeffries’ throat was slit.”

Harry reeled, clutching at the wall. “I didn’t do it! I swear! I would never—”

“I *know* you didn’t do it, Harry! Let me finish!” Her blue eyes snapped like Ron’s when she was angry, he realized; all she needed was a little glint of werewolf-red in them. He nodded at her, hoping the story wasn’t much longer. “When we got into the room, we found his throat slit, and a lot of broken glass on the floor. One of the casement windows had been violently smashed. But the thing is—Clancy knows that you’re a golden griffin Animagus,” she said softly. “The wound—it was clearly not from a knife, or a spell. It was from an animal’s claw,” she finished, so softly now that Harry could barely hear her.

He felt like sobbing, remembering again the dreadful, helpless feeling of all of the evidence pointing at him, implicating him in his mother's death, as though it was premeditated. But then he remembered why he'd come running out of Jeffries' room. "It was Cho!"

Nita looked very confused. "Who?"

"Cho Chang, Viktor Krum's former girlfriend! You know, Viktor Krum who turned out to be Voldemort's *grandson!*"

Nita gasped. "No, I *didn't* know that! How would I know that?" She shook her head. "I mean—I *heard* about his Quidditch-playing, all that. He started playing during his first year at Durmstrang. But I'd left school the year before that, since my parents managed to convince the headmaster to put me with the other students my age, even though I was starting a year late...."

Harry swallowed, wondering whether that headmaster was Igor Karkaroff, whom he had seen die on Christmas night in his fifth year. Somehow he decided he didn't want to know and barreled on. "Didn't Percy tell you any of this? On the way back from Azkaban we found out that Cho is a Death Eater *and* an Animagus! She can become a giant sea-eagle, an erne. She must have slashed at Jeffries with her talons! He *was* killed by claws—but not a *griffin's* claws!" He looked at her. "Take me to Jeffries' room." *Returning to the scene of the crime*, he thought ruefully. *I seem to have a talent for that.*

"I—I can't!" she said helplessly. "I'm already probably going to get the sack! I stunned my senior," she said ruefully, looking at the red-haired man on the floor.

Harry tried to smile reassuringly at her. "Then you've got nothing to lose."

She gave out a short, sharp laugh that made him think not of Weasleys, but of Malfoys. "Good point. But I think we'll just make sure he isn't found right away, to play it safe." She waved her wand over Clancy, transfiguring his body into a chair, which she set neatly against the wall. Harry stared, but she was all business, turning to him and eyeing him critically. "All right then, I need you to shorten your hair again."

"I thought I was supposed to be in disguise?"

"You were—but now they're *looking* for the you with long hair and a beard."

"Ah. Right." He shortened his hair again and followed her to a corner of the room.

"Secret passage," she whispered to him. "Takes us to another set of corridors visitors and patients never see. I didn't even know about them until after I took my qualifying exams. Come on."

The dark, dank, secret corridors were unguarded, although he could hear other bodies moving around them, their footsteps and conversations echoing in the distance. At last, they ascended a steep, narrow set of stone steps; Nita opened a panel in the wall and Harry stepped through after her, finding himself in Rodney Jeffries' room again.

He looked around in horror; Jeffries hadn't been moved yet, but still lay in the bed where he'd been killed, his life's blood staining his hospital smock and the crisp white sheets.

"They left him lying there all this time?" he cried, feeling ill. And yet—the blood still looked fresh, he realized, and the body wasn't starting to smell yet, although that could be a spell. His eyes stared lifelessly at Harry, as though in silent accusation. *I shouldn't have left the room*, Harry thought. *I didn't kill him, but it's my fault that he's dead.*

"All what time?" Nita said, clearly irritated. "It's been about ten minutes." Harry's head reeled. He could have sworn he had been stunned for days.

The central casement window, the one the giant eagle had been banging against, was shattered, the metal frame twisted out of shape and the floor littered with shards of glass. Harry walked forward, peering with interest at some of the glass still in the window frame.

"What's that?" Nita said sharply, seeing his attention drawn by the broken glass.

"She's hurt," he said. "Blood and feathers." He peered over the jagged, broken glass and saw that the window sill was also liberally covered in blood.

She swore, then said, "Brilliant. Now we need to worry about her bleeding to death before we find her. Although—it could be to our advantage, assuming we can find her in time. Since she's an Animagus, it's a safe assumption that she also knows how to Apparate, but she won't be able to do it with this sort of bleeding. She may not even be able to properly transform herself into a human again, not without help. She may be able to fly, a little, but the blood loss will probably make her dizzy."

He looked hopefully at Nita. "If that will slow her down, then maybe we can still get her back here. We need to go after her."

She frowned. "Yeah, I know that without having Hogwarts' Head Boy tell me," she grumbled. "The question is *how?*"

"I can fly, remember? As a griffin. The trouble is—I don't really know where we are."

"Um, yeah, you do. We're at St. Mungo's." She looked as though it turned out that he was far stupider than she'd supposed.

"No, I don't mean that. I mean—where *is* St. Mungo's? I've never come here overland, only by magic. Where in Britain is it?"

She sighed, as though relieved that he wasn't *completely* brainless. "Oh. We're on the edge of Glasgow, on a large estate. Loads of anti-Muggle charms for protection."

"Huh. I wouldn't have thought that both St. Mungo's *and* Hogwarts would both be in Scotland," he mused.

"Well, you'd have thought wrong. Actually, there's an excellent reason for why this is where it is, but I don't think we have time for that now—"

"Too right we don't. I'm going to change; you get on and I'll leap up onto the sill, then jump out." He paused for a second as he realized that Sandy's prediction was quite literal, not just the figurative sense of 'take wing.' "Don't worry—I'll spread my wings and start flying before there's any danger to us. We're on the top floor, which helps. Then—"

"*What?* What on earth *are* you talking about?"

He grimaced at her. "You've got to come with me! I can't say incantations when I'm a griffin, or use a wand. I need someone along who can. Someone, say, who's been to Durmstrang and knows what a person might pull who's been trained in the Dark Arts...."

She gave him a half smile. "All right, all right. You're sneaky, you know that?"

He grinned at her. "I've been told that I would have done well in Slytherin."

He changed and she swung her leg over his back, gasping when he suddenly leapt up onto the window sill, and then screaming when he threw himself into space and fell for a few moments, before spreading his wings and beginning to move them. Harry could hear Nita's frightened breathing in his ears and feel her fingers laced into his mane as she held on for dear life. He flew far up in the sky over St. Mungo's, until the roof appeared small and insignificant. He could feel her heart going very fast, and she started talking nervously in a higher voice than usual, as though to hide her terror.

"What are we looking for? Oh, bloody hell, you can't answer me..."

Harry spotted something falling from a grey cloud; it almost seemed to be *part* of the cloud, but then he saw that it was a large grey and white bird. He dove; they were over the water now, and he struggled to remember what it was. *The River Clyde*. That was it. Going south, it widened and became the Firth of Clyde, where Dunoon was, and farther south still the Isle of Bute sat nestled in the firth.

He miscalculated, however, and didn't reach her in time; she struck the water with a loud *slap!* The next thing Harry knew, he was also in the water, trying not to shiver, tugging on a grey sodden wing with his teeth and coming up with just feathers. Nita let out a sharp cry of surprise when her legs entered the cold water. She grabbed one of the bird's ankles, dragging it to shore as Harry swam sideways against the strong current, his mind almost numb with cold. When they were on land again, he transformed, and with red, chilled hands, he and Nita pulled the enormous injured bird onto dry land.

Harry took his wand from his pocket to restore her to her human form; Cho Chang lay on the ground between them, a deep gash in her side that looked far worse on her than it had on the eagle, even with its blood-stained feathers. Nita sank to her knees, drawing her wand and immediately starting to move it over the wound, shaking her head.

"I hope we're not too late," she murmured. "It looks like she's lost a lot of blood. She probably didn't get very far because blood loss was already making her disoriented; she was probably flying in circles. The clotting spell I've performed will keep her from losing any more blood, and give us time to get back. But it's only temporary." Harry nodded, not trusting himself to speak. He was still shaking, either from nerves or the cold river water, he wasn't sure which. Cho had become for Nita yet another patient. He didn't dare say what he thought of saving her life, but merely watched Nita conjure a stretcher for her, then a sheet to cover Cho's body up to the chin.

As they walked across the broad grounds with the stretcher floating before them, Harry realized, "I know why it's St. Mungo's. I remember now...."

She looked up, interested. "Remember? You acted like you never knew anything about it to begin with. Or do you mean that you remember it from your other life?"

His jaw dropped as he stopped and stared at her. "How do you know about that?"

She ticked it off on her fingers. "Well, there's Peggy—Maggie, that is—who told me about seeing your double auras when she first met you; there's Ron, who told me quite a lot about it, and then Ginny—"

Harry swallowed, wondering what *she* had told her sister. "What did she say?"

Nita shrugged. "She told me how it happened, and that you were her stalker in that life." He couldn't tell whether she was mocking him as waved her wand, moving the stretcher carrying Cho. "And she told me that you had met me, and that I was a nurse, not a doctor."

Harry nodded. "That's right."

"So—*did* you remember something about St. Mungo from your other life?"

"Kind of....did Ginny tell you that my mother was married to Severus Snape in that life?"

Nita was gawping at him now. "No, she evidently forgot to mention that. And he's going to be my brother-in-law!"

"Right. Well, I remember now that he taught me this rhyme that his great-grandmother taught *him* when he was a boy, when he came up to Glasgow to visit her. She died of grief soon after his parents were killed, he told me. He'd already been sent to live with his uncle in Dunoon. Anyway, he taught me and my sister and brothers the rhyme, and the legends about St. Mungo, who was a wizard." He recited:

*"It is the bird that never flew  
It is the tree that never grew  
It is the bell that never rang  
It is the fish that never swam."*

Nita nodded. "Sounds almost like an incantation, doesn't it?"

"Yeah, I always thought so. It's just referring to the things on the Glasgow coat of arms: a bird, tree, bell and fish. They all have to do with St. Mungo. The fish has a ring in its mouth, but I can't remember the story about why...."

"I knew it once," she said. "Here we are," she said in a brisk, businesslike tone as they reached the drive before the enormous building that housed the only wizarding hospital in Great Britain. The large multipaned windows set in the sandstone facade looked blind and indifferent to the plight of people with magical maladies and injuries. But as they approached the door, Harry saw over the lintel the seal described obliquely by the nonsense rhyme he'd learned as a small boy: the bird that never flew, the tree that never grew, the bell that never rang and the fish that never swam. Over all, at the top of the shield, was the image of a bishop with a miter, hand lifted in a blessing. St. Mungo.

"We're not going in this way," Nita said, turning to the left. "This way. Except—" She waved her wand over his clothes to transform them into peach-colored robes, like hers.

"I'm going to impersonate a *doctor* now?" he squeaked. "Is that wise?"

"Quiet," she said tersely. "Just try to look—like you know what you're doing." She waved her wand and conjured clipboards for them. Harry followed her silently. When they were inside the building and walking the corridors, she seemed to be looking around for something. Harry hoped she'd find it soon; he was feeling *more* conspicuous, not less, in the doctor's robes, walking behind her and the stretcher bearing Cho. He smoothed his fringe over his scar repeatedly and tried not to jump at every little sound.

Finally, Nita conducted the stretcher into a room; Harry backed into the room cautiously, watching the people in the corridors carefully until the door was finally closed. She commanded him to lock it securely, which he did, and to guard it while she worked. It seemed to take a very long time, and Nita left through a secret passage twice to get some supplies (potion and salve). Finally, not taking his eye from the door, he asked, "May I ask why you're so interested in saving her?"

She gave an irritated grunt. "Well, if you're all that anxious to go to prison for murder, I can just let her die—"

"What?" He turned from the door.

Nita looked at him again as though he were an idiot. "She's your alibi! The real murderer! A dead Animagus is not identifiable as such. She needs to be alive for anyone to be able to tell that she's the murderer. Now, it *does* help that her blood is on the glass in his room, and the glass being on the floor clearly indicates that it was broken from the outside, not the inside. But we need a motive, also—"

He shook his head. "She wasn't mentioned at all when Jeffries was telling me everything that had happened. Voldemort was, of course, and other Death Eaters." He took a deep breath before saying, "Your aunt and uncle were mentioned."

She wiped a tear from her eye. "I thought as much." Her voice sounded a little thick and he could see her swallow. She looked back to Cho. "We just have to wait now. To see whether she's going to be all right. In a way, right here where you disappeared—in St. Mungo's, that is—is probably the safest place for you. And me." She laughed. "To think, I've been associating with a pack of

Death Eaters all these years, and when I'm aiding and abetting a fugitive, it turns out to be Harry Potter!"

He sat next to her. "No one will be looking into this room? I think I should Apparate back to Hog's End..."

She shook her head. "It's supposed to be refurbished as an office soon. All of the rooms in this wing will be. But the work isn't to start for a few days. We should be fine. Hog's End is the first place they'd look for you, anyway, even if you could Apparate out of here, which you can't. Security has made that impossible. You either get here by Floo, in the entrance hall, by ambulance, or on foot." She gazed at Cho Chang's face with an expression Harry couldn't read, but Nita didn't look especially happy. Harry covered her hand with his.

"How did your parents take it? Your adopted parents. About your being a Weasley?"

She slipped her hand from under his and clasped her hands around her knees. "They don't know," she whispered. "I haven't been able to bring myself to speak to any of *them* about my family. I certainly couldn't speak to Aunt Cissy about what was going on—"

He nodded. "Especially as it turns out she was impersonating an MP and your uncle was impersonating the whip, taking Roger Davies' place—"

She frowned in confusion. "What?"

Harry told her what Jeffries had said. With each successive surprise, her eyes grew wider. "No wonder a Death Eater was sent to kill him, if he was telling you all that!" she said. "But hang on—how would anyone *know* that he was telling you all that?"

Harry hesitated for only a moment. "Third eyes. We were finding them all over Ascog Castle this summer, and Cecilia—Mr. Spinet's lawyer is a witch—found more of them in her office, which explains why the witnesses who were going to testify at the trial on his behalf all mysteriously didn't show. They were sent letters on her firm's stationery, too."

She smacked herself in the forehead very hard, looking quite angry. "*So stupid!* I should never have let him talk to you *there!* I should have moved the two of you."

He nodded at Cho. "You really think she'll be all right? I won't be accused of murder?"

Nita looked grim. "I think so. Good thing I found you when I did. Damn Clancy—"

Harry thought about her senior again. "You don't suppose—is Clancy a Death Eater?"

She looked at him with wide eyes. "He—he might be," she said very softly.

"Right," Harry said, nodding. "I think it's time we got your little brother Percy up here with some of his Auror friends to take care of Dr. Clancy."

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It had been a very, very long day. Sitting in the Hog's End kitchen eating a late dinner with Ron, Hermione, Ginny, the twins, Lee, Angelina and the babies was very strange when, mere hours before, it was possible that Harry was again going to be accused of murder. As it was, he'd been questioned for hours and was under house arrest; two Aurors from the Ministry guarded the front and back doors of the house, which had been taken off the Floo network. Wards prevented anyone from Apparating. (And an alarm would go off if anyone transformed into an Animagus, which meant Hermione couldn't do it either.) It was better than cooling his heels in a cell at the Ministry, however, and Harry was grateful that Percy had enough pull to swing this arrangement.

Dinner seemed to take far longer than usual, as Harry was recounting what Jeffries had told him while everyone else interrupted to ask questions. When they were just starting in on pudding, Percy and Katie entered from the hall, throwing themselves down on the sofa near the fire, looking exhausted. Katie slumped against Percy, her eyes closed.

Ron turned his chair around and asked excitedly, "So?"

Percy smiled at them all. "Nita still has her job and Harry's off the hook and is officially no longer under house arrest," he said, his voice very tired. "We sent the Ministry blokes off before we came in here. Would you like to see it in writing that you're no longer a murder suspect?" He pulled a roll of parchment out of his robes and tossed it to Harry, obviously too tired to walk the few feet between the sofa and where Harry was sitting at the long kitchen table. Harry caught it deftly and unrolled it, reading it aloud.

After the first few words, however, he was drowned out by a cheer going up around the table and Ginny threw her arms around his neck, kissing his face all over. A feeling of relief washed over him as he read, and he sagged in his chair. He saw that Ginny was crying and laughing at the same time; he laughed and kissed the tip of her nose before gathering her to him, holding her tightly, the crumpled parchment now abandoned on the table with the dirty dishes. After stroking her hair affectionately for a moment, he rose and walked to the sofa, extending his hand to Percy, who shook it without standing.

"Thanks, Perce. I really—"

"Oh, don't thank me. The evidence was very clearly not pointing to you, once anyone bothered to take notice of it. The victim's blood was under Cho Chang's toenails, from when she'd slashed at him with her talons; she was questioned for a long time, and without Veritaserum, so no one can contest the results of the interrogation. Plus, since she trained up properly under McGonagall and was a registered Animagus, there are Ministry records of her Animagus form, photographs, all that. And other people at St. Mungo's saw a giant sea eagle flying past their windows. We had her dead to rights. She came clean and even offered to name other names, other Death Eaters. Although—"

Harry frowned. "What?"

Percy cleared his throat. "She didn't have very many nice things to say about *you*."

"I'm not exactly surprised. Because of me, Lucius Malfoy put her under Imperius, then I fixed her up with a bloke who turned out to be Voldemort's grandson *and* then he died because of me—second dead boyfriend in two years that she can blame on me."

Katie sat up now, stretching sleepily. "There is some more good news, though. She corroborated a lot of the story you said Jeffries told you."

Harry stared, confused. "She did? How?"

"Turns out she was in on a lot of it, too. She was a go-between for Bagman and Roger Davies early on. Being an Animagus helped with that. Jeffries probably didn't know. Actually, we've been finding more and more Death Eaters who were involved in that whole operation, and some of them didn't even know about each other. For security, I reckon. You-Know-Who always worked like that. Some were just involved in the Parliament side, some were part of Jeffries' organization, keeping an eye on him, some were involved in stealing the dragons, others were part of the Azkaban breakout."

Harry shook his head, pacing restlessly. "I can't believe we thought Voldemort wasn't doing *anything* all this time, when all of this was going on!"

Percy rose wearily and walked to the table, helping himself to some apple pie. "I can. They kept it scattered, so it seemed random and unpredictable. Who would have thought anyone would try to steal a herd of dragons? Who would have thought the Gringotts surrender was meant to lure Aurors to Azkaban? Who would have thought the dragons would be used to break prisoners out of there? And then there were the dementors...." He shuddered for a moment before putting a large piece of pie into his mouth.

Harry sat next to Ginny again with a sigh of relief. "Thank god they're gone now, before they could do *too* much damage...."

Fred and George looked at each other. "Erm—you don't know?" Fred said uncertainly. Harry had a bad feeling in the pit of his stomach.

"Know what?" he finally managed to say.

"They were being released in fits and starts, here and there," Fred said grimly. "When I'm traveling, sometimes I can't find a handy wizarding pub to stay in, or I just don't want to be seen by wizards, so I go to a Muggle pub instead; I was sitting in the bar of a pub a bit east of here, having a drink and watching the telly, when this news reader came on with a horrible story about entire villages being hit by dementors." Fred saw Harry's shock and hurried on. "That's not what he said, of course. He called it an 'inexplicable outbreak of hysteria.' Except there were also experts from all over the country saying they'd never seen hysteria like this. People going all quiet, like, and not paying attention to what they were doing anymore. There were some who had jobs—like bus drivers—who were killing people because they weren't taking proper notice of what they were doing, and no one cared—the dead bodies just piled up. People stopped eating and died from starvation. Little kids who hadn't been hit by the dementors didn't have anyone to take care of them, and some of *them* were dying from neglect—just awful." He swallowed and shook his head. "The first story I heard like it, I popped back here; George and Lee and I went to the villages that had been hit, taking chocolate. That helped some people who'd just had the happiness sucked out of them. But not—"

"—not the ones who'd been Kissed," Harry finished softly.

"*The hopeless ones shall walk the earth....*" Hermione said in a quiet sing-song. They all looked at her. "The Prophecy Maggie gave at Fraserburgh."

"Fraserburgh!" Fred exclaimed suddenly. "That was one of the villages!"

"Oh no!" Harry said, gripping the edge of the table, remembering the people gathered at the football game he'd attended, cheering on "The Broch" and enjoying a good rivalry.

"What—what about other villages in the area? Er—" he struggled, trying to remember the names of the places along the coast.

"Um, Peterhead, I think. A caravan park was hit....Inveralochy? Does that sound right, George?" His twin nodded, looking like he could use some chocolate now.

Hermione gasped. “We—we thought the Prophecy was just about what happened at Stonehenge. But the dementors were abroad even before that—”

George sighed, putting his arm protectively around Angelina’s shoulders. “Right. Those things need to feed. The Death Eaters couldn’t just keep them holed up somewhere. They probably didn’t want to spend too much time with them, anyway. They needed to give the dementors something to keep them going—”

“Why didn’t you tell anyone about this?” Harry demanded.

“We did!” Fred said hotly, looking stricken at the suggestion. “Percy. Aurors were all over northeastern Scotland, looking for those damn things. But they were gone again.”

“The dragons,” Harry muttered. “They were probably transported by dragon to a site just long enough to feed, then taken away again before the authorities could show up....”

“Right,” Katie agreed. “We never actually encountered any of them.” She shuddered. “I couldn’t believe what it was like when so many of them were together at Stonehenge. *The cold*. Took me back to my fourth year all over again....”

Hermione pounded the table, making the crockery jump. “I’ve fallen dreadfully behind in reading the papers from my parents! I’ll bet there was something in there!”

Ron rubbed her back gently, looking grim. “It’s not your fault. And the stories wouldn’t have actually mentioned dementors anyway, would they? From what Fred said, the Muggle news wasn’t very clear about what was going on.”

“But—but if I’d just read between the lines—”

“Dementors!” Harry exclaimed suddenly, remembering that he had another reason for visiting St. Mungo’s. “I never did get to see my aunt!”

Katie nodded. “That’ll have to wait. It was decided that, now that she was talking, the best thing to do was to take her back to Surrey. I went with her. Familiar face.”

“Erm, is everything all right, Katie? How did my uncle take her coming back?”

“Oh, all of that was fine. Along the way, though, she had some *choice* words to say to me. You know, about my having been dating you last summer and now being married to Percy. Charming woman, your aunt. Has she considered the foreign service? Life as a diplomat?” she suggested, her mouth twisting. Harry laughed, then sobered.

“Sorry. Was she really dreadful to you?” He shook his head. “Sounds like she’s back to normal all right. I reckon I can wait a little to visit, in that case.” Katie rolled her eyes; perhaps she had hoped that the dementor had sucked Petunia Dursley’s acrimony from her. Then he thought of something else and frowned at Percy. “What I don’t get is—how did Cho go from killing Jeffries to keep him from talking to talking so much herself?”

Percy shrugged. “We’ve seen that a lot. Loyal Death Eaters, carrying out orders, *until* they get caught. Then they’re falling over themselves to name names. Not all that odd, really.” He gave them un-Percy-like sly grin. “Rumors have been circulating in the Ministry cell blocks that something far *worse* than Azkaban is being cooked up to replace it, and no one wants to find out first-hand what it’s going to be.”

Ron goggled at him. “Worse than Azkaban? What could be worse than dementors?”

Fred, perfectly serious, said, “They must have heard they’re all going to be locked up in one big room while Percy reads his old cauldron-bottom reports to them day and night....”

Everyone broke up at that, even Percy and Katie. Ron, Lee and the twins cleared the table and started the dishes washing themselves while Angelina left to put the babies to bed with help from Hermione, who was cooing over little Rufus on her way out. Harry left for the drawing room with Ginny, glancing over his shoulder at the jovial cleaning-up.

“I never saw any of them lift a finger at the Burrow; your mum must be pleased that they’re finally doing housework here.”

She let out a snort of laughter for a second. “You don’t understand. Fred and George used to *beg* mum to let them help around the house. Total chaos. But there’s no one here to stop them. Percy and Katie are busy being Aurors and Angelina has her hands full with two babies, so they can’t be bothered. Someone has to do it. They have fun and just use ‘reparo’ quite liberally whenever anything breaks. Which is at least a few times a day.”

She grinned at him and opened the drawing room door. Although it was a month past the start of spring, the nights were still cold, so Harry started a fire in the grate and settled down with her on one of the couches, feeling very domestic and settled and trying not to think about the close call he’d almost had with going back to prison. Ginny’s cat, MacKenzie, curled up on Ginny’s lap and purred softly while Harry petted her.

A minute later, Percy and Katie joined them, sitting in quiet companionship on another couch.

For a moment, Katie's eyes met Harry's; she looked happy and content, giving him a very small nod before closing her eyes and leaning her head on Percy's shoulder. Harry gathered Ginny to him, sighing with satisfaction; the cat removed herself to the hearth rug, where she curled in a black circle and tucked her nose under her tail.

Harry remembered apologizing to Katie after leaving her flat and kissing her, on their first date, and her saying to him, "*You thought you could get yourself to forget the other girl? It's all right, Harry. Do you mind—do you mind if I ask you if it's Ginny Weasley?*" Katie had known all along that it was Ginny. He turned and pressed his lips to Ginny's brow before leaning back and closing his eyes. If only he'd known then that she didn't really love Draco Malfoy, and that Malfoy's cousin was really Ginny's sister....

He opened his eyes wide again and sat up. "Percy—are you sure Nita's all right? You said she still has her job—but what about her senior, Dr. Clancy? She thought he might be—"

"A Death Eater? Right in one. He's in custody, although he's no longer a chair. It did make it easier to bring him in; we waited until we had him secured to transfigure him again," he added, smirking. "Turns out that he knew what Jeffries was telling you because he was monitoring it from his assistant's office using a third eye that matched one where you were. He contacted Cho Chang to take care of the problem, since he couldn't risk incriminating himself; he reckoned that with you being a known golden griffin Animagus now, it wouldn't be too hard to pin on you once he messed about with the evidence. Good thing Nita stunned him when she did, before he could complete the frame-up. Now, if you don't mind my putting aside work for once, Harry—" Percy said sleepily, leaning his head on Katie's again.

Harry gawped at him. "That's why he kept leaping up when he was supposed to be talking to Nita! Well, then, if he's not an issue...I just wasn't sure that Nita was really all right. Are you sure she should have gone back to her flat all alone? What if someone ambushes her there? I only just found out today that Narcissa Malfoy is really Harrington-Smyth—there probably hasn't been time to track her down and capture her yet. Has there? What if—" He stopped, seeing Percy and Katie's sly glances.

"I think Nita's fine, Harry. No, we haven't got her 'aunt' in custody yet, but she's not spending the night alone," Katie told him, a smile twisting the corners of her mouth.

"She's—oh, good. Someone's protecting her, then? She has somewhere else to go?"

Katie looked merry, like she had a secret. "The same 'somewhere' she's been going for a couple of weeks now. My dad's flat."

Harry's jaw dropped. "What? Nita—your dad—"

Katie snuggled down in Percy's arms again, looking very happy. "That's right. I haven't seen him this cheerful since—well, never, really."

"I think they're good for each other," Percy proclaimed, sounding more like his old pompous self.

"Huh," Harry said, not having expected this. "She didn't say anything...."

"She wouldn't, would she? Nita's not—not used to sharing things. Maggie told me she's been trying to draw her out a bit, but it's like pulling teeth," Ginny said knowingly.

"But your dad went to prison because of Lucius Malfoy!" he said to Katie.

"She doesn't exactly go about singing his praises anymore," Katie observed.

Ginny nodded and drew Harry's head back to her shoulder. "Settle down," she said sleepily. "Spend some time with me before we have to go off to our separate rooms...."

Just as she was saying this, the drawing room door opened, admitting Ron, Hermione and the twins. George looked rather surprised.

"You're joking, right?" George asked, staring to guffaw.

Harry jerked his head around and stared at George. "About what?"

"About going off to separate rooms. Do you think there's any point to pretending that the four of you," he pointed at Ron and Hermione, in addition to Harry and Ginny, "aren't going to do a little bed-swapping in the middle of the night? Couldn't you at least have a little consideration for the rest of us and not make a racket with the creaking floorboards and doors? Just go to bed where you're actually going to be and stop pretending...."

Harry gawped at George. "But—but—Ginny—brothers—" He knew he wasn't being coherent, but he couldn't seem to form a sentence, he was so shocked.

"You can thank Ron," George informed him. "Of course, it's not like he doesn't have a self-interest. *He gets to spend the night with his girlfriend....*" This made Hermione turn deep red; she looked like she wanted to flee the room.

"Actually," Ron said, straightening up so that he towered over the twins, "I prefer to think of it as my having learned to be mature about it all," he said in the most pompous voice Harry had ever

heard him use. "Harry is my best friend," he said nobly; "Ginny is—"

"Oh, yes," George said, rolling his eyes, "you're being quite mature about it because then you and Hermione can—"

"George!" Ginny said sharply, seeing Hermione's discomfort. "*Shut up!*"

George merely grinned with amusement. "I'm just saying—"

Harry noticed that Fred was between Ron and George still, his hands deep in his pockets, giving Harry a very hostile look. "Are you all right, Fred?" Harry asked uncertainly. Fred hadn't been pleased to find him and Ginny in bed together the last time Harry had stayed at Hog's End. Fred's closed mouth moved about as though there were some very choice words he wanted to say. Suddenly, George smacked him sharply on the back of the head.

"Hey!" Fred exclaimed.

"Yeah. He's fine, aren't you *Alfred*? Not going to make any trouble, *are* you?" his twin said pointedly.

Fred put his hand on the back of his head. "Do you want to be hexed?" he demanded.

Harry stifled his laughter; he looked at Ginny, who, to his surprise, was turning a bright red to match Hermione. *He* certainly hadn't known anything about any bed-swapping; evidently, Ron was planning for it to be a surprise.

"Tell him, Ron," George said quietly; Harry only caught it by reading George's lips.

Ron smiled as though he had a secret and leaned over to whisper something to Fred, who started laughing. "Oh, okay. That's all right, then."

Ron clapped him on the shoulder, grinning. "I thought you'd think so."

Fred looked a little uncertain for a moment. "Are you absolutely sure?"

Ron continued to grin and laid his finger alongside his nose. "Trust me."

Fred laughed again and threw himself into a chair. "Thanks, little brother," he said, although Ron was more than a few inches taller than him now.

"Ah, I see," Harry said quickly. "It's a trick. We'll find that we have a bed of nails, or there's a spell on the room so we fall into a deep sleep the second we walk in the door..."

Ron looked affronted. "Not at all! This is—everyone behaving like adults," he said in oddly sober voice; the twins looked like they were ready to burst. "Although for *some* of us there are fringe benefits..." His eyes slid toward Hermione again.

"Oh, Ginny!" Hermione said in a strangled voice, very pointedly changing the subject. "You should have seen the babies having their baths. Rowena was being so adorable..."

A terrified look abruptly crossed Ron's face and he mouthed the word *babies* to Harry. "Harry, how about a game of chess?" he said, standing quickly. Harry tried not to laugh and agreed, kissing Ginny on the head, then following Ron across the room to the chessboard. As they set up the board, Ron shook his head, looking across the room at Hermione telling Ginny every cunning thing Rufus and Rowena had done while Angelina was bathing them and getting them ready for bed. He shook his head, starting to play.

"Don't worry, Ron," Harry said, grinning, making his first move. "She probably doesn't want to have kids right away—" He felt like getting a little revenge. He still wasn't sure what was going to greet him when he and Ginny went to sleep in his room later.

"Babies," Ron said again, taking Harry's pawn. "*Urgh.*" Harry just laughed.

\* \* \* \* \*

"So."

"So."

They stood looking at each other nervously, the door of Harry's room closed securely. Harry was very aware of the bed out of the corner of his eye and both his and Ginny's bags at the foot. So far they hadn't experienced any ill effects from just walking into his bedroom, but it was like waiting for the other shoe to drop. There had to be a good reason for Ginny's brothers to agree to let her spend the night in Harry's room.

"Well..."

"Well," she said in a falsely bright voice, looking as though she'd never seen the room.

*This is stupid*, he thought. *It's not as though we haven't done this before.* But then he realized that it wasn't strictly true. They'd never spent the night together, except for the two nights in this same room, one during which Harry stayed on the window seat, and one during which *Fred* slept on the window seat. They'd made love once more since the Hogsmeade trip, although they'd had two opportunities. Both chances were Saturday afternoons spent in Maggie's rooms; she'd wanted to make up for helping to get Harry suspended and invited them to tea, then grinned at them and left.

They didn't have to worry about being out of Gryffindor Tower during the patrols, they didn't have to worry about being someplace where Harry had been with Hermione. It was perfect. (Although Ron's reaction later left something to be desired.)

The next Saturday, Maggie had arranged to give them her rooms again, but this time Ron had scheduled them for an early morning Quidditch practice and thoroughly exhausted them. They went to meet Maggie, still in their Quidditch gear, and when she left them alone this time, they both promptly collapsed onto her bed and fell into a deep slumber. When she returned, tentatively creeping into the room, she woke them with her laughter.

"I thought there was a *different* reason for the pair of you to miss dinner. I didn't think it was excessive *napping*." She'd had a hard time restraining her laughter. They'd had to leave in order to get back to Gryffindor Tower before the nine o'clock deadline, and along the way, Ginny had stopped and apologized to Harry.

"Don't apologize; I fell asleep, too," he reminded her, kissing her on the forehead.

"It's just that—I feel like we wasted a perfectly good opportunity—"

"Now, I won't hear any more of that. Time spent in bed with you under *any* circumstances isn't a waste of time, as far as I'm concerned. I want to spend a lot of time in bed with you in the years to come, and not just doing the first thing that comes to mind," he said, starting to nibble at her neck. She laughed at first, then sighed.

"And what sort of things aren't the *obvious* things?" she asked, punctuated by a gasp as he brought his mouth up to her ear.

"Sleeping, reading, talking into the night, eating snacks and getting crumbs in the sheets, doing crossword puzzles...." he murmured, breathing warmly into her ear. She shivered.

"Keep that up and I'm dragging you back to Maggie's. You don't do crosswords," she said suddenly, pulling back and looking at his face.

He shrugged. "I know. My dad did. I reckon, when I think of being with you....I remember seeing them that night...."

"The night they died," she whispered, bringing her hand up to cup his cheek in her palm.

He nodded. "I just—that's why—when I had the chance—"

"—to save your mum, yes, sssh, I know—"

And she was holding him and kissing his neck while he tried to calm down again. Finally, he backed up from her and smiled the best that he could. "Anyway, we should get back to the common room....And no more about wasted time in bed, all right?"

She smiled at him, making his heart leap. "All right. I promise."

They stood now in his large, sparsely furnished room and continued to stare at each other awkwardly, hearing the other Weasleys bustling about in the upstairs corridor, bidding each other goodnight and going to their rooms.

"Um, I'm going to brush my teeth and use the loo. Be right back," she said quickly.

Harry swallowed and paced for a moment. Had Ron and the twins planned a surprise for them? It was nerve-wracking not to know. While he waited, he took his pajama trousers out and quickly changed into them. He wore nothing from the waist up, as usual, save for his basilisk pendant and Sandy around his arm. He started to creep his hand toward the pendant, but thought better of it. Instead, he checked his breath and grimaced, then took his toothbrush out of his bag. When he walked down the corridor to the bathroom, however, it was not Ginny but Hermione who was leaving it, carrying a small bag which she quickly thrust behind her back. He stared at her guilty-looking face, perplexed.

"Is everything okay, Hermione?" he asked, not sure he wanted an answer.

"Okay? Erm, of course. Everything is fine. Everything is as it *should* be."

She was speaking in a queer high voice, but before he could say anything else to her she was skittering away from him toward her and Ron's room. Ginny practically ploughed into him as she left the bathroom, and her face immediately turned a deep red.

"Oh, well, there you are," she said, every bit as queer as Hermione. Harry had no idea what was going on. Had Ron and the twins given Ginny something in her food to make her act strangely? If so, the joke might be on Ron; Hermione seemed to have eaten it, too.

"Yeah. Tooth-brushing time for me too," he explained, waving his brush as though it was a wand. She smiled, her gaze lingering for a moment on his chest. He suddenly wished he had brought a dressing gown, in case one of her brothers found them standing in the corridor like this and changed their minds about them spending the night together.

She practically ran to the bedroom while he entered the bathroom. When he emerged, the corridor was quiet and empty. He was very conscious of every step he took making the floor creak

and groan. Once back in the bedroom, he found that Ginny was in bed already, the covers pulled up to her chin, seemingly asleep. He walked around the bed and climbed in, extinguishing the candles. The waning moon cast a silvery light over the room.

"Ginny?" he whispered to her, lying on his left side, wondering what was going on.

"Yes, Harry?" she whispered back, lying very still, not moving anything but her lips.

"Is everything all right?"

She opened her eyes and looked at him; even in the moonlight, Harry could see that she looked very unhappy.

"What is it, Ginny?" he said, his hand going to her cheek instinctively, a knot starting to form in his stomach. What could be upsetting her so?"

"It's stupid, really," she said in a muffled voice, turning her head to the pillow so that his hand was on the back of her head now.

"What?"

She sat up abruptly and held the sheet and blanket against her front in a defensive posture. "Well—here we are, and—and we can't *do* anything because—because—"

Harry sat up, frowning in confusion. "Just because your brothers know we're in here? Or because they're not fighting it? What? I don't understand."

"No, my brothers have nothing to do with it," she said impatiently. "This is me—"

"We can't do anything because of you," Harry said slowly, trying to understand. "But you *want* to do something? Forgive me, but I still don't—"

She huffed impatiently. "Harry! Ron—Ron isn't the only one in the family who has—who has something *happen* to him once a month—" She looked at him with wide eyes, waiting for him to understand and looking like she hoped she didn't have to be more clear.

"Oh!" Harry said immediately. "Why didn't you say so? Is that all? That's why you're so upset?" It never occurred to him that there was a simple biological reason.

A tear rolled down her cheek and he wiped it away with his thumb, pressing his palm to her cheek again, smiling at her. "I know all about that kind of thing, Ginny. I was the only one home when it happened to Jamie the first time, and I had to help her. Plus, I *did* have Hermione for my girlfriend for over a year!" Now she looked even more upset about his mentioning Hermione, and he struggled to repair the new damage. "I just meant—you wouldn't believe the lecture Hermione gave me about this. Complete with charts and graphs. No, really. I am *not* making this up," he said, laughing.

She was also laughing now, which was a big improvement over her being jealous. "You should have seen Ron after she gave him *his* lecture," Harry went on. "He looked like he would have preferred to take his O.W.L.s again. This is a *good* thing!"

"Good!" she said. "Said like someone who's never had to go through it."

"I didn't mean—listen, at least we know the potion is working, that it hasn't worn off, right?" She conceded this with a nod. "You shouldn't be upset! I told you before—no time in bed with you is ever wasted. Just having you next to me is wonderful. I'm going to be very spoiled after a week when I have to go back to school and sleep alone again...." He leaned toward her and kissed her on the lips lightly, then her brow. She sighed deeply.

"I just thought—what timing! For all of them—except Fred, until Ron said something to him—to be all right with this, and then—"

"Ron!" Harry said suddenly. "He knew! *That's* why he was all right with our spending the night together. And he told Fred—so that's why Fred calmed down. And Ron may have told Percy and George before that—"

Ginny frowned. "How could Ron know when we were downstairs? I didn't find out until I went to the loo—and then I had to yell for Hermione to bring me something—"

Harry pointed to his nose. "Werewolf, Ginny. He smelled the blood."

She looked indignant. "Why that big overgrown—"

He interrupted her by pulling her face to his and claiming her mouth; when he pulled back again, she seemed to have lost her train of thought and had a little smile that made him think all too vividly of what they *wouldn't* be doing. "Don't be angry with Ron, Ginny. "Listen—we get to sleep in the same bed every night during the holiday without your brothers killing me. I never expected anything so wonderful this week....don't be angry with Ron. He's done us a big favor, really. Come on—let's get some rest."

She gave him a small smile and put her head on the pillow, and he also rested his head, gazing into her eyes. After a moment, however, she whispered, "I need to roll over. Sorry to turn my back on you, but I can never start off on my right side," she explained.

He grinned at the back of her head. "I don't mind; that's one more thing I've learned about you." He kissed her cheek tenderly. "Good night, Ginny. I love you."

She turned her face to his and caught his lips. "I love you too, Harry. Good night."

He put his head down again, snaking his arm around her waist; she pulled his hand against her stomach and sighed for a moment, but soon exhaustion overwhelmed her and her deep, regular breathing told him she was fast asleep.

\* \* \* \* \*

He fell into bed every night, almost unconscious before his head hit the pillow. Hermione was putting him and Ron through their paces getting ready for the practical N.E.W.T.s during the day, and for the written exams in the evenings. Percy and the twins allowed them to turn a large part of the garden into a practice area, and after spending the first three mornings of the holiday fighting Chthonians they'd created from sowing dragons' teeth in the loamy soil, Hermione was finally satisfied that they could move on to something else. Harry loved waking up next to Ginny in the mornings, watching her sleep a little before she opened her eyes and gazed up at him lovingly, then holding her in his arms and kissing her into wakefulness, although neither one of them felt much like getting up after that, rather than just lying together in a heap of tangled sheets and blankets.

Finally, on Thursday, Hermione allowed him, Ginny and Ron to get in some Quidditch practice. Ginny only blocked one-third of the balls Ron sent sailing toward the improvised hoops in the garden of Hog's End, but he was impressed that she'd blocked that many, and so was Harry, given Ron's unstoppable nature. After they'd eaten dinner, she asked whether anyone needed to use the loo before she took a shower, which she said she needed to relax her aching muscles. Harry knew that she ached from trying to block Ron's goals, and that she'd be exhausted when she came to bed. He wasn't as tired as when he'd played a real game of Quidditch, as no one was trying to catch the Snitch before him or brain him with a Bludger. While she showered, he changed into his pajamas and crawled into bed, knowing that he should reread some of his History of Magic book but instead picking up *Flying with the Cannons* yet again.

"*The Daughter and Lion shall be one.*"

He swallowed, looking down at Sandy, on his left arm as usual. "What?"

He didn't get an answer, however, for a moment later, the bedroom door had opened and Ginny entered, wearing her old plaid dressing gown, her hair not completely dry but sleeked back from her face, making her dark eyes look very large.

"Feeling better?" he asked extending his hand. She walked to the bed and took it.

"A bit. You didn't peek?" she asked him with a mischievous glint in her eye.

"Now, I only do that when you've expressly instructed me to," he said, pretending to be more shocked than he was. It wasn't as though he hadn't been *tempted*.

She laughed, then groaned, tilting her head back and forth. "I don't suppose you could give me a little neck rub? That practice today....I've become soft, I think."

"Of course you haven't! Although we'll probably need to have intense practices every day next week for Saturday's match." He directed her to turn around and sit on the edge of the bed. He sat behind her, his legs flanking hers, and moved her damp coil of hair out of the way to access her neck. It was difficult with her dressing gown in the way, so he pulled it off her shoulders—only to find that she wasn't wearing anything else under it.

His breathing sped up; he stared as if transfixed at her upper back, water from her shower still beading between her shoulder blades. *We can't really do anything*, he reminded himself as he committed himself to just moving his hands over her shoulders and neck. When she squirmed backwards, however, he knew that she could feel that this was having an effect on him, and he could have *sworn* that he heard her give a very small giggle.

He couldn't resist breathing warmly on her neck, enjoying the shiver he sent through her; he continued to move his hands over her shoulders, then lightly tickled them down her back and up to her neck again. His stomach flipped when she responded by tipping her head back and groaning, arching her spine a little. When she did this he had a clear view for a moment of her bare chest, also still glistening with shower water, and that did nothing for his self control. Harry pressed his lips to her neck, even while knowing that he shouldn't torture himself much longer this way. However, just as he was about to say something about it, Ginny said, "Harry?"

"Mmm?" he responded, his mouth still on her neck. Before she went on speaking she heaved a great contented sigh.

"The reason why my brothers let us share a room....well, let's just say that what was true five days ago is no longer true. I think they forgot that it's not a permanent condition...."

He lifted his head and looked at her; she turned to face him, the desire in her eyes making her meaning very clear. She had only to lean forward a half inch to capture his lips with hers; Harry felt an enormous relief roll through him. They didn't have to hold back, they didn't have to pretend this wasn't what they wanted. As they kissed, Harry slipped his hands under her arms and cupped her breasts in his palms, pressing his chest to her back, the basilisk amulet between them. She gasped into his mouth, arching her back again, pushing herself into his hands. He moved his lips down her throat, turning her over and lying back, pulling her on top of him, her dressing gown coming away completely. She licked her way up his chest, covering his mouth with hers again as he held her to him, running his hands down her silky back, feeling her soft, damp hair cascade around him.

Merely sleeping in the same bed with Ginny had been both wonderful and torturous during the holiday; now the torture was over as she removed his pajama trousers for him and they touched each other as they'd wanted to during the previous five nights. Still, Harry was mindful of the fact that four of her brothers were in the house with them, and that Ron had extraordinarily acute hearing. When he wanted to cry out, he clamped his mouth shut, and when Ginny's whimpers grew ever louder, Harry pulled her mouth to his, swallowing her cries before she went limp and collapsed, a glazed look in her eyes.

He pulled the sheet and blanket over their bodies, still entwined, feeling that everything had finally come round right in his life—almost. He framed her face between his hands and stared into her dark eyes, unable to remember how he had stayed away from her for as long as he had. And then he remembered that he hadn't—not really. He'd been unable to resist meeting her on top of the Astronomy Tower, flying with her, kissing her and declaring his love, even though she had still been with Malfoy....

A sudden rush of sympathy for Draco Malfoy washed over him; he would never know this connection with her. Malfoy cared about Mariah, but Harry remembered well what it was like to sleep with Hermione, his friend whom he cared about and would defend to the death—but still, he hadn't been in love with her. That something extra was missing. Whom did Draco Malfoy see if he were to hold the amulet now? Did he see Mariah, or did he still see Ginny? And how on earth were they ever to get his help in getting rid of Voldemort, especially while he was full of hatred for Harry and love for Ginny?

For that matter, what could Ginny do to help? His throat constricted for a moment as he remembered what his mother had done, and he held Ginny more tightly, suddenly having trouble breathing as he remembered, in his other life, getting the letter from his stepfather telling him that Ginny had been killed....

Ginny put her cheek on his chest and whispered, "What are you thinking about?"

Harry hesitated. "The Prophecy," he said, somewhat truthfully. "Voldemort. All that. Us. How-wondering how—"

"Sssh," she hushed him. "I talked to Maggie about this. She said that Prophecies are tricky things. Think about the one she gave at Fraserburgh. Now, that took less time to be fulfilled than the one she gave when she was a little girl, but even if you'd worked out that 'when the night and day must needs agree' meant the vernal equinox, you couldn't have known that finding the dementors' 'berth' would mean working out how to send them into Limbo, or that they would be at Stonehenge to begin with..."

Harry started to sit up, so Ginny had to roll off him; she pulled herself into a sitting position while Harry digested her words, his head feeling like it was going to explode. "Hang on—*what* prophecy she gave when she was a little girl?" But even as he asked, he had a strange feeling that he knew the answer. *It wasn't Trelawney*. "Do you mean—Maggie gave *the* Prophecy? The one *we're* in? And Malfoy?"

She nodded. "I—I thought you knew," she whispered. "My—my dad was the one who told Professor Dumbledore it was Trelawney, all those years ago. They both wanted to protect Maggie, so no one would know she'd done it. Dad and Professor Trelawney, that is. I thought Sirius would have told you, since he was the Lion in the first triangle—"

"What?" Harry exploded, heedless of noise now. "*Sirius?* I—I always assumed—assumed that it was my dad—"

She shook her head. "No. When Peter Pettigrew was still in custody and was talking, he and Sirius had a long talk about the first triangle...Pettigrew was the first Moon Child. His birthday is the twenty-eighth of June. See, evidently Professor Snape was worried that *he* was the Moon Child. His birthday is the ninth of July, which also fits the Arithmancy numbers. Sirius told him that it was actually Pettigrew, that You-Know-Who himself knew this, and that he knew Sirius was the Lion. *It was* Sirius who made the decision to change the Secret Keeper," she whispered, looking down and away from him.

"It wasn't Sirius' fault that my parents were killed!" he said hotly, although his chest hitched when he thought of this. *Wasn't it?* said a voice inside him. *Wasn't it his fault that Wormtail knew where they were and could tell Voldemort?* The beating of his heart was like someone punching him repeatedly in the chest. He remembered seeing Sirius in his sister's bedroom with his mother, his rage making the door hit the wall....

"No, it wasn't," she agreed, not knowing what he was thinking. "But he *contributed* to the fall of You-Know-Who, in his way, just as your mother did, by sacrificing herself. And—and in his way, Peter Pettigrew contributed as well..."

"No! He's a traitor and a murderer!" Harry cried angrily.

Ginny put her hand on his cheek. "Yes, he's that *too*," she said softly. "But—but all three people in the triangle did *something*...."

Harry swallowed. "Yeah, well I don't see what Draco Malfoy could possible contribute apart from being an insufferable prat. The last time I checked, that quality wasn't known for felling Dark Lords," he said bitterly. Ginny swallowed and sat back on her haunches.

"Neither is being a stupid little girl who lets herself be controlled by an enchanted diary," she said softly. He quickly took her hands, starting to speak, but she pulled one hand away and put it over his mouth. "No; you don't have to say anything. I know you love me, Harry. But I also know you think I'm useless for this...."

"No!" he insisted, pulling her to him. She shook her head.

"I'm not an Auror like your mum was, and I don't have a child I can die for, but who knows? Maybe by the time we—we fulfill the Prophecy—"

"No!" he said again, his hands tightening on her back as he whispered into her neck; "you are not going to die! Not if I have something say about it!"

She pulled back from him, and the look in her eyes frightened him more than anything he'd ever seen. "You might not *have* anything to say about it, Harry," she whispered. "It was your mum's sacrifice that did the trick last time....Ever since I found out that I'm the Daughter of War, I've—I've been thinking about this—about what I'm willing to do—"

He gasped. "No, Ginny! You—you haven't been thinking you have to *die*, have you?"

She drew her lips into a line and looked away from him. "How could I not think about it?" she said so quietly he could barely hear her. She faced him again, her eyes full of tears. "None of us know what we'll be called on to do. I just—I just want to *be* with you until we—we find out—"

She lunged forward and kissed him suddenly, hungrily, with a desperation that he knew was born of her fatalistic thinking. She continued to cry as they kissed, and he could taste her salt tears running into their mouths. He gathered her to him, rolling her over beneath him; her hair was dry now, and it was like a cloud of fire around her head; he moved his mouth down her throat, trying not to cry himself.

"You're not going to die, Ginny," he whispered as his lips moved over her flushed skin, but even as he said it, he wondered whether he believed it. *She died young in that other world; who's to say she's not meant to die young in this one, too? And if Voldemort falls—*

"You're not going to die, Ginny," he repeated loudly, trying to still the voice in his brain. He moved up to kiss her mouth, but he had the feeling, as they brought their bodies together again in a denial of death, that neither one of them completely believed it. Afterward, he gathered her to him, holding her as close to him as he could without being joined to her again, feeling every breath she took, her ribs beneath his fingers, while they both lay very still, staring at the moonlight moving over the ceiling. Finally, they both dropped off to sleep close to dawn, having beaten back real death for the night, but no longer able to stave off the temporary one.

\* \* \* \* \*

*He passed through the gates to Hogwarts, pausing for a moment to look at the statues of winged boars at the top of the gateposts. It seemed to be taking him a very long time to reach the castle; he continued to put one foot in front of the other, and still, he seemed to be no closer than when he started.....*

*He could see that someone was waiting for him on the front steps of the castle, but he was too far away to see who it was. Then suddenly, everything seemed to speed up. With no effort or movement on his part, the castle seemed to be rushing at him, and he looked up, dizzy, to see his sister standing on the steps, smiling down at him.*

*She looked as he remembered her, the dark hair curling slightly on her shoulders, glinting red where the light hit it. Her large green eyes were exactly like his mother's, but the freckles on her nose were all her own. She was wearing Hogwarts robes and smiling at him, making his heart turn over.*

"Hello, Harry."

*He wanted to run toward her and hug her tightly, she seemed so real, but suddenly, she changed. That's all he knew; he couldn't tell exactly HOW she changed. He was reminded of Fleur transforming into a frightful creature of vengeance at the wedding, but Jamie didn't look anything like a veela. And yet, still, he knew she was his sister...*

"Jamie!"

"Harry!"

Harry sat bolt upright, his heart going very fast. The sun already seemed to be quite high in the sky. He checked his watch; it was after ten o'clock, and he groaned. "We should probably get up." Seeing Ginny lying beside him with nothing on, however, the dream receded from his consciousness and he started to lean over her, a smile pulling at the corners of his mouth. "Unless you'd like to spend some more time in bed, that is...."

Ginny stayed on her back, looking at him incredulously. "Yes, because that's exactly what every girl wants to do after hearing her boyfriend wake up calling his *sister's* name."

He pulled back, struggling to remember the dream; it was more difficult than he felt it should have been, as though a memory charm had been put on him. "That's right—Jamie—I was dreaming—"

"Mm hm," Ginny said, fishing around amongst the sheets for her dressing gown.

"No, really—it was weird, though. I don't think it was really her; she *changed*."

Ginny stopped. "Changed how?"

He told her what he could remember about his dream while she put on the dressing gown and tied the belt. She stared into space, thinking. "Well, I don't remember Trelawney or my sister saying anything about how to interpret dreams like that....are you sure you're not still thinking about Cho? Did Jamie change into a giant eagle?"

He shook his head. "No, that wasn't it." He sighed and closed his eyes, trying to think. "I'm not sure what it meant...."

Ginny leaned over to kiss him on the forehead, just next to his scar. "I'm sorry I was a bit snippy. I'm—well, frankly, I'm often a little out-of-sorts in the morning—"

He grinned at her. "Yeah, I've noticed that when you come down to the common room to warm up for running."

She made a face, her hand on the doorknob. "You don't know how long I resisted getting up early to run in the mornings. I'll be right back; going to the loo."

He heard Hermione's voice as she passed his door, which made him think of Ron. He suddenly realized that they could have a small problem on their hands unless something was done, and he ran to the door, looking for Hermione in the corridor; she was fully dressed, waiting outside the bathroom for Ginny to finish. When he hissed at her she gaped at him in his pajama trousers.

"Well, look at the lie-abad! Thought you'd join the waking world, finally?"

"I have to talk to you!" he whispered urgently. "Get in here!"

She frowned at his rudeness, but he didn't feel he had time to worry about social niceties, pulling her into the room when she was about three feet away still and closing the door abruptly. She put her fists on her hips and demanded, "What's going on?"

"Where's Ron?"

"In the garden, doing kata. *Some* people have been up for a while. What's *wrong* with you, Harry?"

"Well, Ginny said you helped her with something on her first night here—well, it's been about five days, and she doesn't need that sort of 'help' anymore, so last night we—erm—"

"Ooooh," she breathed slowly. "And you're worried Ron will get wind of it."

"Literally."

She grinned. "I have just the spell. It will deaden his olfactory nerves—his sense of smell. He won't detect a thing."

"You're sure? What if it doesn't have an effect on werewolves?"

She shrugged. "I'll make it strong enough that he wouldn't be able to smell Fang if he was standing one foot behind him. Trust me. I'll take care of it."

"Thanks. Because I really could have done without his trying to take my head off at dinner a few weeks back when Maggie let us into her rooms for the afternoon...."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "He wouldn't speak to me for three days because I gave him detention for that. What did he think I would do? I'm Head Girl, and he'd just attacked the Head Boy with a bowl of mashed potatoes."

Harry grimaced. "Not that his having detention did much for my dignity. Malfoy loved that,

seeing old Potty having to walk out of the Great Hall with mashed-potato hair.”

She looked like she was trying not to laugh. “Ron’s trying to be mature about this, he is. I think it would be easier for him if he didn’t have to think about it, like his brothers, but because he’s a werewolf and can *detect* certain things, he feels like he has no choice but to think about it. So I’ll just help him along a little with the not-thinking-about-it.”

He pulled her to him in a hug. “You’re a lifesaver, Hermione.”

Ginny opened the door and looked at them with a raised eyebrow. Hermione pulled away from Harry and said, “I’ll take care of it now,” leaving quickly. Ginny closed the door after her and slowly walked to Harry.

“Take care of what?”

He pulled her to him in a long, slow kiss, while he untied her dressing gown and pushed it from her shoulders. He whispered in her ear what Hermione was going to do and Ginny laughed. “Oh, thank goodness! I—I was worried about doing anything this morning in case—in case it would be too obvious to him—but now—”

Harry grinned at her and picked her up, carrying her to the bed.

\* \* \* \* \*

Ron was convinced he had a head cold the rest of the time they spent at Hog’s End because he was incapable of smelling *anything*. Hermione had very obligingly brewed him Pepper-Up Potion, which had had no effect (she had assured Harry that this would be the case). When they’d been back at Hogwarts for a couple of days, she took the spell off him, and he declared that his cold had simply gone away on its own; his appetite increased again, as food hadn’t held much interest for him while he hadn’t been able to smell it.

Harry felt as though he’d been through far more than one year of schooling since September. He seemed to be constantly leaving the school and returning. As expected, Ron had them practice very hard all week leading up to the Quidditch Final against Slytherin. When Harry walked into the stadium at the start of the game, he noticed that Munro Kirkner was sitting with his sister. A number of girls in his vicinity were giving Munro very appreciative looks; he smiled ingratiatingly at them. When he wasn’t looking (although he might still have been aware of it happening) this produced swoons.

Harry swallowed on seeing the Kirkners; there was still no word about their mother. He hadn’t thought of them during the holiday, having been so caught up in being with Ginny, preparing for the match and doing N.E.W.T. revision. The Kirkner family problems had gone clean out of his brain. *But they’re also my problems*, he reminded himself, aware of Draco Malfoy’s pale head out of the corner of his eye. He remembered the cavalier way he’d stepped forward and blamed Harry for the loss of the dementors, dragons and various Death Eaters. *He doesn’t need a bloody Obedience Charm to be Voldemort’s lap dog*, Harry thought irritably, as Madam Hooch threw the Quaffle into the air.

Ron took the Quaffle immediately, zooming toward the Slytherin goals. Harry shot straight up, surveying the field from this lofty vantage point, watching for a glint of gold. Malfoy sped toward the Gryffindor goals, where Ginny was hovering, although she didn’t have to work at the moment, as Ron had just scored twice on the Slytherin Keeper.

“TWENTY TO NOTHING, GRYFFINDOR!” Seamus Finnegan cried.

A Bludger rushed at Harry and he dropped down about fifteen feet, unpleasantly reminded of the rogue Bludger Bagman had sent after him. Unfortunately, another Bludger hit Ron’s broom, sending him off course so that the Slytherin Keeper could throw the Quaffle to one of his team’s Chasers, who immediately started down the pitch toward Ginny.

“And Ginny Weasley BLOCKS the attempt by SLYTHERIN!” Seamus yelled as Ginny hurled the Quaffle toward her brother, now weaving between the other players, leaping up to grab the red ball from the air, bring his broom around and head back toward the Slytherin goals. Harry excitedly followed, far above, adrenaline pumping through him as he enjoyed watching Ron play. The Quaffle sailed through the far left Slytherin goal and Harry couldn’t help thinking that this might be Ron’s last game of competitive Quidditch. Ron still didn’t know what he wanted to do after finishing school; he thought he’d known what he wanted to do back when he’d been playing Quidditch for England, but now....

“WEASLEY SCORES AGAIN! NOW IT’S FORTY TO NOTHING, GRYFFINDOR!”

Harry grinned at Ron and swooped around the edge of the pitch again, trying to avoid the other players and the Bludgers. Twice Slytherin tried to score on Ginny, and on the third try one of them finally made it. However, Ron had also been busy, so they were up by fifty points. Harry scanned the field again, trying not to be distracted by reflections from wristwatches or eyeglasses. Draco

Malfoy always seemed to be at the opposite end of the field, as though avoiding him. This was odd, as Malfoy's usual *modus operandi* was to tail Harry, leaving it up to him to find the Snitch and then trying to beat him to it. As this had never worked for him, Harry didn't really blame him for changing his strategy.

Finally, Harry saw it. He tried not to look like he was going anywhere in particular, keeping an eye on Malfoy, who was again hovering near Ginny, his mouth moving. Harry wished he knew what he was saying to her, but there was no time to think. He made a sharp dive, hoping Malfoy would think it just a feint, and when he pulled out of the dive he was holding the Snitch over his head, a triumphant grin on his face. The team rushed him and the screaming and hugging started. When they had all landed and were going round, embracing each teammate in turn, Harry finally reached Ginny, who slid her arms up around his neck with no hesitation, kissing him deeply, while the rest of Gryffindor House raised Ron, the team captain, to their shoulders, carrying him back to the castle.

Harry and Ginny grinned at each other and followed the crowd at a more leisurely pace, their arms around each other's shoulders. When they were about halfway up the lawn, however, Harry felt the hairs standing up on the back of his neck; he turned to see Draco Malfoy standing by himself in the middle of the pitch, glaring at him. Harry turned to face forward again, but he couldn't prevent a strange shiver from passing through him, nor could he stop seeing the pale, pointed face, much as he tried.

\* \* \* \* \*

Harry couldn't believe it; in the middle of the celebration, there Hermione sat, doing revision. He left Ginny, Ron and Tony, who were in the midst of the merriment, to stride over to where she sat by the windows, bringing her a bottle of butterbeer.

"You're not *serious*, Hermione. We've won the Quidditch Cup! Come join the party. You're the captain's girlfriend; Ron's wanted this since first year! Hey—hang on a minute," he said suddenly, noticing the book she was reading. "Isn't that *my* book?"

"Yes. Sorry. I asked Ron to 'borrow' it from you so I could read through it, just to play it safe. You can't be too careful with N.E.W.T.s. After all, I've decided to sit for the Ancient Runes N.E.W.T., which is very tricky, and this book is *full* of runes..."

"Well, I don't think you want to mess about with that book. Remember what happened to me and Ron when we tried one little spell? Turned Sandy into the image of my sister and had everyone in the school thinking we were sneaking strange girls into the castle..."

She laughed. "I'd forgotten about that."

"I haven't," Sandy said.

"I didn't ask you," he hissed at her.

"I know," Sandy responded calmly.

"Anyway," Hermione said, her attention back on the book, "I wasn't able to read a lot of it. That spell you used was Latin, and it was also given in Greek and medieval French or Italian, or it might be Provençal—but some are in languages I don't recognize at *all*..."

Harry moved around the table and bent over the book with her as she turned the pages. He stopped her after a few pages, recognizing something from his other life, from his visit to Rabbi Pelta's synagogue. "Isn't this Hebrew?" he said, running his finger along the page. However, alongside the column of blocky letters was some flowing script, and next to that, a column of strange symbols that seemed to be made from very small triangles.

"That looks like cuneiform!" Hermione exclaimed.

"Like *what*?" Harry frowned.

"Cuneiform. It was a very early writing method—possibly the first one, apart from using simple slashes for counting things. Small triangular pieces of wood were pressed into soft clay and the clay was dried. This must be a *very* old spell. I wish I could read it..."

"Well, I know who we can ask about the Hebrew," Harry said, striding across the room to where Ruth was perched on Tony's lap, her arm around his shoulders. "Tony!" he exclaimed. "Fantastic game. Listen, can I borrow Ruth for a minute?"

A minute later, all three of them were bent over the book while Ruth frowned over the words Harry had thought were Hebrew. "It's not," Ruth informed them in a dreamy voice, as she gazed at the yellowed page. "It's Aramaic."

"It is?" This seemed to excited Hermione. "I wish we learned about Aramaic in Ancient Runes! After all, it's the language that—" She glanced at Harry, biting her lip.

"Right," Ruth said, continuing to run her finger down the page, muttering something under her breath. "I learned it from my mum. She teaches it at university. Ancient Near Eastern languages."

She stared some more at the columns of text. "I think the way these are laid out, they're meant to be like a Rosetta stone. The same thing is in each column, very likely, but in a different language. I only read a little Arabic, and this isn't modern Arabic, but as far as I can tell, it says the same as the Aramaic...."

And then, to Harry's surprise, she muttered something like *abracadabra* and gasped.

"What? What?"

Ruth looked at Harry and Hermione. "It's a very ancient spell that was created at the same time as—as the Killing Curse. It's—it's meant to maintain balance...."

"Balance? How do you mean?" Hermione wanted to know.

She tapped the page with her finger. "It's a resurrection spell. That's why it's done with a snake, the ancient symbol of immortality. It's to bring the dead back to life."

Hermione scowled. "There's no such thing. Dead is dead."

Ruth raised her eyebrows. "I didn't say I believed it—I'm just telling you what it says. Okay, to be technical, it's not a resurrection spell. It's—a way to petition the gods—"

"Petition the gods?" Harry squeaked. "Wha—?"

"It has to do with the beginning of the world. From what I can make out in both the Aramaic and Arabic versions, they've each got phonetic spellings of the words of the spell. The first two look like *Enuma Elish* in each column. That's the name of the Babylonian creation epic. It means *in the beginning*."

"Sounds familiar," Hermione said tentatively.

Ruth smiled at her. "Don't worry about offending me. My parents are rabbis, but they're also academics. They're both well aware of the various creation stories that merged and converged over time in the Near East. *Most* creation myths start with *in the beginning*." She pointed at the book. "That's followed by the names of their chief creation gods to invoke them: Tiamat and Apsu, which means 'abyss.'"

"So," Hermione said a little smugly. "It's *not* a resurrection spell."

"No, I'm sorry. I misspoke. According to this, when someone's killed prematurely, the world is thrown into imbalance. With this you can petition the gods to bring them back."

Harry felt like he couldn't breathe. *If something happened to Ginny, maybe—* "How do you do it?" he said quickly. He ignored Hermione's glare.

Ruth didn't notice Hermione's expression but bent over the text, explaining the theory to him. When she straightened up, she whistled. "That's some powerful magic. You don't want to go invoking mystical realms at the drop of a hat, I think...."

Harry looked grimly at the page; a wood block print showed an enormous snake curled around a wizard, the snake's tail in its mouth. The wizard had his wand raised. "No, not at the drop of a hat. But to get rid of dementors, or a Grindelwald—"

"Harry!" Hermione said sharply. "Are you forgetting that Professor Snape's grandparents were sucked into Limbo? And Bagman will never be brought to justice now, either. This is dangerous stuff. I don't care if you are a Parseltongue and—and everything else. You already tried to save your mu—" She stopped abruptly and clamped her mouth shut.

"Don't do it," Ruth said quickly, her voice very tense.

Harry peered at her, remembering sitting next to her at the piano at her parents' house, learning the Kaddish. "Why?"

"Even though the spell was created to maintain balance, to counter the Killing Curse, who decides who should live and die? Only God," she said softly, almost inaudibly.

"What if someone has already played God by killing someone else? What then?"

"Then that person was meant to die," she whispered, unable to look at him.

"No!" he said, more loudly than he'd intended. Luckily the party was very, very noisy. He lowered his voice. "I don't think that's always true. Sometimes, but not—"

"*No other gods*," she hissed under her breath. Harry stared at her.

"What?"

"Listen—do you think it's been easy for me to be a student here? You may not have noticed, but Hogwarts holidays don't coincide with the Jewish calendar, the food isn't even close to Kosher, and it's next to impossible to be idle on a Saturday. But I *do* try to make sure I don't pursue other gods. This spell—I don't know what, if anything, you believe in, Harry. But it's not funny to call on gods. I don't recommend it."

"Gods? You mean—you believe there are other—"

"Of *course* there are 'other.' Why else would there need to be a Commandment against following them? In this case, it's not a matter of believe or not believing—it's a matter of allegiance. Gods

demand attention; you stir one up, and you don't know what that will mean. And if you want a favor from a god? That means sacrifice. You don't get something for nothing. This is *not* something you want to mess about with."

Giving him a fearful look, she crossed the room and returned to Tony. Hermione bit her lip, regarding Harry with trepidation. "I think she's right, Harry," she said softly.

He nodded. "I know you do." He stared at the page again. Something about the spell was familiar... "Hermione! That book I read in the library, in fifth year—the one about the other Voldemort—this is the spell he used to try to get his son back!"

She frowned at the page. "Are you sure?"

"I remember now! And—and he lived after that—" he added tentatively.

"But did he actually succeed?"

Harry stared at the book again. "I don't remember. I think—I think it didn't really say."

They looked at the book for another minute, Harry tracing the illustration with his finger. Suddenly Hermione said, "Oh, did you hear? Professor Snape is giving us a supply of Mandrake Munchies to carry during the practical N.E.W.T.s, in case of mishaps. Last year Madam Pomfrey was swamped with patients after the practical exams; so many people had hexed each other, and they had to be put right again before continuing to take their tests. Now that the twins have developed a sweet that's impregnated with a Mandrake draught, all you have to do is pop one into your mouth, chew and swallow, and no more hex! They *really* should have received more O.W.L.s, don't you think?"

Harry shrugged. "I just hope Padma Patil has done a raft of studying, like you have. I can't believe I got her for my partner."

"Only because there are so few girls in our year in Gryffindor. Padma should do fine; she's not *my* favorite person, as she helped Parvati pull that incredibly stupid *stunt* which could have ended up with her *dea-*, erm, hurt even worse than she was," Hermione stuttered. "But she's a good student, and a Ravenclaw. You'll be fine. We've spent a lot of time doing revision, you're the captain of the Dueling Club. You can control *dragons*, for heaven's sake. You'll be fine, Harry."

He sighed. "I hope you're right. I am *not* looking forward to those Sun Bulls."

She shook her head. "Nor am I, and I don't even have to handle them personally. Ron should be fine, though, with his werewolf strength and all. They won't know what hit them." He nodded; Ron would definitely have an advantage.

"So," she said, nodding at the book. "No playing God?" she said hopefully. He looked over at Ron and swallowed. Easy for her to say; her boyfriend was virtually impossible to kill. Ginny had already almost died because of Tom Riddle when she was a first year.

He didn't answer but slammed the book shut and carried it up to his dormitory. *Playing God*. Who did that more than Voldemort? He stared at the book before returning it to his trunk. *I did it, too*, he thought. *I created a new world*. Was that playing God? *Probably*. But he'd balanced it out, he'd fixed it. *He'd played God again*.

But it was a mistake, and needed to be fixed! he thought irritably.

*Who decides what is a mistake and what is not?*

He felt like his head was splitting in two, and he curled up in his four-poster, trying to shut out the doubts, but his dreams were no help; he had the dream again about his sister, and when he awoke in a cold sweat, the morning sunshine was streaming in the window and bathing the room in a golden glow.

\* \* \* \* \*

Now that the Quidditch Final was history, Harry felt as though the end of the term was approaching with alarming speed. In late May, he and Hermione spent three nights with Ron during the full moon, and before they knew it, June was upon them. Then were to take their written N.E.W.T.s during the first week and their practical tests during the second week. The day before they were to start their practical tests, Remus Lupin entered the Great Hall during breakfast, carrying three large packages, which he placed before Harry, Ron and Hermione.

"Hello!" he said. "I come bearing presents. How are the N.E.W.T.s coming along?"

"We're half done," Hermione told him. "We did written exams last week with Ravenclaw, while Hufflepuff and Slytherin did the practicals. This week we do the practicals."

Remus nodded. "I know." He nodded at the packages. "Don't open them just yet. Are you finished your breakfasts? I came to see Sirius about a thing or two; why don't you bring them up to his rooms and you can open them somewhere comfortable."

Harry frowned at his. "Who're they from?"

Ron poked his package, which had writing on it. "Don't you recognize my mum's handwriting Harry?" he said, grinning. "I think they're N.E.W.T. presents."

"Ooh!" Hermione said, rattling her package a little, but getting no noise but crinkling paper. Harry looked up at the head table; Sirius nodded to them and soon the five of them, plus Ginny, were walking up the stairs to the staff wing.

Once they were in Sirius' sitting room, Remus encouraged them to open the packages, grinning at Sirius. Harry unfolded a piece of parchment that was tucked into the string wrapping the brown paper, a warm feeling blossoming inside him.

*Dear Harry,*

*As you prepare to take your practical N.E.W.T.s, please accept this gift. The boots will be the best thing to wear on your feet when you are using the plow and bulls, the breeches and cloak are enchanted to prevent sharp objects from penetrating, such as horns, and the shirt is simply loose and comfortable. The cloak should fit over your robes.*

*I made everything myself, casting the protective spells as I went. I know you will do well, but it can't hurt to have every little advantage. I couldn't be more proud of you if you were my own son. If Ron starts to get down at the mouth as the tests approach, please remind him how much we love him and try to cheer him up. Remus also has some good news for him.*

*Give Ginny a hug for me.*

*Affectionately,  
Molly Weasley*

Harry opened the package, finding the clothes Mrs. Weasley had described in her letter. He looked up to see Ron reading his letter; he ran his hand through his hair, making the white lock of hair bounce over his brow. After folding the parchment into a very small square, he grimly opened the package and found clothes just like Harry's, only bigger. Hermione was exclaiming over her new cloak and boots as well.

Harry had been dreading the written tests, but they'd gone far better than he'd hoped. He'd been rather confident about the practical N.E.W.T.s, but now something seemed to have crawled into his stomach and was squirming around restlessly, as though trying to escape. He and Ron smiled weakly at each other while Hermione beamed.

Trying to sound more confident than he felt, Harry said, "Well, we're all set then, I reckon? With these and the Mandrake Munchies, we should have no problems, right?"

"Right," Ron said in a strangled voice, running one hand over his new knee-high boots.

Harry smiled at Ginny and gave her a one-armed hug, whispering to her, "From your mum." She nodded and put her head on his shoulder.

"You'll do fine," she whispered; he could tell she understood how he was feeling.

Remus sat in a chair adjacent to the couch where Ron and Hermione sat, looking rather grim. "Now, Ron, I want you to take your tests very seriously. They're very important. Ah, ah," he said, putting up his hand to stop Ron's protest, which died on his lips. "I know you think it doesn't matter how well you do, but you have to show a certain level of competence in your N.E.W.T.s if you're going to come work for me at the Ministry."

Ron's jaw dropped. "Work-work for *you*?" He grinned as though Christmas had come early. "You're joking, right?"

Remus laughed. "Not a bit of it. Now, you know I've been working as an operative for Dumbledore for the last few years, right? In spite of being a werewolf, not being able to Apparate, all that. That hasn't stopped me, now has it?" He raised an eyebrow at Ron.

"No, I reckon it hasn't," Ron admitted. "But—"

Remus put his hand up again. "Now, it's true, some rules were bent for me at the Ministry. But largely what they did was get rid of some antiquated rules that had no bearing on whether someone could do the job I'm doing. It's not quite the job of an Auror, but I do engage in covert work of a dangerous nature. Come to think of it, I'm not even certain that would interest you at—"

"When would I start?" Ron said excitedly. Harry saw the red glint in his eyes.

Remus laughed. "Well, you might want a little holiday after finishing school. Let's say—September? If you're really anxious, you can start training in August."

Ron turned to Hermione, grinning. Harry felt genuinely happy for Ron, who hadn't had anything this good happen to him since finding out he was going to play Quidditch for England. Hermione looked at Remus. "You wouldn't know whether anyone at the Ministry is going to respond to my letters before I finish my seventh year?"

"What letters?" Ron asked, frowning. Hermione rolled her eyes.

"You didn't think I was going to wait until I was out of school to look for a job, did you? I sent letters to a number of departments *months* ago, with letters of recommendation from Professors McGonagall, Flitwick, Dumbledore and Snape."

"And from me," Remus added, smiling. "And yes, Hermione, I happen to know that you should soon be hearing from *all* of the departments with which you enquired—but don't jump at the first letter you get. You might want to wait for the one from a certain rather secretive department—"

She was bouncing up and down in her seat, eyes round with excitement. "No! You're kidding! The—the Department of Mysteries?"

Remus nodded, clearly enjoying seeing her excitement. Ron gaped at her.

"Are—are you going to be an Unspeakable?" he said in awe.

She looked very pleased with herself. "Maybe," she said coyly.

Harry sighed. "It's a good thing I have plenty of gold in my vault, I reckon...."

"What?" Remus said. "To keep all of the other gold company that you're going to make as a professional Quidditch player?"

"A—a what?"

"Well, I happen to know that Owen Aberystwyth is interested in having you back on the Welsh team, and I heard that a number of scouts from league teams were at the Quidditch Final, hunting for prospects. You should be hearing from some people soon."

Harry reflected on that for a moment while Ginny hugged him excitedly. "I reckon I could do that," he said slowly. "After all, my dad was a Quidditch player. Of course," he added, "my mum was an Auror...." Now where had that come from? he wondered.

Ginny was looking at him rather anxiously now. "Is that something that might interest you, Harry?" Remus asked. "Because I don't think you'd be turned away. You'd have to take the qualifying exams to be admitted to training, of course."

Ron brightened. "If you worked at the Ministry too, Harry, all three of us might be doing things together again! That'd be brilliant!"

Harry suspected that he was just feeling jealous that Harry had the chance to play Quidditch, while he did not, but Harry smiled and nodded. "Yeah, that would," he agreed.

First, however, the three of them needed to get through the rest of his N.E.W.T.s. That evening, Padma met him to give him the potions she'd brewed. He put the vials on the table next to his bed, turning to look at them frequently in the night; he kept waking up, his mind too restless to stay asleep. Once, when he awoke, he vaguely remembered having the dream about his sister again, but he still couldn't pin down how she had changed. Another time, he was facing his mother in a huge hall with enormous columns holding up a ceiling that disappeared into blackness. She stood before him like a queen while he felt insignificant and unworthy. And that was *before* he looked down, realized that he was naked, and woke with a start, his heart going very fast.

In the morning, after showering, Harry applied the topical potion to his entire body, followed by drinking the draught of Eutharsos Potion Padma had also made. He remembered the way he'd felt the first time he'd had it, the way he'd felt his body go numb, bit by bit, followed by a wakefulness creeping through him, an alertness and clarity of vision that made it easy to understand how Neville had become addicted to the stuff.

He glanced at Neville now, staring for a moment at the vial of potion before finally tipping back his head and drinking. He looked at Ron and nodded at Neville; Dean and Seamus saw this as well. They'd already discussed this, the four of them; they were going to keep a close watch on Neville, to make sure he was all right, that he didn't weaken and try to take more of the potion after the tests were over. Neville looked up and met Harry's eye, perhaps knowing what they were thinking.

"All right, Harry?" he said quietly. Harry smiled at him.

"All right, Neville."

Harry breathed deeply, his skin prickling on his scalp, feeling very strong and daring. He wondered whether Ron would have felt like this without help, and thought that it was quite possible the Chthonians wouldn't know what hit them when they started fighting Ron. They dressed in the clothes Mrs. Weasley had sent them and set off for breakfast.

For some reason, Ginny wasn't at the Gryffindor table for the meal; Harry asked Ruth where she was, but to his surprise, she turned deep red and stuttered, "She left the dormitory early, said she had to meet someone to talk...." Harry frowned, but then he looked up and saw an empty place at the Slytherin table. *Malfoy*. Mariah was next to Blaise Zabini, with Crabbe, Goyle, and Nott nearby. But no Malfoy anywhere in sight.

Harry mentioned this to Ron as they left the Great Hall; Ron hesitated for a moment, then said,

"We're supposed to be down in the paddock in five minutes, Harry. Ginny said she'd come to watch me, since I'm up first. She—she won't miss this—will she?" he added uncertainly. Harry looked nervously at the mass of students moving past them.

"I don't know," he said truthfully. "What if Malfoy's hurt her?"

"Here's Snape and Maggie—they'll find her. Come on, I don't want you to miss it, either."

They waylaid Snape and Maggie, pulling them aside from the throng of bodies to tell them about Ginny and Malfoy being missing; they both nodded, and Maggie said, "I can feel her presence, nearby. She's—she's upset, but not frightened. And I don't think she's in danger...." she said, closing her eyes and massaging her temples with her fingers.

"All right, then," Ron said. "You find her and get her down to the pitch. Oh, and I want you there, too!" he grinned, hugging his older sister. "Too bad Nita isn't here—"

"Who says she isn't here?" said a crisp voice behind them. Ron turned and smiled at his oldest sister, who was flanked by Fred, George, Percy and Angelina.

"Brilliant! You took the day off!"

She shrugged. "It's not every day you get to see a werewolf take his practical N.E.W.T.s," she said, her blue eyes glinting mischievously.

Maggie greeted her siblings. "Yes, well, first we have to find Ginny. I can tell she's somewhere in the castle, the problem is where—"

Harry struck his head. "How stupid of me!" He leaned in toward Fred, whispering, "Go to my dormitory and get the map out of my trunk."

Fred nodded. "Right. Only—"

"Oh, right." Harry whispered the current Gryffindor password to him and he bolted up the marble stairs. With Fred, Maggie, Nita and Snape looking for Ginny, the others accompanied Harry, Ron and Hermione to the paddock where the Sun Bulls were waiting.

"Mum is taking care of the babies," George informed them, "and Bill and Charlie couldn't get away, unfortunately. Neither could dad."

"Dad? Oh, rotten luck," Ron said frowning as he walked.

"What's wrong with us?" Percy said, clearly hurt. "Katie would have liked to be here too, but only one of us could beg off work."

Harry grinned at him. "I'm glad the pair of you are so happy," he said, only loud enough for Percy to hear. Percy nodded at him and clapped his hand on Harry's shoulder; because of the potion, he barely felt a thing. There seemed to be a protective barrier between him and the rest of the world; it was a strange sensation.

They all stood outside the paddock, waiting for Hagrid to bring out the Sun Bulls; Ron was opening and closing his fists, taking deep breaths, and Harry hoped Ginny would make it in time. When Hagrid finally brought the bulls through the gate on the far side of the paddock, everyone gasped at the awe-inspiring animals. Hagrid nodded to Ron and Ron waved his wand, yoking the bulls without touching them or the plow. As Ron approached them, Harry was suddenly aware out of the corner of his eye that something orange and black was moving on the deep green of the sloping Hogwarts lawn. He shaded his eyes, squinting against the sun, and saw that it was Ginny.

"Hold off, Ron," he called. "Ginny's on her way. Wait until she gets here." Ron nodded; he shaded his eyes, watching his sister run toward them breathlessly. "Yeah, all right. But when she gets close, I'm going to start. I've already got them yoked; I don't want to leave them standing for too long." The bulls were stamping and snorting nervously.

Harry nodded and watched Ginny approach them; Maggie, Snape and Fred were nowhere in sight. She seemed positively desperate, as though it were a matter of life and death to see them take their N.E.W.T.s. Harry frowned. Something about this bothered him. When she was about forty feet away, she called out breathlessly, "Stop him! Don't let him do it! It's a trap!" Her voice was very faint, since she was still so far away.

"What?" Harry and Hermione both said, hesitating for a second. But when they turned, they saw that Ron was listening to something Hagrid was telling him; he could have heard his sister easily if he had been paying any attention, but Hagrid had distracted him. He was about to put his hands on the handles of the plow. Ginny had caught up to Harry and Hermione, and now all three of them bolted forward to stop Ron from touching it. "No! Don't!" they all shouted, while he frowned at them, not understanding their problem. They had to scramble over the paddock fence and then run an additional thirty feet. Harry's heart was in his throat as he ran, his arms pumping by his side. *If all of my running for the past three years is for anything, please let it help me save Ron now....*

He and the girls reached Ron almost simultaneously; He turned in surprise to see the three of them running toward him; they were too winded to talk and had to hope that they could physically

restrain him from touching the plow. But Harry saw with wide eyes that he had put his right hand on the plow handle just as the three of them tackled him to the ground—

Too late.

The moment he touched the handle, the Portkey took them. Harry and Hermione had grabbed his left arm, and Ginny held onto Harry's other arm. Linked thus, they hurtled through space, their shoulders banging painfully. The plow didn't tickle either; it was large and bulky, although the bulls didn't seem to be in the mix; as they weren't physically touching the plow, they seemed to have been left out. It was just as well, as Harry thought that Ron's knee got him in the stomach at one point, making him gasp for breath. The hook behind Harry's navel pulled harder and harder, inexorably drawing him on.

At last, they tumbled to earth, lying in a jumble of arms and legs and plow on deep green grass, so that Harry wasn't entirely certain that they'd gone anywhere. Perhaps the Portkey hadn't worked. But when he staggered to his feet and looked around, and knew that they were far away from Hogwarts. And he knew exactly where they were.

The cottage was far more overgrown than the last time he'd seen it, and far more derelict. He remembered that, at the beginning of this sixth year, when Voldemort had failed (he thought) to convince Harry to save his mother, Dumbledore said he'd returned to Godric's Hollow and blasted the house in frustration. Harry could no longer see simple things like the sitting room mantel, the large chunk of stone that was the threshold. None of the remains rose higher than a couple of feet off the ground. The dresser in the kitchen was gone, as well as the kitchen table with its tea service protected by the green growth.

He looked at the others, hoping they were all right. He called each of their names and they responded with groans. Ron rose to his feet, wincing, then swearing colorfully. He looked around suspiciously. "Bloody hell—is this part of the test?"

Hermione squinted at their surroundings. "No. Definitely not. Where on earth are we?"

Ginny looked at the overgrown cottage ruins. "You know, Hermione. We all do. From Harry's Pensieve. It's Godric's Hollow."

Harry's heart was running away with him. "Ginny—I'm going to change into a golden griffin and fly you away from here. I don't want you here...." He remembered his old dream of Ginny being with him at Godric's Hollow, and turning into a skeleton. "Ron, Hermione—I-I can Apparate back with brooms for you—"

"But I can Apparate, Harry," Hermione said, frowning.

"You want to leave Ron here on his own?" he said, nodding at his best friend. If *only* werewolves could Apparate, he thought not for the first or last time.

Ron bristled. "I can take care of myself, Harry."

"Yes, but we don't know why you were brought here. Which means—bugger! Which means none of us should probably leave, because you were probably brought here to be a hostage....We're all stuck."

He paced nervously, running his hand through his hair. Ginny put her hand on his arm to try to calm him. "We'll figure something out," she said, her voice shaking. "We've all got our wands, you and Hermione are Animagi and know how to Apparate, Ron's a werewolf, and I—" She trailed off. She had her wand. That was it. Harry began to wonder who was really meant to be the hostage.

He held her upper arms firmly and practically barked at her, "How did you know it was a trap? Why did you come running from the castle?" Her mouth moved noiselessly; she looked dreadfully guilty. Finally, he said the word for her: "*Malfoy*."

She nodded, her eyes moist. "He sent me an owl late last night, said he wanted to talk to me before I went to watch Ron. I wasn't convinced I should go—"

"But you did," he said grimly. She peered at him.

"Are you jealous?"

He tried to shake the feeling, with difficulty. "Ginny—I just—I don't trust *him*. With good reason. And you shouldn't either. What did he have to say?"

"Well, he was up on the Astronomy Tower. With his broom. I started right in on him when I saw that. Told him that it was very unsporting of him, when he'd already done his practical N.E.W.T.s, to try to disrupt others' by pulling a stunt on his broomstick. I thought he was going to try to distract the bulls or something. He laughed at me and said that his days of pretending to be a dementor to distract someone were far behind him. He said he just wanted to make sure *I* was safe. That got me going; I started screaming at him, 'What did you do? Why would anyone down at the N.E.W.T. testing *not* be safe?' He wouldn't answer me, and I said, 'It's a trap, isn't it? Isn't it?' He climbed on his broom and said he had to go. He was expected elsewhere and there would be hell to pay if he

didn't go. I-I didn't like that. The next thing I knew, he was gone, and I had a feeling he was going off to meet *him*."

Harry whispered, "Voldemort." She nodded.

"So I came running down to try to stop Ron. Oh, I'd never wished so hard that I was like you Harry, and could turn into a griffin! I could have reached you all so much faster..."

He held her tightly and stroked her hair, feeling her trembling against him. She had a gash on her cheek from traveling through space with the plow. "It's all right, Gin, it's all right. No one's here. Perhaps Malfoy actually did the right thing for once and when he went to meet Voldemort he did something to stop him, or distract him."

She pulled back from him and frowned. "You may think that *I'm* still too soft on him, but I think you're worse sometimes, Harry. He's *not* your best friend from your other life. He's a Death Eater, and I'll just bet that *he's* the one who enchanted the plow so that it would bring Ron here!" She scowled. "The next time I see him, he'd better be *dead*, or I'll kill him myself!"

"Now, now. Is that any way to talk about your former paramour?"

The cold, high voice cut straight to Harry's bones. He whirled and felt his knees tremble; Voldemort looked stronger than Harry had ever seen him, even stronger than when Harry had been initiated as a Death Eater in his other life, by a Voldemort who'd never been weakened. Clearly, in the time since he'd regained his body, he'd been doing things to strengthen himself, to move closer to immortality. Harry swallowed and looked in the eerie red eyes, then away. He remembered the hypnotic voice of the Voldemort in his other life. *Don't look in his eyes*, he thought. Next to him, Ginny was gazing, transfixed, and Harry saw that Ron and Hermione were also.

There was a sudden *popping* noise, but Harry was saying, "Don't look into his eyes!" He whirled Ginny to face him, and she blinked, as though waking from a long sleep. Then Harry heard a laugh, but it wasn't Voldemort's laugh. The *popping* noise had been Draco Malfoy Apparating into the space next to the dark wizard, carrying his broom still, smirking. He had heard what Harry said.

"Yes, that's why others have died," he drawled sarcastically. "They looked in his eyes. He's not a bloody basilisk, Potter, you *idiot*."

"I've killed a basilisk," Harry whispered menacingly.

Malfoy waved this off. "Yeah, yeah. We're so impressed."

"Oh, and did you think *we'd* be impressed, Malfoy?" Ron said now, bristling. "Impressed that you've thrown in your lot with *him*?"

Draco Malfoy surveyed Ron coolly. "I thought I told you after fourth year—I plan to be on the winning side. It's quite clear which side that's going to be. Sadly, Granger's brains seem to have been no help to her in figuring out such a simple thing..."

"Sometimes you have to do what you think is *right*!" Hermione screamed at him, lunging for him. Ron grabbed her arm and she struggled against him. "Sometimes being on the winning side isn't what's most *important*!" Then she saw Ron's face. "I mean—oh, you know what I mean, Malfoy!"

The blond boy laughed. "I always could get you to say things you didn't intend, Mudblood. That's right, Mudblood. Everybody hear that? What are you going to do about it? Scarhead? Weasel? *Mudblood mudblood mudblood*. I'll say it as much as I please. Soon it'll be an obsolete term anyway, after you're all gone from the wizarding world. There won't be a need for a word for people who don't exist." Now Ron was lunging toward him, and Hermione was trying to keep him in check.

"Silence," the dark wizard said, with a wave of his hand at Draco Malfoy, whose mouth was now gone, just as when Mrs. Figg had done the same thing to him on Privet Drive. "You were supposed to bring me the best friend. I'm starting to think you're just like your father, and can't get anything right." Draco Malfoy touched his face in horror.

Voldemort waved his hand casually once more and the four of them were suddenly bound hand and foot, their arms trapped by their sides. The cold laugh cut through the air again and they huddled close to each other; Harry searched the others' faces. They'd never been this close to Voldemort before. He could see the girls trembling; Ron just looked angry and stubborn. Harry was glad that he and Ron had used the potions that were intended to help them on their tests; he knew he should have been frightened, but he wasn't. He looked balefully at Draco Malfoy, but could not read the expression in the other boy's eyes.

*Potion*. Something occurred to him, seeing Voldemort's unearthly visage. *How many spells were responsible for his looking this way, for his near-immortality? What if—* Harry's hand was inching toward his robe pocket; he fumbled with the cloth, trying to get his fingers through the slit, grunting slightly. That got Voldemort's attention.

"Potter! What are you doing there?"

Harry immediately withdrew his hand. "Nothing." His voice was unnaturally high. "Nothing at

all.”

Voldemort made a skeptical noise; looking bored, he said, “*Accio!*” He held out his hand as the contents of Harry’s pocket flew out of his robes and toward the dark wizard, who caught the small drawstring bag with one hand. He looked at it critically for a moment before opening it and peering inside; when he saw the contents, he started laughing. “Sweets! You were trying to get at your sweets! Well, I’m sorry—there shall be no sweets for *you*, Harry Potter—”

Harry couldn’t prevent the groan of disappointment that escaped his lips; he quickly clamped his mouth shut and stared at Voldemort, who eyed Harry suspiciously.

“That concerned about sweets, are you? Well, I think I’ll just help myself to one—” He seemed to be looking at Harry very carefully, to gauge his reaction.

“No!” Harry cried. Voldemort stopped and squinted at Harry.

“What did you say to me?” The voice was very even and slow.

“Um, I mean—” he licked his lips nervously. “I—I changed my mind. Go ahead, eat one. Or more. A lot. Eat a lot if you like,” he said very quickly.

Voldemort stopped and examined the sweet in his hand suspiciously now. “Hm. You *want* me to eat it? That can’t be good. I believe I need someone to fill the role of royal taster...” he mused, looking back and forth between Ron, Hermione and Ginny, his gaze resting on Ginny. “Here, girl. You eat one and I’ll see what it does to *you*.”

“Um, no! Please don’t! It’s—it’s poison!” Harry cried quickly.

“Poison, eh? Is that why you wanted me to eat a lot of it? You evidently don’t understand, *Harry*,” he seemed to be enjoying himself a great deal; “It would take far more than a little poison to kill me at this point. *If* I could be killed at all. Still...if it is poison, how amusing it would be to give it to one of your companions here...”

Harry twisted his robes nervously, watching Voldemort come closer to Ginny with the unwrapped sweet. Harry tried to watch Draco Malfoy out of the corner of his eye; he looked like he wanted to lunge forward, although Harry wasn’t sure what that meant. Ginny seemed unable to move, as though Voldemort had mesmerized her; he forced her mouth open and inserted the sweet, then pointed his wand at her. She seemed to be chewing and swallowing against her will. He stood very close to her, peering at her closely. The cut on her cheek was healing over and disappearing before their very eyes, until her skin was smooth and unblemished once more.

To Harry’s horror, Voldemort was smiling. *No one should ever have to see that*, Harry thought. Voldemort was practically nose-to-nose with Harry now, making him flinch at his nearness. “I should have known,” he said softly. “First you *didn’t* want me to eat it, because it has healing properties and you wanted to save it for yourself. Then you knew I’d be suspicious of anything that you *wanted* me to eat, and that I’d probably give it to one of you, to test it.” An evil grin stretched across his face. “But your amateur attempt to manipulate me hasn’t worked. I know now that it heals, that it helps. Well, say goodbye to your little secret weapon, Harry Potter,” he said smoothly, still smiling. “*I am the one who will be strengthened by these now....*”

He started unwrapping the Weasley Wizard Wheezes Mandrake Munchies. He popped each one into his mouth, chewing several at once, and Harry felt himself break out into a cold sweat, watching, trying to look anxious and disappointed instead of hopeful. *Chew them, chew them all, you old bastard....*

And chew he did, clearly enjoying the look of distress on Harry’s face. One sweet after another went into his gash of a mouth, but to Harry’s satisfaction, the mouth wasn’t quite so gash-like anymore, and the red eyes had darkened noticeably. The flat, snake-like nose was now protruding from his visage, looking like a proper *human* nose again, and there were actual lips visible around the gnashing teeth. Hair slowly sprouted on the previously bald head, hair that was a mixture of dark brown and grey. The five of them watched with fascination the metamorphosis that was occurring before them, and Harry wondered what would have happened if *he* had eaten one of the sweets, whether his scar would have disappeared; it had never occurred to him that this might happen if he ate anything made from Mandrakes. He glanced at Malfoy, his eyes open wide in shock as he stared at Voldemort. (He probably would have had his mouth open, too, if he’d still had one, Harry thought.)

When he had finished the last one, the Voldemort who stood before them was no longer the Voldemort Harry had seen when he had first emerged from the cauldron with his restored body. It was not the Voldemort who had initiated Harry in his other life. This Voldemort bore far more of a resemblance to an aging version of a boy Harry had met twice—once in the Chamber of Secrets, and once in the copse of trees standing just beyond his parents’ former home, not fifty feet from where they were gathered.

He glanced at Ginny to see her reaction, but to his surprise, she was not recoiling in fear and

disgust (he remembered belatedly the way she said Tom had terrorized her). She had a lopsided, ironic smile, and it appeared that she was trying not to laugh. Forcing her mouth into a more sober position, she surveyed the middle-aged wizard before her, his salt-and-pepper hair, his dark eyes and his familiar chiseled features.

Her eyes were still laughing, however, as she said to him, clearly and slowly, "Hello again, Tom."

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The quote at the beginning of the chapter is from page 44 of *Looking Around: A Journey Through Architecture* by Witold Rybczynski.

Thanks to Rena, Nick and Dan for the excellent beta reading, and to everyone who commented on Chapter 27.