

— CHAPTER THIRTY —

## Shadows

*Rather than seeing beauty and goodness in brilliant illumination, the Japanese thought these qualities lived in the obscurities of shadows. Temples, palaces and common homes were dominated by massive roofs. Architects built the enclosing structure of the various rooms in the deep, ample shadows produced by the eaves. Even in the most intense sunlight, the walls, doors, and pillars sheltered by the roof's edge disappeared in gaping darkness. Light was held out to the sides by the umbrella-like roof and penetrated the interiors horizontally through layers of shoji screens. Dwelling in the resulting darkness, the Japanese came to find beauty in gradations of shadows—heavy shadows overlapping lighter ones. In the simple, bare rooms, the nuances of faintly glowing surfaces became the sole decoration. The edges that separated one object from another dissolved to reveal the transcendent reality of things.*

—Anthony Lawlor, *The Temple in the House*

Harry put his hands up to his face, under his glasses; from what he could tell, he still had his eyes. They were just absolutely useless. “Do I—do I still look the same?” His voice shook.

“Yeah,” Ron said, his voice also shaking. “Same green eyes. In fact, you’re looking right at me. I mean—they’re pointed in my direction. Seems like you ought to be able to see as well as you ever did.”

Harry heard Draco stagger to his feet with more than a little grunting. “What happened?” Draco wanted to know. “I remember—I remember the curse hitting me....And then I was—well, anyway, now I’m *not*. I wake up and I’m lying here with a gaggle of Gryffindors hanging over me, and Potter’s *blind*? Are you sure we’re not *all* dead? Because I certainly should be, after what I remember....”

“No, we’re not *all* dead, Malfoy,” Hermione said, her voice bitter. “I would have stopped him if I could have, but from what I could see, Harry did a spell from this book he has about snake magic. He took your body with him and he’s been gone for hours. Now he comes back with *you* alive, but *he* seems to be blind.” She paused, and when she spoke again, there was awe in her voice. “What happened, Harry? Where did you go?”

Harry swallowed. “I went someplace....someplace where you have the opportunity to do something to bring the other person back from the dead. The opportunity to make a sacrifice. The spell doesn’t do it; the sacrifice does.”

“But Harry,” Ron said, his voice catching, “you gave up your *sight* to save Malfoy? How could *any* sacrifice be worth *his* life? After what he did, handing me over to that madman? Nearly getting us all killed?” Ron sounded as bitter as Hermione.

Harry tightened his grip around Ginny and felt her lean her head on his shoulder. “But you *weren’t* killed,” he said. “Nor Hermione. Nor—nor Ginny. He saved her. And then when Riddle tried to kill her—” He put his hand out to her face, tentatively, tracing her cheek with his fingers, finding her nose and following it up to her forehead, where he found exactly what he expected. He pushed her hair out of the way, off her brow so they could see what his fingers had already found.

“*Look*,” he told them, realizing a moment later how odd this must be coming from him. He heard them gasp and knew that they were seeing the already-healing wound that he could trace delicately with his fingers. “You’ll most likely have a scar there, Ginny,” he whispered to her.

He felt her arm move up as she touched her own forehead with her fingers. She was shaking. “Oh, Harry—”

He pulled her into his arms again, and this time, when he found her mouth with his, he didn’t let her go immediately; her arms went around his neck, her fingers into his hair. He felt the utter freedom of not knowing or caring what was going on around him, whether a half-dozen or a hundred people might be gawping at them and staring....

But finally, he felt her pull away, and he hadn't known it was possible before, but he thought he could practically *hear* Ginny blushing. It was in her voice.

"Harry....There'll be time for that later...."

He grinned at her and laughed. "Is that a promise?" She, however, sounded quite somber.

"W-well, yes, of course, but-but there are some things you should know...."

He didn't like the sound of that and no longer felt like laughing. He turned again to where he thought Ron and Hermione were. "It-it seems a bit quiet. What's happened since I've been gone?"

He heard Ron take a deep breath. "Well, after you disappeared, the tide really turned. That spell of yours rather caught the Death Eaters' attention, plus they couldn't attack the Aurors and others because of the gold dome. By the way, thanks for warning me about the phoenix song, Harry," he intoned sarcastically. "Thought I was going to go *deaf* from it."

Harry grimaced and mumbled, "Sorry," before Ron continued.

"Well, anyway, when some of them saw what you'd done, *and* found that they couldn't get through the dome, they just started surrendering, throwing down their wands. It seemed that some of them were trying to Apparate away, but the dome was emitting some kind of interference so they couldn't. And the werewolves couldn't Apparate, of course, so they tried running off, but our people stunned them. Some of the Death Eaters have been claiming that they were under Imperius, of course. Finally, Ginny and I couldn't take holding onto the wands anymore--"

"-you mean *I* couldn't hold on anymore," Ginny said, not sounding hurt so much as wanting to tell the truth. "You don't have to share the blame, Ron--"

"There's no shame in not being able to go on like that, Gin," Ron said stoutly. "I can't believe you held on as long as you did. My bleeding arms felt like they were going to drop off my body. Anyway, after we broke the link," he told Harry, "some of the Death Eaters *still* fought on--stubborn sods--but they were horribly outnumbered by then and easy to catch. We've also been dealing with some fakers who've been pretending to lie still so we'd think they were out of it, and then trying to get us when our backs are turned while sorting through the dead and wounded. Those were mostly werewolves who pretended to be hit with stunners. I think some of them, when they saw what was happening to the others, took a dive for the ground and pretended to be out. One of them even kicked Hermione in the jaw, but she really shocked her by turning into a wolf herself." He gave a half-hearted laugh for a moment. "It was easy for me to stun the werewolf after Hermione's performance." He gave a deep sigh, no longer sounding like laughing. "It's all been over for hours now. We've definitely won."

Harry heaved a sigh of relief. "I-I hoped you'd be all right. It *looked* like you were going to be all right, when I left." He remembered the odd sight of Ginny and Ron floating through the air, linked by the identical wands; he remembered enlarging Sandy, casting the spell....

"Sandy!" he said suddenly. "Where is she? Is she all right?"

"I am here, Harry Potter," he heard the still-deep voice say. He turned toward her voice, uncertain whether he was correct.

"Can someone take the engorgement charm off her?" he asked. He heard Hermione's voice utter the incantation and then felt her place the small pebbly body in his hands, but something seemed to be wrong.

"Sandy?" he asked, uncertain.

"I am here, Harry Potter," she said again, her voice sounding normal to him once more, except that she seemed very weary. He had never thought to hear her speak again.

"Are you all right, Sandy?" he asked her.

"I think she'll be all right, Harry," Ginny said softly; as he stroked Sandy, he could feel Ginny's fingers on her also. "I think the spell took something out of her. Perhaps when we get back to Hogwarts--"

"Hagrid'll be able to see to her," he said confidently. "He knows all about snakes." He switched to Parseltongue, saying to her, "You'll be right as rain once Hagrid has seen you, Sandy."

"Erm," Ron began. "See, Harry, the thing is, we're doing a lot better here than they are at Hogwarts--"

*Hogwarts.* "What about Hogwarts? What happened?" Harry's heart had leapt into his throat.

He heard Ron's hesitation. "Well, see, it's been a little hard to piece together, because all of Voldemort's top people are gone." Harry felt himself grinning; Ron had said it: *Voldemort*, with no hesitation or shaking in his voice. "Wormtail might have known about the whole plan, but--well, we can't very well ask him now...." Harry swallowed, seeing again the small man's rat-like features as he looked defiantly at his Master and refused the order to continue torturing Ron. He guessed that Ron was probably also thinking of this, from the way his voice had trailed off.

"You could try asking *me*, Weasley," drawled the maddeningly superior voice.

"And why should I ask you anything, you traitor? Harry's sight wasn't worth your life, I can tell you that!"

"Ron!" Harry said sharply. He turned in the direction of Draco's voice. "When you were trying to warn Ginny—what did you think was going to happen? What had he told you?" He tried to keep the quiver out of his voice but was annoyed to hear it anyway.

Draco Malfoy took a deep breath. "Okay, this was the plan as far as I knew. He wanted to bring both Weasley and Granger here, your two best friends. He asked me whether you had a girlfriend, but it was just a question, not a direct order to tell him whether you had a girlfriend, so I was able to lie to him. He wasn't always very careful about that, but *I* always made sure I noticed the way he asked me things so I could work out what my response should be. Couldn't be too careful. I'm the one who suggested to him that Granger be left behind, since she can Apparate. I convinced him that Weasley's werewolf strength and all that would make him a good choice, and I pointed out that he wouldn't be able to escape by Apparating. And then he'd be trapped here when the Death Eaters were summoned and the werewolves showed up."

"A *good choice*. Yeah, for being tortured and healing myself up again to get ready for more. Thanks ever so much for that, Malfoy. Next time I know of a dark wizard looking for pasty little ferrets to torture, I'll be sure to recommend *you*, to return the favor," Ron snarled.

"I *was* doing you a bleeding favor, Weasley!" Draco shot back. "Why do you think I tried to convince him to leave Granger out of it? Oh, don't rush to thank me or anything, either one of you. And I *thought* that maybe, just maybe, you'd be strong enough to escape, Weasley. Or do him some damage before he summoned the others. *I* couldn't hurt him so I was trying to get someone here who might be able to. You may think I'm stupid, but I *know* you are if you couldn't work this out for yourself."

"Thank you for trying to protect Hermione," Harry said firmly, suspecting that neither Ron nor Hermione would ever say this. "But—when you were on the tower this morning, ready to fly off on your broom, what did you say to Ginny?"

"It wasn't what he said," Ginny whispered. "It's what he *couldn't* say...."

"Right," Draco confirmed. "Bloody bastard had told me I couldn't say or write a word about any of this to anyone, and I agreed, since I knew that refusing wouldn't do me any good. If I'd died for refusing that would just mean I wouldn't be alive to find a way to work around the order. So I tried just talking to Ginny about the testing. I asked her whether she was going to be down there. She said she was planning to. I showed her that *I* had my broom with me, and she started going off on me about disrupting the tests. I told her that was the last thing I had in mind, and she started to catch on that allowing the test to go on could be what was dangerous. I also told her that anyone who was smart would do what I was about to do, and I flew off, hoping she'd understand that I meant that she and everyone else should just leave the castle."

"*Leave the castle?*" Harry said in confusion. "Not just avoid touching the plow?"

"Harry—" Hermione started to say, hesitating. "You see, Harry, it seems that the plan was to bring Ron here, you'd see him tortured through your scar and convince Dumbledore to come here with you and others to try to fight for Ron, but—but in the meantime, there were other forces in position to attack the castle. He wanted to do it while you and Dumbledore were *here*, preoccupied with rescuing Ron...."

"*Attack the castle!*"

"Right," Draco agreed. "See, you weren't supposed to come here with Weasley. You and Dumbledore were supposed to get a force together to come rescue him, leaving the castle in the hands of the younger students and the teachers who don't do much fighting. I reckoned you'd send the elves and people like Flitwick and McGonagall—which is just what Granger did instead—and I thought I saw some people from the Dueling Club as well. Dumbledore was supposed to be here. The Dark Lord was counting on it. But that wasn't the only thing that didn't go according to plan...."

"What happened, Hermione?" Harry whispered to her.

"Well, when I left here, I went straight to the Ministry. I knew Katie was working and she and I went to Eustace Bean in Magical Law Enforcement. He called up all of the available Aurors and sent them here. Then I Apparated to Hogsmeade and ran to the castle as a wolf. But I could already see, when I was running toward the gates—" She choked on a sob.

"*What?*" Harry demanded, clutching Ginny around the middle so tightly she let out a little squeak; he relaxed his grip.

"Well, it was chaos," she said, tears in her voice. "The giants were—"

"*Giants!*"

"Yes," she whispered. "Giants. Remember when Hagrid's mum was living in the forest with her

friends? How she said only a few of them were interested in what Hagrid and Madame Maxime had to say, when he visited them? The rest were visited by Death Eaters last year, evidently, and they agreed to join-join Voldemort. They've been waiting in the forest for his signal."

"*They've been in the forest?*" He was shaking, wishing he had still been in the habit of flying with Ginny over the trees, where he might have seen the giants. He might have been able to alert Dumbledore to their presence....

"Some Death Eaters were staying with them. They had a way to communicate with Voldemort, and they were able to use magic to keep the giants from being seen or heard. And-and they were also in contact with some students who were sort of angling to be Death Eaters as well. That's how they kept track of what was happening in the castle."

"Who?" Harry demanded, shaking with fury.

He heard Draco Malfoy snort. "You have to ask? I can tell you: Zabini, Nott, Crabbe, Goyle and Parkinson. And they'll claim to have been under Imperius, all of them. You watch. Er, so to speak," he added awkwardly. Harry grimaced; people were going to be doing a lot of that, he expected.

"Did you know about the giants in the forest, too?" he asked Draco, his voice shaking with barely-controlled rage.

"No, not exactly. I know the five of them were up to something, but the Dark Lord had ordered me to leave them alone...." He sounded more than a little embarrassed and Harry again silently cursed the Obedience Charm.

Hermione went on with her story. "From the castle drive, I could see smoke coming from two of the towers-Trelawney's and the Astronomy Tower," Hermione continued. "When I went round the castle, I could see that they were both being pulled down from the bottom. The giants were destroying them with their bare hands. They couldn't reach the tops, of course, but that doesn't matter if you can just tear into them from the bottom up...Trelawney was still in her tower," Hermione added; "you know she almost never leaves it..." Harry could hear her crying. He'd never thought to hear Hermione cry over Professor Trelawney.

"Let's hope she didn't see it coming," he whispered, not sure what to say. Trelawney had always looked as delicate and insubstantial as a dragonfly, and now she was just-gone.

"Oh, but she did," Hermione said, trying to compose herself again. "Maggie said, afterward, when I went back, after the battle was over here. Poor Maggie! She's been kicking herself over it. According to her, Professor Trelawney *did* see this coming. Her death, that is. Maggie said that Trelawney told her, 'The reason I stay in my tower is that this will be my tomb. I have already foreseen my death; this is where I shall both live and die...' She didn't have a specific time; she had simply Seen herself dying in her tower. Maggie reckoned she just didn't want to lose face in front of her new assistant." She sniffed. "To think, she *knew* she was going to die there and she stayed, instead of trying to get far away. And I called her an old fraud so many times...." She sounded truly contrite.

Harry swallowed. "Well, when I was in third year, she knew that Wormtail was going to return to Voldemort," he said softly, realizing a moment later that this wasn't really a comforting thought.

Ron cleared his throat and from the rustling of robes, Harry thought he was perhaps enfolding Hermione in his arms. Harry had the idea that she might not be able to speak again for a few minutes. "Anyway, when Hermione ran around the castle that's where she found the battle proper going on," Ron said, speaking for her. "Maggie was the first person she found; Snape had her shelter under the Whomping Willow with some of the younger students; she hasn't learned much about dueling yet and doesn't have a broom. As she's not a kid, he reckoned she could calm the first and second years. They stayed squashed in the tunnel so Maggie could see what was going on and she could still be near them."

"Well, really, Angelina was the first one I found. She was unconscious, near the tree. I think it hit her. I could see Maggie's face and others through the tree roots," Hermione managed to say through her tears; "I dragged Angelina along when I went in to speak with her, so she wouldn't be trod on by one of the giants. I got inside it and started the tree moving again just as a giant was heading for us...Maggie told me what happened after we all were brought here by the Portkey."

Hermione broke into what sounded like fresh sobs and Ginny clutched at Harry again while Ron continued for her once more. "After the four of us disappeared with the plow, there was a bit of an uproar, of course. Snape ran up to the castle to see Dumbledore while Hagrid tried to calm down everyone who was at the tests. But before he even reached Dumbledore's office, Snape ran into him coming down the stairs, running like he'd never seen him. Dumbledore already knew something was wrong and that he needed to get down to the paddock. Remus was with him; as they went down the stairs, he gave Snape the short version of why he'd come.

"Remus had been telling Dumbledore that the work he'd been doing infiltrating a secret society of

werewolves had paid off. He learned that they had all been given Portkeys that were going to activate at nine-thirty this morning, that they were going to be called upon to fight for their 'master.' Remus had managed to get one of the Portkeys. So Snape told them *his* news of what had just happened down at the testing, and Remus reckoned that that was what the werewolves were supposed to do—attack one of their own, me. Except that all four of us had been taken along. Dumbledore was certain that Voldemort would be upset about it not going according to plan.”

“And then,” Hermione choked, “while they were all waiting down by the paddock for some word from Professor Snape, Maggie said that she had one of her ‘feelings’ and told everyone to run away from the forest. Well, the Weasleys knew better than to ignore her, but the other seventh year Gryffindors and Ravenclaws don’t really know what Maggie can do—Trelawney didn’t exactly give most of the students much faith in Divination—so they were still milling about with Hagrid. He was trying to control the bulls, who weren’t yoked to anything anymore once the plow had left. A moment later, the ground started to shake and Maggie and the other Weasleys looked behind them, finding that the others hadn’t followed, and now there were *giants* coming out of the forest. About a dozen of them,” she said, her voice shaking. Harry remembered how she had trembled from being picked up by Hagrid’s mum, a *friendly* giant.

“So,” Harry whispered, “they just—”

“Oh, the others ran once they saw *that*.” Her voice dropped to a whisper. “Not that it was much good by then, for some of them....”

Harry had a feeling he was going to hear about it sooner or later, so he decided sooner was better. “Who?” he choked.

“Well, some of the giants went right up to the castle and started pulling down Trelawney’s tower; the first thing the others did was to pick up the sun-bulls and start throwing them at people. Those—those horns are lethal—”

“*Who?*” he demanded again; Ginny clutched him tighter.

“Parvati,” she whispered; Harry heard Ron sniff. He already knew, Harry realized. “And her sister, too. And Seamus. Maggie and Angelina were already running for the castle, to find Professor Snape. Professor Dumbledore told them to get all of the younger students they could find, and Sam had Percy, Nita, George and Fred follow him to the broom shed; after taking some for themselves, they also got brooms to Dean and Neville, who were trying to cast spells on the giants from the ground and avoid being trod on or picked up and pulled to pieces. Once they were all up in the air, flying over the giants, they were able to cast spells from a safe distance, although it’s harder to aim like that, and Dean flew too close to one of the giants. He was thrown right through one of the library windows....”

“From the *paddock?*” Harry gasped.

“Yeah,” Ron said, his voice grim. “He’s very bad, but Madam Pomfrey said he’ll be on the road to recovery in a few days—he was cut to ribbons by the glass and has concussion and internal bleeding....”

“They got some of the other Ravenclaws, too, who were there for the testing,” Hermione added. “Mandy Brocklehurst. Terry Boot. Neville managed to bring Parvati’s body back to the castle, though,” she said, sobbing softly. “The—the really horrible part for everyone has been collecting the—the bits of the people who were dismembered—” She couldn’t go on. Harry felt ill.

“Bloody hell,” he heard Draco Malfoy say softly.

Harry pictured the faces of his fellow students, now dead. So many. *So many!* And yet, he had a feeling that it was just the tip of the iceberg.

“So Neville’s all right?” he whispered.

“Oh, Neville was brilliant!” Hermione said, a happy note in her voice again at last. “He flew like—well, like *you*, Harry. Maybe it was the potion he used to take his tests, I don’t know. The giants were *so* annoyed by him. He, George, Nita and Percy tried to keep the giants occupied until Dumbledore could get there. Sam flew up to the castle to get more of the older students to help. Unfortunately, that drew more attention to the castle and the giants who’d been destroying Trelawney’s tower started in on the Astronomy tower. They’d already done a lot of damage in a short amount of time when I arrived.”

“Hang on—I don’t understand how Dumbledore knew something was wrong,” he interrupted her. “You said that he was in his office, getting a report from Remus, and then—”

“I don’t know,” Hermione admitted. “Remus said that he’d just finished talking about the werewolf Portkeys and Dumbledore had sent Fawkes off with an urgent letter to the Ministry. Then Remus was just about to tell him he’d heard a loud noise coming from the forest, when Dumbledore looked at him in a sort of panic and said they should go; he said he heard ‘it,’ too. And the next thing, they were dashing from his office and practically falling over Professor Snape on their way

downstairs.”

Something struck Harry as odd then. “You left out some people. You said that Neville was all right and that he, George, Percy and Nita were flying around trying to curse the giants and Sam had gone to get more students. And you said something already about Maggie and Angelina. What about—who didn’t you mention? There’s someone else, I’m sure....”

Silence.

“Well?” he said, wondering why they wouldn’t answer him.

Ginny put her arms around his waist and put her head on his chest. “Fred,” she said softly, tears in her voice. “Fred is—”

“*Fred!* No!” he cried.

In a strangled voice, Ron said, “George had saved Lavender, see. Plucked her right from one of the giants down by the paddock and was flying back to the castle with her. She’ll be all right eventually, but she’ll need a new leg. Partial leg, anyway,” he said, and Harry felt his stomach move within him again.

“Why?” Harry choked.

“Bitten off,” Hermione explained quietly. “Just above the knee.”

Before he could think about this, Ron went on. “Neville said that the giant who’d had Lavender saw Fred and got confused, thought he was George, so he went after *him*. Couldn’t reach him, though. Flying too high. So he uprooted a huge old tree and used it like a Beater’s bat....only—only Fred was the Bludger....” His voice ended on a choked sob.

Harry held Ginny tightly, feeling her crying into his chest. He could tell how difficult this was for Ron, and he thought of poor Mrs. Weasley....

“They found him near the front gates of the school,” Ron whispered. “He’d lost the broom he was riding, see, or he probably could have pointed the handle up and stayed aloft. But he lost his grip when he was hit with the tree and had no way to—”

Ron couldn’t go on. Harry felt his own tears beginning to leak out of his otherwise useless eyes. “Who else?” he croaked.

“Well, in all of the chaos, Dumbledore decided to stay himself to fight the giants, and so did Remus, who decided not to use the Portkey. He sent Professors Flitwick and McGonagall with me, as well as the elves and some of the Dueling Club, the older students who had already learned to Apparate. Sirius and Sam came too—Sirius was worried about you, Harry, and Sam was worried about Katie. I also brought Ruth, Annika, Zoe, Colin, Tony—”

“Tony didn’t make it. He must have died before we managed to link the wands....” Ron added quietly.

“Angelina’s still unconscious from the Willow hitting her; she’d been planning to help fight after helping Maggie get the younger kids under the tree,” Ginny began, but she couldn’t go on.

“What?”

“Any others?”

Ron responded, trying to be dispassionate and straightforward, but a quaver in his voice betrayed his emotions as the list grew. “The third years and up rallied, got out their brooms and also flew down from the castle. George said Will Flitwick flew brilliantly, and he’s okay. So’s Jamaica, Dean’s sister, although she’s worried sick about him. Some are just wounded, others—well—” Harry waited. “Jules Quinn and Gillian Lockley were killed, from Gryffindor, and that girl Jules liked in his year, Amy, I think her name was. Had a twin brother, Andy. I don’t know about him. Barry Bagshot’s dead too, you know—the one whose aunt or great-aunt wrote all of those books we have to buy every year. I don’t know how many from the other houses. No one from Slytherin fought the giants, of course, except for Mariah, in her way.”

“How is she?” Draco Malfoy immediately asked.

“She’s fine, Malfoy,” Hermione said grudgingly. “Unlike *you*, she was actually some *use*....”

“Yeah, except for Mariah, all of the others in your house stayed down in the dungeons. I wouldn’t be surprised if the whole lot knew to expect this,” he added bitterly. “Let’s see, who else....” Hermione mentioned that Katie came here with the first wave of Aurors, right? I can’t keep track—”

Harry’s heart leapt into his throat; he remembered seeing her. “Is she okay?”

Ginny whispered, “It’s her foot—it was blown off.”

He swallowed, thinking of Katie’s perfect little feet....“Colin Creevey probably won’t make it. Burns over most of his body. He wouldn’t stop screaming, so the doctors—they magically removed his voice box, so he wouldn’t disturb the other wounded and dying—” Ron’s voice gave out completely now, as though he’d suffered the same procedure, and Harry could hear the tears in it, then heard the rustling of robes, and he suspected that Hermione had enfolded him in her arms.

"So," he said, his voice trembling, "did Dumbledore defeat them or not, then?"

"Well, yes and no. The giants are all dead, if that's what you mean," Hermione confirmed. "And it was partly Professor Dumbledore who did it—"

"Partly? Who else?"

"Well, Remus, Will Flitwick, Neville and the others were doing a fantastic job of defense from the air, but there didn't seem to be any way to stop them coming. They were just too big and a lot of spells were just bouncing off them, like the Death Eaters had put shield charms on them or something. It was actually Mariah who came up with the answer—"

"Mariah!" Draco Malfoy's surprised voice cut in.

"Yeah," Ron spoke again, sounding impressed. "She used those tunnels to get to the lake, and went in. No thanks to your other cronies, Malfoy. Afterward, Crabbe, Goyle, Zabini, Nott and Pansy Parkinson were found stunned near the entrance to the tunnels. Looks like Mariah and Millicent took on all of them. Millicent helped her and waited while she went into the lake; Mariah told her that if she didn't come out after an hour to go for help."

"Aha!" Malfoy said triumphantly. "It wasn't just Mariah who fought!"

"Yeah, all right, Millicent had to fight off *other Slytherins* to make sure Mariah could get into the tunnels. *One* other person helped," Ron said grudgingly, as though this didn't count.

"I don't understand," Harry said, his head feeling foggy. "Why did Mariah go into the *lake*?"

"She went to speak to the merpeople!" Hermione exclaimed. "She asked for their help with the giants. And the giant squid, too. The squid was probably the most important of all. Do you realize how strong it is?"

Harry shook his head. "So? I still don't—"

"The squid started pulling the giants into the lake," Ron said excitedly. "None of them had ever learnt to *swim*, since most of the water they've ever been near isn't deep enough for them to need to bother. Voldemort used dragons to get them here to Britain. The squid reached out and wrapped around a giant's legs, pulled him or her into the water and then the merpeople held him there. Giants are strong, but merpeople are *very* strong too, and they were *all* pitching in together, and using these nets they'd woven of really strong water-weed."

"So all twelve giants were drowned?" he gasped, incredulous.

"Eventually. One at a time. Some were a bit difficult at the end, Neville said. Dumbledore was shouting at the merpeople in Mermish—which sounds damn queer, he said—and trying to put banishing charms on the giants to send them into the water, as they were still trying to tear the school down, but the charms weren't working so he just went to the lake himself to try to attract them. He used himself as bait. Neville said he didn't really want to drown them, but when nothing else seemed to be working, he decided it was the only way. So many killed....Even poor old Fang. Hagrid's hut has been completely trampled to bits. It's just—flat. Gone. Not that it really matters now—" Harry thought he heard an 'oof' noise from Ron, and Hermione whispering.

"*Oh, tactful way to tell him—*"

There was a long pause. Harry was afraid to ask. No one said anything. Finally, he heard Ginny say to the others, "I'll do it."

Harry clutched at Ginny again. "It's Hagrid," he whispered. It wasn't a question. And yet a part of his mind did have a question: How could anything kill *Hagrid*?

Hermione answered in a very small voice. "Neville saw it. Professor Dumbledore had gone to confront the giants who were trying to tear down the Astronomy Tower. Three of them saw him and went for him at once, and of course he was able to cast a spell to protect himself, but all Hagrid saw was someone attacking Dumbledore, and he ran in front of the giants...." She took a great gulping breath. "One of them picked him up and threw him far into the forest....Hagrid never really had a chance. He—when he landed—well he didn't really land—Professor Dumbledore found him after it was all over. He was impaled—"

He could tell from her voice that she'd already cried plenty over Hagrid. There had always been a special bond between Hagrid and Hermione. She had taken to the gentle half-giant almost from the start. Harry remembered the hours she put in to try to save Buckbeak, poring over magical law books in the library even while she was missing a tremendous amount of sleep because of the Time Turner. He remembered Hagrid chastising him and Ron for not talking to her after they thought Crookshanks had eaten Scabbers and when she had had McGonagall confiscate his Firebolt to check it for jinxes. And now she had watched him being thrown through the air into the midst of the forest he knew like the back of his hand, which had finally become the death of him.

Harry swallowed, glad he would not be able to see Hagrid in repose, in death. He could not imagine him as anything other than larger than life, hale and hardy. He remembered the tender

care he'd received from Hagrid's mother, Fridwulfa, because he was Hagrid's friend. *Hagrid was gone forever.* He was still having trouble getting his mind around that thought....

He didn't want to know any more. Not right now. "What now?" he asked, turning to where he thought Ron and Hermione stood.

"Dumbledore was with some of the dying in the field hospital," Ron said. "Don't know if he's still here or he's gone back to the castle. We should take you there, see if there's anything that can be done for your eyes...."

"Or for Sandy. *I'm* not wounded, Ron. That's not why I'm blind."

There. He'd said it. *I'm blind.*

Silence met him. He heard them shuffling about awkwardly, then Ron's voice again, as though he'd just thought of something he should have realized before.

"Hey! I almost forgot! *Stupefy!*" Harry never realized before that there was a crackling, static sound to the air when this spell—maybe all spells—was being performed. He heard the spell make contact with a body, heard the body hit the ground.

"What did you do, Ron? Who did you stun?"

"*Harry,*" he said, as though it should have been painfully obvious and Harry shouldn't have needed to ask. "Malfoy, of course. He's my prisoner."

"Prisoner!"

"Of course! He's a traitor. He's the one who transported us here with that Portkey. This is all his fault, isn't it? He should be in whatever they're going to use in place of Azkaban for a good long while...."

"Ron! I didn't bring him back to go to prison! He may be a traitor—but he's also a hero. Because of him, Voldemort was defeated. He could have let Ginny be killed. I could be dead. And if I hadn't given you and Ginny the wands for the spell, which I couldn't have done while Voldemort was still alive, you could be dead too. You owe your life to him. Revive him."

"*Revive him?* But—"

"*That's an order,* Major Weasley."

He heard Ron gasp. "Are you—are you *pulling rank* on me, Harry?"

Harry took a deep breath, considering. "That's General Potter. And yes. Yes, I am. Now revive him."

He heard Ron move toward Malfoy, then say, "*Ennervate.*" That was followed by achy moaning and then belligerence as the Slytherin came back into consciousness.

"Sod off, Weasley! What are you about, you bloody bugger? What did I land on, nettles? I just came back from the dead. What's next for you? Planning to kick little old ladies now? Use any babies for *Quaffles* lately?"

"Shut it, Malfoy. Quit whinging or I'll stun you again, after putting a few other hexes on you. You're the last person I ever wanted to see alive again. I said it before and I'll say it again: this is all *your fault!*"

"Ripping to see you too, wanker."

"Insufferable git."

"Stupid prat."

"Useless pillock."

"Hang on!" Hermione yelled, trying to put an end to the exchange of insults. "Stop it, the pair of you. Whether you like it or not, Ron, Harry has a point. If it weren't for Malfoy—"

"Well, if you feel that way Granger, you can just come here and give the conquering hero a little well-deserved good-to-see-you-alive-snogging," he responded, voice dripping smugness. "After all, I *did* try to protect you, too. Even Potter thanked me for it."

Harry heard Hermione make a retching noise. "Not bloody likely," she told him coldly. "You do like to push, don't you? I was just—"

"You know, seven years of school, and I think that's the first time I've ever heard you say *bloody.* Save the apology, Granger. I don't need your pity. I knew what you were doing. I was just messing about. Gads! You are just too easy sometimes, you know? But then, both Potter *and* Weasley are well aware of just how easy you are—"

Harry heard a scuffle and turned to Ginny, puzzled, who acted as his eyes for him. "Hermione's trying to restrain Ron," she said in a bored voice. "Ron's trying to get to Malfoy to hit him. Some things never change, do they?"

"Right. Can you guide me to him?" he asked her softly. "Malfoy, I mean."

He didn't hear a response, so he said, "Gin? Did you hear me?"

"Oh, I'm sorry, Harry! Yes. I nodded, not remembering that of course you can't see me. So stupid—"

"It's okay. You'll get used to it. Just don't do silly things like trying not to say the words *see* and *look*, and things like that. Don't walk on eggshells around me. I'm blind. Not talking about it isn't going to change that fact. Now take me to Malfoy."

She guided him a short way across a gravelly terrain, and when the hand he had outstretched touched a body, he pulled it back abruptly.

"Sorry, Malfoy."

"S'okay, Potter," he grumbled, as though he wished he could complain about the person who had brought him back from the dead, but didn't think that would be good form.

"No, Malfoy, I'm saying sorry in advance for this," he said, pulling back his hand and suddenly walloping him across the jaw. He thought for a crazy moment that Malfoy might duck or do something else to avoid his fist, but he must have been too surprised or just disbelieving. The satisfyingly painful contact of his knuckles with Malfoy's jawbone told him he'd calculated correctly. He heard the agonized yell as Malfoy fell away from him, the sound of him hitting the ground, the scream as he landed again on the nettles.

"*Bloody hell!*" he bellowed from the ground. Harry shook his sore hand, an ache radiating up his arm to his shoulder, which had taken the brunt of the blow. He put his bleeding knuckles in his mouth; that had been very enjoyable, he decided. A very concrete feeling of accomplishment. He tasted his own blood and tried to slow his breathing down again. His heart was racing from the rush of hitting Malfoy.

"Ron wanted you to pay for what you'd done. Now you've paid. I just wish I could see the look on your face—"

"You are *not* going to get away with that, Potter—" Malfoy growled at him. Harry heard him struggling to stand; he stood his ground, trying to push Ginny behind him, but she moved forward and positioned herself between the two of them.

"Stop it! Stop it, the pair of you!"

Malfoy started to say, "Get out of the way, Ginny, so I can—"

"Will you look at yourself?" she practically shrieked at Malfoy. "You're trying to hit someone who's not only blind, but who is blind because he *saved your life*. And yes, I'm aware of the irony of yelling at you, since *you* saved *my* life, but that still doesn't mean—"

"What *does* it mean, Ginny? Hmm? Does it mean you're going to throw yourself at me, to show your gratitude? Didn't think so. You never did when you were my girlfriend, why should you start now? And saving your life! After all *that*, it's you and Potter, off into the sunset. Only think of this; if I were still dead, how awkward would that be for the two of you? Hmm? You knowing that I'd die in your place, and *him* not being able to rid you of my memory. I'd always be between you. But because Potty finds a way to one-up me and bring me back to life, *he's* the sodding hero and I'm the traitor. That's just bloody brilliant. Well, I have to say, Potter, my hat's off to you. You found a way to continue to be in her bed and not have her wishing it was me..."

Harry felt a rage bubble up from inside him and he lunged forward, thwarted by Ginny, who was grunting with the effort of holding him back. "Let me go, Ginny. I've already landed one punch. He's shown he doesn't even have the brains to duck, can't even avoid a blow from a *blind man!* What kind of idiot gets hit by a blind man, Malfoy?"

"I hope you're happy, Harry," Ron's bitter voice came suddenly from behind him. "Bet you're not so glad now you saved his worthless life. If it weren't for him—" Ron started to say again.

Harry turned in the direction of Ron's voice. "Yeah, well, what kind of person would I be if I could only do that for someone I don't *detest*?"

"I guess, Harry. I guess," Ron said grudgingly.

Harry reached around Ginny and extended his hand to Malfoy. "We're done, Malfoy. No one owes anyone anything. All accounts are null and void."

He waited; after some hesitation, he felt Malfoy's hand grasp his. His hand was still a little cold, as though his circulation wasn't yet quite up to speed. "Agreed," he said tersely, then let Harry's hand go as soon as he could.

The five of them walked across the field, Ginny leading Harry toward the makeshift hospital, where wounded were being attended to, regardless of what side they'd been on.

"But," Hermione explained, "the Death Eaters are segregated and under heavy guard. And all wands are locked up—no matter what side you were on in the battle. No one wants a Death Eater to be able to nick someone's wand from their pocket while they're walking around the beds. So everyone has to check theirs before going in."

Harry took out his wand and ran his fingers over the smooth wood before handing it over to the wizard who was keeper of the wands; the last spell he'd performed had been the *Enuma Elish*. And it had worked; Malfoy was alive. Alive and as obnoxious as ever. Harry had to smile inside. *Maybe he'll finally turn over a new leaf for real, when people start thanking him left and right for contributing to Voldemort's final defeat.* He thought of his best friend in his other life, the boy who had loved his sister and sacrificed himself so he wouldn't have to remember loving and losing her. Harry realized that he should have known how passionately Draco Malfoy loved; he'd been willing to die for love in that other life, and he'd been willing to die for it in this one. And both times, what he had done had had a cataclysmic effect....

Professor Dumbledore had returned to the castle, so he wasn't on hand to greet Harry, but Madam Pomfrey was there and insisted upon taking care of Harry and Draco herself. She clucked over the split skin on Harry's knuckles, from hitting Malfoy, and she said there was a bruise beginning to blossom on Draco's jaw. She either decided not to comment on Draco having died and come back to life, or she didn't know. No one felt like volunteering this information. Ginny and Ron and Hermione were shooed away. Ginny kissed Harry softly on the lips before going, gently taking Sandy from him (she assured him it was just temporary), and Hermione gave him a friendly kiss on the cheek. When Madam Pomfrey was done with them, Harry turned tentatively to the other boy, speaking quietly.

"Malfoy?" A noncommittal grunt. "Is anybody else nearby? Anyone who could hear us talking if we kept it quiet?"

"Who said I wanted to talk to you, Potter?"

"Well, I was just wondering....What did you see when you were dead? Where were you?"

"You saw where I was."

"I did?"

"Yeah. You were looking right at me. Looking pretty happy about what you were seeing, I might add."

"And what was I seeing?"

"Why are you asking me?"

"Because I think we were seeing very different things. When I woke up after jumping into the abyss with you, it looked like I was at Hogwarts."

"Hogwarts?"

"Yes. I had to go through seven gates, until I entered the Slytherin common room. Except that it wasn't. It looked like an ancient temple. And your dead body was hanging on a hook, like a piece of meat."

"On a *what*?"

"A hook."

"I heard what you said. What I mean is--well, that's not where I was."

"I told you. So where *were* you?"

Harry could actually hear Draco gulp. "Not a good place. Not a comfortable place. I've experienced the Cruciatus Curse before, mind you, but I've never felt anything like--well, that's why you looked so smug, I thought."

"You were being tortured? I couldn't see that."

"Well, yeah. Ruddy well surprised me, frankly. So to speak. I mean, I never really believed in a 'hell' until I'd died and gone there...."

"That's not true."

"What's not true?"

"That you didn't believe in a hell, or some kind of punishment. If you didn't, you wouldn't have been where you were."

"What?"

"That's what I was told. When I was in the Slytherin common room that wasn't. And Dumbledore told me the same thing, once. Basically. After death, people see what they expect to see. You obviously expected to see yourself in a place where you would receive punishment for the awful things you'd done, and that's where you were. After we die, we can't deceive ourselves. You may have convinced yourself that what you'd done wasn't dreadful when you were alive, but after death, that kind of self-deception is impossible. And if you expected people who'd done what you did in life to be punished for it after death--well, then, it's no wonder that's what happened to you."

Malfoy was quiet. Harry heard distant moans and groans on the other side of the tent, and witches and wizards bustling about tending to the wounded. He'd let the words just tumble out of him, in spite of the fact that he'd been rather close-mouthed before. Now that he couldn't see

anything, silence felt like the world slipping away from him; he had nothing to anchor him if there was no sound.

"Malfoy? Don't you have anything to say?"

Silence again. Harry steeled himself to be patient and wait for the response. Finally, Malfoy said softly, "Yeah. I do. Thanks for bringing me back, Potter. And that's the last time I'm going to say it."

Harry let him wait a little now, too. "You're welcome," he said simply, after a minute.

There was some more silence, and then Malfoy spoke again. "Harry."

"What?" He tried not to show surprise at being called by his first name.

"What do *you* believe in?"

Harry thought for a moment. He thought about the times he'd changed what shouldn't be changed. One of those changes had stood—the rescue of Sirius and Buckbeak. One had not—his saving his mother and sister. Now he'd changed something else, and he'd paid a high price for it. And despite everything, he knew that he'd do it again. He also strongly suspected that it was possible that the next time Draco Malfoy died, he wouldn't be where he was before.

Now that Ron wasn't here to goad him, even though he wasn't exactly hugging Harry and declaring him to be his closest friend in the world, and he wasn't voicing an ambition to work for world peace and to feed all the starving people and house all the homeless wretches in the world, it *did* seem that there was *perhaps* a slow change taking place in Draco Malfoy. Harry could hear something in his voice; he wasn't *exactly* the same person who had perished by throwing himself between Ginny and Voldemort. Draco Malfoy been reborn in more ways than one.

"What do I believe in, Malfoy?" He paused again. Then the answer suddenly leapt into his brain. He smiled, not sure whether the other boy was looking at him. It didn't matter.

"I believe in second chances."

\* \* \* \* \*

When they had all returned to Hogwarts, Harry managed to convince Madam Pomfrey that he was in perfectly good health and did not need to stay in the hospital wing that night. Ginny had returned Sandy him, and he reluctantly gave her up to Snape, who took her down to his dungeon to see whether he had an appropriate potion to help perk her up. Harry fell into bed in the tower room feeling strangely empty and not a bit like sleeping, but also like there was nowhere else he would rather be. He was glad that, before turning in, he couldn't see Seamus' empty bed, nor Dean's. Ron had gone to the seventh year girls' dormitory to spend the night with Hermione; they both felt deep remorse over Parvati and neither wanted to be alone. Harry didn't imagine that they'd be doing more than holding each other tightly and breaking into sporadic tears.

He and Neville were the only ones in the seventh year boys' dormitory, and Harry could hear that Neville was also lying in his bed sobbing over Parvati—and probably others, too. Harry's eyes were dry, though. He felt numb all over.

Soon after he had put his head onto the pillow, Harry heard the door open. "Ron?" he whispered, thinking perhaps that his best friend had decided to spend the night in his own bed after all. He turned out to be partially right.

"Me too, Harry," Hermione whispered. "It was just too—quiet in my dormitory. We—we wanted to be with *people*."

He shifted over on the bed and patted the mattress. "Want to talk?" he croaked, not sure that he was feeling up to talking, but he wouldn't mind listening. When he listened to Ron and Hermione he could vividly imagine their faces, the way their expressions changed, the light in their eyes. It was almost as good as still being able to see them. Perhaps this was what he really wanted, what he needed.

He felt the mattress shift as they accepted his invitation, then felt Hermione's arms go around him, her hair tickling his nose. He felt Ron's arms go around them both as Hermione's body began to shake with her tears. They enfolded each other in warmth and life. Harry felt two smaller weights on the mattress and then heard the low motor-like purring.

"Crookshanks?" he asked Hermione.

"Yes. And Ron's Argent, too."

She put her head on Harry's shoulder again and he held her with one arm and petted Crookshanks with the other, the rhythm of the cat's purring matched by the gentle circles he traced on her back. He could feel Ron's warm weight against his leg, his arm moving as he stroked his own cat.

"Neville?" Hermione whispered suddenly, her voice thick with tears.

"Okay," Neville said in a muffled, nasal sort of voice, climbing onto the bed with them. Harry

assumed that he'd been standing nearby, a wordless plea on his face; Hermione must have seen his need and motioned for him to join them.

As the four of them sat together, mourning their fellow Gryffindors (as well as students from other houses), Harry had a strange thought: *We're all together again*. He had a very vivid memory, for a moment, of the four of them sitting in the gently rocking boat as they crossed the great cold lake to Hogwarts castle soon after their arrival in Hogsmeade. He wondered whether the others also thought of this, but he didn't ask.

At length, the crying gave way to the talking. About Parvati, about Seamus, about Tony and Colin, repeated stories about Hagrid. Laughter began to be as frequent as tears and Harry knew that there was no other way he would have wanted to spend that night, remembering the good things, picturing the faces of the departed, Ron even dredging up stories about when they didn't know Peter Pettigrew was Scabbers the rat, recalling the time he'd bitten Goyle on the finger.

Harry thought it might be near dawn when the others finally fell asleep. Neville lay across the foot of Harry's bed, snoring softly; Ron and Hermione had moved to Ron's bed, taking the cats with them. They were also snuffling quietly while they slept. Harry sat on his pillow, his legs drawn up to his chest, listening to the birds beginning to awaken outside the window. He hadn't slept at all but didn't really feel tired. He heard a footstep on the landing and wasn't surprised when the door started opening slowly. A familiar voice whispered his name.

"Harry?"

"Ginny?"

He heard her soft steps pad across the stone floor and then felt the mattress dip; a moment later she was in his arms and he was gripping her tightly, his cheek on her hair. "I'm sorry I didn't come up last night, Harry," she apologized. "But Ruth—she's devastated. I felt that she—"

"Sssh. Don't worry about it. She needed you."

He felt her head bob. "We stayed up talking most of the night. She's asleep now, finally. Poor thing! She and Tony were going to Venice this summer to visit family, but now—"

"Which family?"

"Both. It turns out that his family is from Venice and hers as well. On her dad's side. Granted, her family lives in the *ghetto vecchio*—that's the Old Ghetto—and his has a palazzo on the Grand Canal—"

"Sounds like you talked about a lot."

"We did. What was going on here?" He realized that it probably looked peculiar, Ron and Hermione in bed together in the same room with Harry and Neville, and Neville across the foot of Harry's bed.

"We spent most of the night talking too, the four of us. Did you know that we all rode in the same boat to cross the lake when we were first years?"

"No, I didn't know that," she whispered.

"And the four of us found Fluffy together, too."

"Fluffy?"

He frowned. "I'm fairly certain I told you about Fluffy. That three-headed dog of Hagrid's."

"Oh, right!" she said. "I just thought of 'Fluffy's lair' as the place where, um, you and Hermione—"

"Oh, right. No, I thought you knew about all this? See, Malfoy had challenged me to a duel—"

As he told her the story, it felt to him like he was telling her a fairy tale, something from another lifetime, a long-lost era. *Was that really nearly seven years ago?* he thought. He remembered running into Hermione in the common room and finding Neville curled up on the floor of the corridor, fast asleep...he remembered the panic at nearly being caught by Filch, how stupid he'd felt when Hermione pointed out that Malfoy had set him up, then the sheer terror of being discovered by Peeves followed by the enormous relief he'd felt when Hermione had grabbed his wand and pronounced the *Alohomora* incantation so that the four of them could hide—only to be introduced to Fluffy.

Ginny kissed him on the cheek. "Ron wrote home to us regularly that year, but that doesn't sound like the sort of thing he would want Mum to know about," she said, snuggling down into his arms and giggling softly. Harry grinned.

"I reckon not. And he couldn't have told you himself at the Christmas hols because he stayed here that year."

She nodded against his chin, whispering, "Yes, I was so lonely that Christmas. I mean, it was wonderful to go with Mum and Dad to visit Charlie in Romania, but I missed Ron and the others. We were with all of these *strangers* for the holiday, and in a different country. It felt very odd."

"I'd forgotten all about that," Harry said. "That's right, I remember Ron saying that your parents

had gone to visit Charlie. I forgot that would mean you'd gone, too, especially as he didn't mention you."

She shuddered. "I was scared to death of the dragons. God! I was having flashbacks when we were at Stonehenge. Charlie didn't make it any better, he was so foolhardy around them. 'Daring,' he called it. I thought I was going to throw up every time I saw him come close to danger. I used to have nightmares about Charlie being killed by one of them, after visiting him and seeing for myself how dreadful they were, and that's all I could think about when you were trying to get that egg away from the Hungarian Horntail..." She paused. "Later I had nightmares about Draco turning into one of those dragons, and chasing you on your broomstick. It would start off with him talking to me, perfectly civilized, then suddenly—"

"I had a hallucination like that!" Harry declared. "When I'd been burnt, at Roger and Alicia's wedding—"

"Well, you had an excuse, didn't you? Your mind does funny things when it's experiencing that much pain, to get away from it—"

He nodded. "Yeah, I reckon it was another way of coping, like when I'm blocking Cruciatius."

Somehow he felt like all barriers had been lowered as they talked, like they were more exposed to each other than they ever had been. And yet—there was still something he couldn't tell her. Something he hadn't told anyone. But there was no reason to tell. What good would it do? He had to stop dwelling on it and move on. Draco Malfoy was alive and he, Harry Potter, was blind. That's all there was to it.

They sat quietly for a time; eventually, Harry heard the others starting to stir. For once Ron didn't get excited about Ginny being in Harry's bed. He just greeted her casually, "Oh, morning, Gin."

"Morning, Ron, Hermione, Neville."

After the girls left, the boys dressed for breakfast. Harry was ready first; if there was one thing he didn't need his sight for, it was dressing, having been dressing himself in the dark under the stairs for ten years before Hogwarts. He left the dormitory before Ron and Neville, feeling like he was moving in a fog as he brushed his hands over the stone walls in the curved stairwell. When he arrived in the common room, Ginny immediately took his arm and he felt a bit better. The other Gryffindors were subdued as they all greeted their Head Boy and shook his hand (the boys) or shyly hugged him (the girls). It didn't seem to Harry like there were nearly enough people for it to be all of Gryffindor House, and he was glad again that he couldn't see them. He saw the missing faces in his mind's eye. That was bad enough.

When he arrived in the Great Hall, holding Ginny's hand, he heard a murmur roll through the crowd. He swallowed and tried to put out of his mind, even though he could hear far more of their whispering than they probably supposed:

*"He took away You-Know-Who's power, yeah? He turned him into a Muggle, and then—"*

*"Draco Malfoy's actually a hero!"*

*"No, he was still a wizard. He put the Killing Curse on him."*

*"Imagine that—a Slytherin hero!"*

*"Well, so is Mariah Kirkner a Slytherin hero."*

*"He put the Killing Curse on who?"*

*"I heard he forced You-Know-Who to eat poisoned sweets—"*

*"How could he have put the Killing Curse on him if he's still alive?"*

*"Yeah, I heard she talked the merpeople into helping with the giants."*

*"So, she's part mermaid, then?"*

*"It's 'on whom.' On Draco Malfoy."*

*"She's The Girl Who Lived! Did you see her scar?"*

*"Nah, I heard she was part grindylow on her mum's side or something."*

*"I still don't understand. If You-Know-Who hit him with the Killing Curse, why's he alive?"*

*"That's why Harry Potter's blind. He made a deal with the devil, to give Malfoy's life back—"*

*"He really did? A deal with the devil? What'd he do that for?"*

*"Yeah, if he was going to save anyone, why not my brother, or someone else killed by the giants? My brother never tried to get anyone killed."*

*"I don't get it either. Draco Malfoy?"*

He heard it over and over: *Why? Why save Draco Malfoy?* He felt like screaming his reasons at the top of his lungs, yet he remained quiet, eating his toast, pretending he couldn't hear any of it when it felt like it was filling his head.

It promised to be a strange week. All lessons were canceled, as were the rest of the end of term exams. With Hagrid and Trelawney dead, plus Vector, Flitwick and McGonagall in the hospital wing, there weren't even enough teachers to handle all of the lessons if they were to be held. All seventh year students who had been interrupted in taking their NEWTs, written and practical, were passed.

A memorial was to be held a week after the battle; Professor Dumbledore had taken on the task of planning it himself and had asked Hermione and Snape for assistance with the music. This had surprised Harry at first, but then he remembered the booming sound of his stepfather's deep voice as he sang sea-chanties on the *Patricia*, or Christmas carols at Hog's End, harmonizing with his wife's lilting voice while they decorated the house for the holiday.

Hermione was going to go see Dumbledore about this planning after breakfast; Ron was going to meet with Remus in the Gryffindor common room to discuss his impending job at the Ministry. Before she could leave the Gryffindor table, Harry turned to his right, where he knew Hermione was sitting.

"You should get Ruth to sing," he whispered to her.

"I'm way ahead of you Harry. Already done. She's going to do Ravel's *Kaddish*," she whispered back.

This did not surprise Harry. "I can do something, if you like..." He told Hermione his idea and she hugged him and nodded against his chin, which he took to mean that she approved.

She told him that she'd also already asked Will Flitwick, which pleased Harry; he remembered Will's flute-like voice raised in song before they flew into the forest to save Severus Snape and Draco Malfoy. Before Ron became a werewolf...

Was that why Ron wished Harry had left Draco dead? he wondered. Did Ron blame Draco Malfoy for his lycanthropy? Perhaps he felt that enough sacrifices had been made on Draco Malfoy's behalf. Harry had a feeling that Ron would never fully understand what he had done. Nor would anyone else, very likely.

After breakfast, Harry and Ginny went to the staff wing to visit Sirius. Harry had been relieved to find that Sirius had been injured during the battle at Godric's Hollow but was going to recover with only minor scarring and bruising. Madam Pomfrey had allowed him to return to his rooms, as the infirmary was overflowing with people who still needed to be transferred to St. Mungo's. After greeting Mrs. Figg, who was babysitting little Arne in the sitting room, they entered the bedroom; Ginny informed Harry in a whisper that Alicia was holding Sirius' hand as he laid in bed and she was pressing a cold cloth to his brow.

"Erm," Ginny had begun, upon approaching them; "is there something you'd both like to tell us?"

Harry had suspected it for a while, despite Sirius' protests to the contrary, but now they both finally admitted to having been involved for some months. (Harry thought that his accusing Sirius of being attracted to her might be the main reason he hadn't owned up to it.) In the aftermath of the Rodney Jeffries debacle it had been necessary to cover up Alicia's part in it, as well-intentioned as she had been. It was true that she had worked to get her father elected to Parliament at the behest of a Death Eater, but she hadn't realized it was to replace him with Narcissa Malfoy masquerading as a Muggle, nor that anyone would be murdered to bring this about. Harry learned that there were a few other things going on of which he'd had no knowledge, such as Alicia's father being broken out of Muggle prison by Sirius. (Her parents had been staying in the staff wing with her, well out of sight of the students and even the other staff.) That, Harry thought, explained some of his dodginess and long absences. If there was anyone who understood the anguish of being an innocent man in prison, it was Sirius Black. He did not want Alicia's father to suffer—even without dementors—a moment more than necessary.

"We're emigrating," Alicia finally told them, her voice shaking; Harry could hear how frightened she was. *Emigrating!* It had never occurred to him, but the moment she said it, he thought, *Yes. Starting over. That sounds about right...*

"Where? When?" he asked, letting himself be led to a chair by Ginny.

"End of the month. To America," Sirius said with a croak in his voice. "We're taking Arne. There's a small fishing village populated entirely by wizards on an island off the coast of Maine. That's in the northeast. It's practically in Canada it's so far north. At one point, I think the Canadian Ministry of Magic was fighting with the Americans over who could claim the island, but as it's mostly barren rock, a few wizarding families and a handful of seals, I think they decided the Americans could have it and good riddance. Calling what's there a village is really a bit of a stretch."

"Huh!" Harry said. "And what will they think of the infamous Sirius Black coming to live there? Your fame must have spread to North America by now."

Sirius laughed. "I imagine you're right, but no one there will know it's me, if everything goes as

planned. All of us are getting new identities. Dumbledore is seeing to it. We're *really* getting a fresh start."

"All of you?" Harry asked, frowning.

"Well, I am because the American Bureau of Magic could choose to extradite me if the British Ministry ever realizes just what I did," Alicia said quietly, sounding more than a little ashamed of her actions. "My dad is because if the Muggle authorities ever got wind of an escaped convicted murderer being in the country, they'd probably extradite *him* back here, and my mum is because she's married to my dad...."

"Hmm," Ginny agreed. "I see the problem. It's so far away, though! Are you going to cut yourself off from *everyone* you used to know?"

"Not entirely," Sirius admitted. "But you'll have to send us trans-Atlantic owl post under our new names. It'll take a bit of getting used to."

"And we don't want to have any fuss about the magical or Muggle authorities checking our identities for a marriage license, so we're going to marry here first and then present it as a *fait accompli* once we're in America," added Alicia softly.

Harry's jaw dropped. "Marry! You didn't tell me that—congratulations!" he cried, trying to find his way to Sirius to pump his hand and give him a hug. Ginny helped guide him, and he thumped Sirius on the back just a little too hard, making him wince. "Oops. Sorry! I just—well, bloody hell! I thought the pair of you fancied each other, but I didn't think you were up for getting *married*...."

"You just thought we were going to shack up?" Alicia said slyly. Harry felt his face grow warm and was glad that he didn't have to meet her eye.

"Well, to be honest, yeah. I thought—well, I thought—"

"—that we were already shagging day and night?" Sirius suggested, laughter in his voice. Harry's face felt warmer still.

"Well, I wasn't going to say it, but—"

Sirius and Alicia laughed. "It wasn't quite like that," Sirius informed him. "I'm not a young lad anymore, after all—"

"You're young enough for me," Alicia said in a soft but firm voice.

"Oh! You're so *adorable* together...." Ginny told them.

"Ginny!" Sirius laughed. "I don't think I've *ever* been called 'adorable.'"

"Professor Dumbledore himself is going to perform the ceremony before we leave," Alicia told them. "It'll be a double ceremony, actually. It just seems to be the season for weddings...."

"Double?" Harry said, frowning, trying to think of who else might be about to marry. Then his jaw dropped. "Oh. My. God. Did Ron pop the question to Hermione? How could he not have told me himself as soon as it happened?"

"No, silly," Ginny said, a scowl in her voice. "I think I know who. Think about it. Who else do you know who are *already* engaged?"

Harry wracked his brain, then widened his useless eyes, turning in Sirius' direction. "No! You've got to be joking! *He* agreed to share his wedding day with *you*? Of *all* people?"

Sirius laughed again. "I couldn't make this up if I tried. Yes, Harry. Dumbledore will be performing the wedding ceremony for both me and Alicia and for Maggie and Severus. That's the double wedding. It would make history were it not for the fact that it'll need to be very hush-hush."

Harry was still in shock. "I can't believe it. After you tried to get him killed—"

"—and he tried to get me kissed by a dementor. Yes, clocks will probably strike seventeen and it will snow in Tahiti." He laughed some more. "But here's another thing, Harry—it works out well because we both want to have the same best man. You'll do it for us both, I hope?"

Harry was grinning ear to ear now and lunged forward to hug his godfather again. "Of course I will, you prat! You even have to ask?" In the back of his mind, though, Harry wondered whether Severus Snape would be annoyed by not getting to ask him himself. Sirius had beaten him to it.

"Well, at a certain point—yes. I do have to ask. So, that's a yes?" He could hear that Sirius was trying to suppress his laughter now, unsuccessfully.

"What do you think? Of course it's a yes!" he declared, pulling Ginny onto his lap. He laughed and put her arms around his neck.

"There will be one maid of honor, too," said Alicia. "I'm having Angelina and so is Maggie. She's her sister-in-law, after all. Sort of. Angelina and George will actually finally be having a wedding later in the summer. That one will be big—your mum is *insisting*—" she told Ginny; "—and not a bit hushed up, but we won't be here for it, unfortunately," she added wistfully.

"So many weddings!" Ginny said, a strange note in her voice. Harry suddenly felt extremely uncomfortable and wanted very much to change the subject.

Despite having felt previously that nothing could make him happier than asking Ginny to be with him for the rest of his life, he was uncertain now. How could he ask her to tether herself to him, sightless as he was? And yet—it was right for him to be like this.

They left the staff wing just in time for lunch, and she brought up another subject he'd been dreading: how to fix his eyes.

"Perhaps Nita—"

"No, Ginny," he said firmly as they walked down the marble stairs.

"Well, at least magical eyes—"

"No."

"Why not?"

He swallowed, stopping, gripping the handrail on the stairs very tightly. "It wouldn't be right."

"But Harry—"

"I'm not discussing it," he said brusquely, worried that this would be more likely to come between them than if there was no way to give him his sight again. He finally gave in to at least having an examination by one of the St. Mungo's eye doctors. But he made no promises to accept magical eyes or any other way of getting around his sacrifice.

The next morning, Dr. Chaudhri came to see him, along with Nita. Professor McGonagall, well enough to leave the hospital wing, had given them her office for the purpose, patting his shoulder firmly before she left. She was sniffing a little, he thought.

Nita, on the other hand, was her usual no-nonsense self.

"Sit *still*, Harry," she ordered him, an irritated edge to her voice. She was reminding him more than a little of his mother and he bit back a borderline rude response.

"I am sitting as still as I can possibly be expected to, especially considering what she's *doing* to me," he said through gritted teeth, gripping the arms of the chair as Dr. Chaudhri closed his right eye with her thumb on the eyelid and then pressed her wand to the sensitive skin there, muttering an incantation which was repeated on the left eye. It felt like she was trying to poke her wand *through* his eyelids, as far as he was concerned.

When she had done some other highly undignified things to him concerning his ears, he was told that the examination was over. He heard Dr. Chaudhri walk a few feet away to consult with Nita.

"It's as I thought, Nita—"

"Are you sure? I don't know, Jess. Why would—"

"I can hear you!" Harry cried, feeling very irked. "Remember—blind man here. Sensitive hearing and all that." He didn't think, though, that someone who was sighted would have had any trouble hearing them either. Somehow, through being blind, it was as though *he'd* become invisible to *them*.

"Harry," Ginny started to scold him. He heard Nita and Dr. Chaudhri approach him again.

Suddenly he heard Dr. Chaudhri's voice say, "Here, Harry."

He started to frown, then felt a soft feathery thing hit his forehead. He heard a mechanical whirring that sounded familiar and he floundered about with his hands, scrambling to touch his face, his chest, trying to work out what had collided with him. He failed to catch it, much as he flailed with his arms in the air around where he was sitting.

"What's the big idea? What was that?"

"See, Jess?" Nita's annoyed voice was heard.

Dr. Chaudhri spoke again. "I'm still not convinced. You told me yourself that his powers of self-suggestion are considerable."

"Stop talking about me like I'm not here! I'm blind, not comatose. Would someone bloody well tell me what is going on and what that thing was that practically flew through my head?" he demanded. "Was it a Snitch?"

"Spot on," Dr. Chaudhri said smugly. "I told you, Nita," she added.

"Told her what?" he wanted to know.

"That you can see."

Harry had never felt such fury surge up in him. Not the Dursleys—even Aunt Marge—not being convicted of his mother's murder, nothing compared to how furious he felt upon hearing Dr. Chaudhri say this. "I can *what*?"

"You can see. You did an admirable job of pretending *not* to see the Snitch flying straight at you, but how did you know it was a Snitch if you couldn't see it?" He was sure she thought this sounded reasonable, but he wanted to throttle the woman.

"I can tell it's a Snitch, you *quack*, because it felt feathery when it collided with my forehead and

I can hear the wings making noise," he ground out, trying to resist the urge to take out his wand and randomly start throwing curses around; he might hit Ginny, after all, or Nita, who did not seem to agree with Dr. Chaudhri. "And I think the fact that I can't see pretty much cancels out your saying that I can. I think I'd *know* if I could see, thank you very much."

"Not necessarily. Many people with hysterical blindness have truly convinced themselves that they cannot see a thing. They've even managed to control their bodies to the extent that their pupils do not dilate when bright light is brought near. I've read about cases where—"

"*Hysterical blindness!*" Harry, Ginny and Nita all said together.

"That's it," Nita said firmly. "Goodbye, Jess. I did not bring you here to—"

"Hear me out!" Dr. Chaudhri insisted.

Harry stood, shaking. "You heard Nita. *Get out*. I can no more see than a Muggle can do magic."

"There is *nothing physically wrong with you!*" Dr. Chaudhri exclaimed, sounding as frustrated as Harry felt. He hesitated momentarily.

"There isn't?" he asked.

"No. Your optic nerve, your eyes, everything is in perfect working order. There is absolutely no reason why you shouldn't be able to see. Except for the fact that you evidently can't."

He swallowed, sitting. When he'd told Ginny that it 'wouldn't be right' when she'd brought up magical eyes, it hadn't occurred to him that he couldn't change his mind. Ever.

"So—" he started to say.

"—magical eyes are out of the question. They interact with the optic nerve to send your mind visual information. But your real eyes seem to be working just fine and aren't. That means that we couldn't guarantee that the magical ones would work either. And I would never recommend removing healthy organs to experiment with prosthetics if there's a very good chance that the prosthetics would fail," Dr. Chaudhri told them. "Which, I think, in this case there is."

"Since I'm pretending to be blind," he growled at her.

"No, since you're *convinced* that you're blind. It's a different issue. It's not something you're doing consciously...."

"And Cedric Diggory was in the pink of health. There was absolutely no reason for him not to be up and running about, except for the little matter of having been hit with the Killing Curse. Listen, has it ever occurred to you that I might be blind because the goddess *blinded* me? That that's why my eyes seem like they should still work?"

"The—the *what?*" Dr. Chaudhri sputtered.

"A goddess blinded Harry," Ginny confirmed.

"Oh," Dr. Chaudhri said now, sounded deflated. "You didn't tell me it was god-magic. That's another story entirely. Accidents we can fix with magical eyes. Hysterical blindness as a result of a traumatic experience we can treat as well. But god-magic....There are some things humans just shouldn't mess about with...."

Her voice was very soft now and Harry was a little sorry that he'd yelled at her. Harry turned to Ginny was. "Please, can we go now? There's nothing to be done. And even if there was—I wouldn't want anything done."

"All right," she agreed, sounding like she was trying not to cry.

When they were in the corridor she collapsed against him, her face buried in his shirt. He stroked her hair, feeling numb. *There is nothing physically wrong with you*. No, not a thing. I just can't see.

"Sssh, Ginny," he said, feeling her shivering as though she was freezing. "I'm fine with it, really I am. Aren't—aren't you?" But even as he said this, he was starting to have doubts.

She sniffed loudly but did not answer him. He stepped back a little. "You—you don't understand, Harry—"

She pulled away from him and he heard her footsteps receding along the corridor.

"Bloody hell," he said softly, realizing that he was going to have to get back to Gryffindor Tower on his own. *She doesn't want to be with me anymore*, he thought, his heart lurching wildly. *What have I done?*

He sank down, crouching against the wall, running his hand through his hair. He hadn't bothered trying to do anything with it since he'd returned, and he hadn't bothered shaving either; he could feel the stubble on his cheeks. He'd been afraid of taking off the end of his nose or his ear if he used magic to shave (or if he used a razor, for that matter). *Perhaps I'll just grow a beard*, he thought. *Then I'll look less like myself, harder to spot in a crowd....*

He heard the door to McGonagall's office open and two sets of footsteps that stopped short. "Are you all right, Harry?" Nita's voice asked.

"Yeah, I'm fine. But Ginny's a bit upset and now I can't find my way back to the common room. I

mean, it's hard enough to deal with the corridors and stairs moving about when you can *see* them, if you know what I mean."

"Well, Professor McGonagall should be back any minute and she can help you. I'm afraid I'd only get you more lost, as I've never been to your common room."

"You should have done," Harry said immediately. "You shouldn't have gone to Durmstrang. You should have gone to Hogwarts."

"Well—can you excuse me for a minute, Harry?" She took a deep breath before saying to Dr. Chaudhri, "I'm sorry about all this, Jess. Listen, you're familiar with the castle, right? Can you see your own way out?"

"I'm fine," Dr. Chaudhri answered. "Take care of yourself, Harry," she said quietly to him.

He didn't answer her but waited for her footsteps to also recede along the corridor. Nita seemed to be waiting also. He heard her robes rustling as she crouched next to him.

"Yes, Harry. I should have gone to Hogwarts. But I didn't. I was kidnapped. I lived in an orphanage. I went to live in Sweden and was adopted by Anna and Nils Anderssen. I've made my peace with it all. Can you truly say you've made your peace with what's happened?" He started to say something, but she continued before he could put his thoughts into words. "I'm not saying you *should* have made peace already. I'm just saying—yeah, there are some things you're going to think about for the rest of your life. Things you could have done differently." He swallowed, thinking for a moment of Cedric, of disarming his mother, of leaving the room when the Cho was hurling herself against Jeffries' window.... "But you can't go change what's happened, so it's no use agonizing over what you *didn't* do, is it? *Why* do you think Ginny is so upset, Harry?"

He was tired of being lectured. "I don't want to talk about it. I'll just wait here for Professor McGonagall."

She stood and made a huffing noise. "You're as stubborn as Severus."

He frowned. "Why do you say that?"

"Because I've had the chance to get to know him a little, now that he's going to be marrying my sister. All I can say is that my sisters seem to have a remarkable talent for finding the most *stubborn* men possible."

Harry snorted. "Oh, yeah. Sam Bell isn't stubborn. And I'm a purple hippogriff."

"It's not that Sam's *stubborn*. He's just—set in his ways," she said defensively. "Listen, Harry, I have to go. Please don't be so hard on her—"

"Hard on her! Just because I don't think it's right to try to undo this I'm being hard on her? Didn't you just tell me you shouldn't try to undo some things?"

"*You* restored someone to life who died perfectly willingly, Harry. And as far as Ginny is concerned, I mean—try to understand what she's going through, that's all. Please?"

She didn't wait for an answer but marched away from him, the tattoo of her shoes on the stone flags echoing in the distance while he sat on the cold, hard floor and waited for Professor McGonagall to lead him back to the Gryffindor common room.

\* \* \* \* \*

That night they didn't engage in pretense. Hermione and Ginny climbed the stairs with Ron and Harry. Neville had gone home to visit his family; his grandmother had been frantic when she'd heard what he'd done during the battle with the giants and had insisted on his coming home until the memorial. Dumbledore was getting a lot of similar requests, all of which were granted. It wasn't as though the students were missing lessons.

As they climbed into his bed together, Harry was aware of a soft thud on the mattress. "Um, Hermione? Ron? One of your cats is on my bed. Not that I mind. Just—if you were looking for—"

"No, Harry. That's MacKenzie," Ginny told him.

"Oh, right. I forgot about her." He heard another small body land on the bed.

"And Bainbridge," she added. "Jules Quinn's cat. Remember, she's Argent and MacKenzie's mummy. I've been taking care of her since—since Jules can't anymore," she said, her voice sounding very close to breaking.

He swallowed. "Oh, of course. That's fine. Let's—let's just get some sleep."

He felt a weariness more of the soul than body, though, and long after she had fallen asleep, curled against him, his arm around her waist, he continued to listen to the noises of the night, punctuated by her breathing, as well as Ron and Hermione's deep, even breaths.

Although he could no longer see, he couldn't help seeing in his mind's eye a million images: Riddle cursing Ginny, Draco jumping between him and Ginny, his sister standing on the front steps of Hogwarts, his mother gazing expectantly at him....He couldn't sleep, so he couldn't dream,

but it seemed that he was condemned to dream while he was yet awake....

*A shower is what I need,* he finally decided. *Something to clear my head.*

He carefully extricated himself from Ginny and the two cats and crept from the room, not bothering with his dressing gown. He felt his way across the landing and entered the communal bath, hearing the magic candles spring to life when his presence triggered the spells. *Not much bloody point to that, is there?* he thought, feeling as though a finger of ice had touched him, making him shudder for a moment.

He hung his pajama trousers on a hook after patting the wall looking for it, then felt his way to the showers, turning on the water full blast. He stepped under the hot spray, feeling the warmth cascading over him, enveloping him. Then, without warning, the dam burst; the stoic facade he'd maintained all day collapsed as the sobs started punching their way out of his stomach and the tears ran down his cheeks, blending with the hot water. He screamed incoherently and pounded his fists on the tiled wall, rage and anguish pouring out of him. He kicked the wall, not caring how much it hurt, not caring that after striking the tiles repeatedly with his fists he was bleeding, the hot water making his wounds sting. He sank into a crouch in the corner of the shower stall finally, panting with exhaustion, still no closer to getting the suffocating feeling out of his chest.

*What had he done?*

"Harry?"

"Harry?"

Even above the racket of the water he could tell that the voices belonged to Ron and Hermione.

"Go away," he mumbled, running his hand down his face.

"Harry, what are you doing to yourself? You're bleeding all over the place—" Hermione said reasonably.

"Here, mate, get dressed and go to bed, get some sleep—" Ron said nervously.

"How did you know I was in here?"

"How did we know?" Ron said, sounding incredulous. "The way you were bellowing?"

"Even I heard a little something," Hermione said. "Well, mostly because Ron woke me up and asked me if I could hear it, too. Ginny's still asleep."

He could feel Ron handing him a towel. Harry took it reluctantly, wrapping it around himself, but as he was doing this, the sobs started to come again.

"Get out, Ron," he said abruptly, turning away from him. "Please."

"Harry—"

"Go! I don't want to—"

"All right, all right," he said, sounding reluctant, but perhaps seeing that Harry didn't want to bawl like a baby in front of him. "C'mon, Hermione—"

"She can stay," he said through his tears, surprising himself. He heard Ron's hesitant footsteps on the tile floor.

"Go on, Ron. I'll be fine. We'll be along. Don't worry," she added.

Harry heard Ron leave the room and he sank down onto the floor again, feeling worse than he ever had in his entire life, unable to stop the sobs rolling out of him. He felt Hermione settle herself next to him, but she didn't speak, just put her arm around his shoulder while he wept. When he felt cried out it was very quiet in the room. He sat up, pulling away from her a little. She evidently had her wand with her because he could feel it lightly touching his knuckles and he could hear her whispering the incantation to heal his wounds. He let her, not speaking, and when she was done she pulled his head to her shoulder again. He thought, yes, he could cry on Hermione, the way he used to with Jamie, but no more tears came now. He could feel nothing but hollowness inside.

"Are you also going to tell me to be more understanding of Ginny's feelings?" he said at length, feeling contrary.

"No," she said simply. "I think that your feelings are pretty important right now, too."

"You want to know why I gave up my eyesight for Draco Malfoy, don't you? You want to know how I could give up—" He took a great gulping breath. "—Quidditch and flying as a golden griffin and being able to just point my wand and cast a spell without worrying whether it's gone way off. You want to know how I could give up just walking down a corridor. How I could give up Apparating. I mean—how would I know whether I'd reached my destination? How would I know whether Muggles were standing about gawping at me? I can't even use Floo, can I? How would I know when to get out of the right grate?"

He stopped talking abruptly, waiting for her to answer. "Well, Harry, what were *you* thinking when you made the decision to give up your eyesight?" she finally said.

He swallowed with difficulty, shaking his head, tempted to laugh, except that he was afraid that

it would be hysterical laughter, and that he wouldn't be able to stop.

"That's just it, Hermione. I didn't."

"What do you mean?"

"I never decided to sacrifice my eyesight. I decided to sacrifice something else, and when I got back—I was blind."

"So—the goddess took your sight instead of what you'd decided to give?"

"It looks that way. Pardon the expression."

She pondered this silently; he appreciated her silent company. After a while she finally spoke again. "What *did* you decide to give up, Harry?"

He hesitated for a moment before saying, "*My magic.*"

"Oh, Harry!" was her immediate reaction, hugging him tightly. "Then thank goodness she didn't take that! She must—she must have felt that the *willingness* to give it up was enough, and decided to take it easy on you....How on *earth* could you choose to give up your magic?"

He shook his head. "I couldn't think of anything else big enough, important enough. I mean—you're not like Ginny and Ron. You haven't always known you're a witch. You remember the moment you found out for the first time, like being given a gift, only it was the best gift in the world, the one thing that was going to change your life forever, make you special, make you *you*."

He felt her nodding. "That's true. I'll never forget that," she whispered.

"I mean—what kind of sacrifice—the kind you have to live with—could possibly be worth another person's *life*? And that was it, I thought." In his mind, he saw not the Draco Malfoy who had taken the Killing Curse for Ginny, but the boy lying on the bed in the tent, the boy who had given up his life force so that Tom Riddle could leave the diary. "But being blind—it's like being able to fly but having clipped wings, isn't it? How am I supposed to make a living? I'm willing to bet Owen Aberystwyth isn't going to want a blind Seeker playing for Wales. And Ginny—how can I ask her to be with me now?"

Hermione made a skeptical noise. "Don't be stupid, Harry. And *don't* be like Ron. *Ooh, I'm a werewolf, so you shouldn't be with me.* Codswallop."

"It's not the same thing, Hermione. This can't be solved by Ginny becoming an Animagus or my taking a potion once a month. On the other hand—"

"What?"

"I think what I'm most afraid of is that she *won't* leave me, and I'll make her miserable...."

"More codswallop. You could never make her miserable, Harry."

"I did with you, didn't I? And Katie, too."

"Because when you were with both of us you were pining for Ginny. Don't be stupid."

"Stop saying that. It's redundant, since stupidity is my permanent state of mind now. Hopelessly stupid."

"Don't be—argh. Stop it, Harry. You're not stupid. You're just *behaving* stupidly."

He snorted. "As though there's a difference. Anyway, I think I have a good reason to be afraid of making Ginny miserable. When she was still quite large, Sandy said something...."

"What?"

When he told her, she was silent and thoughtful for a moment. "How far ahead do you think she was Seeing?"

"I'm not sure, but when Sandy was in the zoo, she said a python predicted what happened in the forest at the end of our sixth year. The prediction was about a year before that."

"Well, a year sounds about right. And you should be somewhat adjusted to all of this by then."

"But Hermione, I can't work, I can't do anything but impose on others."

"Nonsense, of course you can work. You could—you could teach. Professor Figg was only going to do one year. There's a job opening next term, and I'm sure Professor Dumbledore would jump at the chance to have you."

"Erm, I don't think so. Apart from the fact that I'd need someone else to read student's tests and essays for me, and I wouldn't be able to demonstrate counter-curses and hexes without taking someone's head off, that would put me in the position of *teaching* Ginny, which I don't think is a good idea. Maybe it's something I'd consider eventually—but not next term."

"You'd manage the spell-casting with some help from your students. And you're wrong about the reading; there's a simple spell to put on a parchment or book to get it to read itself to you. How do you think I've read *Hogwarts, A History* so many times? It's very soothing to listen to while I'm taking a bath....But at any rate, you do have a good point about being Ginny's teacher," she conceded. "All right then, I have another idea. You already know the boss, it's work you've done for

the previous two summers—”

He gave her a small smile. “I wonder why I didn’t think of that?”

“Because you’re too busy feeling sorry for yourself,” she said briskly. “Not that you shouldn’t, necessarily. I’m just saying it’s preoccupying you at the moment. You don’t necessarily need your sight to do gardening, do you?”

He thought about this. “A lot of it *can* be done by feel,” he admitted. “If Aberforth is all right with it—”

“There you go!” she said. “You always liked working for him, didn’t you?”

He nodded. “I should have known you’d think of something....”

He felt her stand next to him. “I’m going back to bed. Get dressed and try to get some sleep, Harry. This will all take some getting used to, but—”

“Don’t tell Ginny,” he said suddenly.

“What?”

“About—about what I was going to sacrifice. Don’t tell Ginny. Or Ron. Or anyone, for that matter. Just—don’t. Please.”

He heard her sigh deeply. “All right. I promise.”

“Thank you.”

Hermione left but he remained seated on the floor, thinking. His hand moved automatically to the amulet he still wore, and when his hand was wrapped around it, grasping it tightly, he saw Ginny lying in his bed bathed in moonlight, the tawny-striped mother cat curled up at her feet with her black-haired daughter in a tight furry circle next to her. He gasped, realizing for the first time that he hadn’t touched the amulet since returning from the realm of the dead. *I can still see Ginny!* he thought excitedly. He grasped the amulet so tightly he could feel the basilisk image imprinting itself on his palm. *Ginny, Ginny, Ginny....*

Somehow, though, he was glad he had waited. Seeing her in repose like this he could take; seeing the anguish on her face when he returned...he wasn’t sure he had missed anything by not seeing that. Her hair had fallen away from her brow as she slept and he could see the lightning-bolt wound on her smooth skin; he instinctively reached up to feel his own scar with his left hand, still grasping the amulet. *You could never make her miserable, Harry.* He certainly hoped Hermione was right. It was the last thing in the world he wanted. He needed to keep his chin up and learn to cope, convince her he was all right. She could never know what he had meant to sacrifice. As hard as he was finding his new life, he knew he’d done the right thing. After learning that Draco Malfoy had been in hell, he was more convinced than ever. But that wasn’t automatically going to make coping easier.

After he dried himself and dressed again, he padded back to the dormitory and climbed into bed with Ginny, who turned over in her sleep so that her arm and leg were thrown over him. He put his arm around her tightly, thinking about what Sandy had said. Holding onto the amulet with his other hand, so that he could see the two of them in his mind’s eye, he finally drifted into a dreamless sleep.

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The quote at the beginning of the chapter is from page 132 of *The Temple in the House* by Anthony Lawlor, G.P. Putnam’s Sons, NY, NY, 1994.

Just the Epilogue to go now....the memorial, a double wedding, the leaving feast, the train ride back to London and goodbyes all around.

Thanks to Rena, Emily, Nick and Dan for the beta reading, and to everyone who commented on Chapter 29.