

# Epilogue — From the Ruins

*"In a literal sense, houses represented the transfiguration of religious experience," writes the folklorist Robert St. George. Seventeenth-century New Englanders called God an architect, and to the passionate Puritan, raising a house to divine specifications in the desolate wilderness was a godly act that temporarily halted the effects of Adam's sin. "Housebuilding," says St. George, "was conceived as an heroic effort to stop time, suspend decay, and interrupt the ordained flow to ruin that started with Adam's fall."*

—Tracy Kidder, *House*

"You shall see."

Harry had been about to give the password to the gargoyle outside Professor Dumbledore's office; he stopped, jolted. "I'll see?" he asked her.

"Yes, Harry Potter. You shall understand."

"Oh," he said, deflated. *That* kind of seeing. He'd been unaccountably excited for a moment, even though he'd already said that it wouldn't be right for his vision to be fixed in any way. He was glad to have Sandy back, after Snape had revived her with some obscure potions, but her predications all seemed to have double meanings lately, which was making his head hurt.

Ginny squeezed his arm. "Are you all right, Harry? I think Professor Dumbledore will be able to explain why he waited to see you."

He nodded, gave the password, and she entered with him. The sensation of rising on the spiral staircase without being able to see anything was a peculiar one. When they reached the door, Ginny placed his hand on it and brushed her lips across his.

"I'll see you later, Harry."

*There are so many meanings for "see,"* he thought, listening to her descend the stairs. Only when he could tell that she was really gone did he turn and feel for the griffin-shaped knocker, hitting the door with it just once. He wasn't sure how he felt about Dumbledore at this moment, but he wasn't feeling inclined to be very forgiving for his having made him wait two days before seeing him.

"Enter."

Harry opened the heavy door and slowly entered the headmaster's office. He could hear the whirring and chiming of the delicate silver instruments Dumbledore kept there. Harry moved tentatively, afraid to knock into something, and suddenly barked his shin on a hard knee-high piece of furniture that, upon investigation, turned out to be a chair. *You could bloody well give me some help,* he thought irritably, sitting down rather awkwardly.

"Good, Harry, very good. You are learning to cope a bit already." His voice was entirely too cheerful for Harry's taste.

"That's all you have to say?" Harry snapped, his shin still smarting.

"Well, as I said at breakfast, I do apologize for not meeting with you before now, but I have been kept quite busy doing my duty by the families who have lost loved ones, and those unfortunates who were quite severely injured." He paused. "I am sorry to say that I have just received an owl concerning Colin Creevey." He sighed deeply and said, "Mr. Creevey has breathed his last. He fought quite valiantly for the last two days, but—"

Harry swallowed, remembering Colin's open, enthusiastic face, his unflagging cheerfulness. "I'm sorry to hear that, sir," he said very softly. He felt like a small, petty person now. He'd been intending to whinge about Dumbledore not caring about his blindness, but when all was said and done, he wasn't in the infirmary or St. Mungo's, and he'd only lost his sight because he cast the Enuma Elish spell. He'd *decided* to do that, even if he hadn't consciously decided to give up his sight.

"I think that the first thing I should do is tell you something about myself that only my brother Aberforth knows now. Even the staff here at the school do not know what I am about to tell you, and everyone else who knew has long since died...."

Harry sat up straight, wondering what it could possibly be. "Yes, sir?" he said, waiting to hear what Dumbledore had to say. He felt some of his hostility ebb away.

"Harry, what I wanted to tell you is this: I was born blind."

It took Harry a few moments to digest this. He frowned and finally said, "*What?*" He was unable to muster a more coherent response, he was so shocked. He could hear Dumbledore chuckle and found it impossible *not* to picture his bright blue eyes twinkling in amusement. *Blind?* How could Dumbledore be *blind?* "But-but sir—"

"Yes, Harry, I daresay you are confused. Let me explain. When I was born, my eyes had a sort of white film on them. That is why my parents named me Albus, in fact. I was completely blind, due to an illness my mother contracted while she was carrying me. My parents were Muggles, remember."

Harry swallowed, his head whirling. "But-but you've never seemed blind! So many times you've been looking right at me and—"

"I did not say that I was *still* blind, Harry. I said that I was *born* blind. The summer that I was eleven years old, we were visited by the deputy headmaster of Hogwarts, a Professor Blythe. He informed my parents that I was a wizard and a place was waiting for me at Hogwarts. *They* informed him, however, that schooling was out of the question for me, as I had been blind from birth. Professor Blythe was undeterred by this; he explained to them that I could, with their permission, receive powerful magical eyes that would give me sight for the first time. They were thrilled of course, as was I.

"Professor Blythe took me off to St. Mungo's to get my eyes, which he said would be a lovely twinkling blue, not that I had any way of knowing yet what 'twinkling' or 'blue' was. Now, although they were rarely used, magical eyes *had* been developed by then that were on the order of Alastor's, except that they looked a little more natural than his. Alastor wanted one that did *not* look natural. Auror's advantage, you know, unnerve the enemy. At any rate, after I received my eyes, I could see, but not as most people saw. It is possible, over time, to learn to control what one sees with magical eyes, but I was very young. When I received them I had not yet even gone to Ollivanders to get a wand and didn't know the first thing about controlling my magic. I could see through several layers of wood, through bone, stone walls, lead, and of course, clothing...."

He cleared his throat, and Harry remembered Parvati being rather disturbed by the ersatz-Moody's magical eye at the Yule Ball. He also remembered Mercy telling him about her eyes, recent developments that made it possible for her to see the world in a normal way without needing to make an effort.

"Well, you can see how this would be a problem for an eleven-year-old boy, I imagine," Dumbledore said, chuckling for a moment; Harry again imagined those blue eyes twinkling. "Or rather, how the headmaster and my teachers would think it a problem. I thought it was wonderful, naturally. I managed to get up to quite a lot of mischief at the beginning of my first year, until my head-of-house came up with a solution." Harry tried to imagine a very young Dumbledore getting into trouble because of his magical eyes, but failed; he simply could not imagine him as anything other than an adult, whether with his familiar white hair or the auburn hair Harry had seen when he'd gone into Riddle's diary.

"He experimented with magical spectacles of various strengths," Dumbledore explained, "but these were not ordinary spectacles, designed to make the wearer see *more* clearly. These were designed to *block* much of what I could see with my magical eyes, to make me see more like the other people around me. They worked, and I was duly ordered to keep them on during all of my waking hours. The teachers and prefects were told that that young trouble-making Albus Dumbledore was to receive a detention and lose house points if he was caught not wearing his spectacles..." He chuckled again; Harry had a feeling that when he was a boy he had not always followed this rule.

"But sir," he said, thinking about the ramifications of this, "if you were wearing the sort of half-moon spectacles you have now, you could easily just look over them any time you—"

"Ah, but at the time I had large, round spectacles, rather like the ones you had when you arrived here, Harry. Yes, you are quite correct about how convenient it is to look *over* my current spectacles to see what is *really* going on here in the castle; in fact, I created these from my old glasses on the day I was hired to teach here so that it would be easier for me to keep an eye—or two—on the students." There was a sly tone in his voice. "When I choose not to be distracted by the many things I can see, I look through my spectacles. I could just control my eyesight with some concentration, but I have chosen to dedicate my powers of concentration to other things, and this way I need only glance up to see a great many things...." Harry shook his head, thinking of Dumbledore's *penetrating* gaze. It was far more penetrating than Harry ever imagined. And if his eyes were like Moody's eye, that also meant—

"You can see through Invisibility Cloaks!" Harry cried, the realization washing over him.

Dumbledore laughed. “Of course I can, Harry. You didn’t think I would have given you something that would make it possible for you to hide from me, did you? Your father never knew. You see, Harry, I reckon that a certain amount of sneaking about the castle late at night *will* go on. It is a given. But one must have some rules and penalties, so it does not get out of hand. A certain amount of sneaking about is usually quite harmless, after all, but my eyes give me an advantage over sneaky, crafty students. Thus, I saw no harm in giving you your father’s cloak. If I wanted to know what you were up to or feared that you would endanger yourself, I would still be able to learn about it. And while the sneaking about would probably dwindle to almost nothing if students realized that I had magical eyes, as they would fear discovery, I prefer to keep that my little secret.”

Harry frowned, a thought at the edge of his brain...Finally, he knew what he’d been trying to remember. “You saw us! Me and Ron. We were under the Invisibility Cloak in Hagrid’s hut when Fudge came to take him away to Azkaban, when we were in second year...You looked right at us, and I was certain that the Invisibility Cloak had stopped working, but Fudge didn’t see us, so I thought I was just being paranoid. And when Malfoy came to tell you that you’d been kicked out by the board of governors, he didn’t see us either...But you knew we were there all along! The things you said...”

“Yes, Harry. In fact, I worried that I had said too much, that you two would work out my little secret...”

“Hermione would have done, if she’d been there,” Harry said, feeling a little disgruntled. “She worked out that Remus was a werewolf long before we found out...”

Dumbledore gave a very small laugh. “Yes, I daresay that Miss Granger would have worked it out, had she seen me looking in your direction and heard what I’d said.”

Harry was confused. “But what I don’t understand is—why tell me now?”

“You are almost ready to leave school, Harry. You are my Head Boy. And—and I wanted to reassure you about your—situation.”

“My blindness, you mean,” he said, his voice hard.

“Yes, your blindness,” the headmaster agreed, as though it weren’t a life-changing thing for Harry. “You see, I lived for over eleven years without seeing the world at all. My parents thought I was destined to be a burden on them for the rest of their days. They never said that to me, but I developed quite good hearing and none of their ‘private’ conversations were really terribly private...”

“Your hearing!” Harry exclaimed. “That’s how you heard the ticking bomb at Azkaban, and why you heard the giants in the forest when they were heading toward the castle...”

“Yes, and I was afraid that someone like our Miss Granger would again work out the truth behind my eyesight because of those things. I still have remarkably good hearing, especially considering my age, which was also very useful to me when I became the Transfiguration teacher. I suggest that you begin to practice the art of being truly still and *listening*, Harry, so that your ears can help you perceive the world more fully. Your hearing will never take the place of your eyes, of course, but—”

“Yeah, well it would also help me if a lot of people didn’t think I was *invisible* when I’m *not* using a cloak.” He told Dumbledore about Dr. Chaudhri’s examination and her initial diagnosis. Dumbledore cleared his throat and sounded thoughtful.

“Well, that is very interesting indeed. Why do you think she came to that conclusion?”

“Why? Because she doesn’t know what she’s doing. And I’m really not sure why you thought telling me you were born blind would help me,” he said grumpily. “You didn’t *stay* blind, you had a chance to see, with the help of magical eyes. I don’t have that opportunity. And even if I did—”

“—you wouldn’t want it,” Dumbledore said quietly. “You don’t think it would be right.”

Harry swallowed, crossing his arms on his chest. “Well, no I don’t. Even if I am a bit—”

“—remorseful? Regretful?”

“Having trouble—adjusting. I—if this were easy—”

“—then it wouldn’t be a sacrifice. You’re quite right, Harry. And while it is something you will have to live with—well, perhaps there is a part of you that feels that it *shouldn’t* be easy, or convenient.”

Harry’s throat felt tight. “Right,” was all he could manage to say.

He heard Dumbledore rise and walk around the desk. “Bringing back Mr. Malfoy...”

Harry shook his head. “You can’t say anything the others haven’t already. I shouldn’t have messed about with life and death, he wasn’t worth it, I should have left him dead, he’s an insufferable pillock. I know he is. But—but he—”

“Harry. Calm down. I was not going to attack you. I think I have a fairly good idea why you did it. As someone who was recently responsible for a number of deaths, I rather wish I could say that there was a life I had kept from being snuffed out—”

His voice sounded unspeakably tired and *old*, which alarmed Harry. “But sir! You did save lives!

The giants killed so many people, and you—”

“Exactly. I couldn’t seem to find a way to defeat them *and* keep them alive. You may not agree, Harry, but I count that as a failure. Yes, lives were probably saved by the giants’ drowning. Miss Kirkner’s solution was extreme—but probably the only way. I do not fault her for her quick thinking and pragmatism. Sometimes....” He sighed deeply. “I once had great hopes for the giants, that they would want to work for the good. But Hagrid’s mother and her friends were the only ones who felt compelled to do that.” He swore briefly and softly, under his breath. “I do hate being wrong about these things.”

“You—you wanted to believe in them. You believe in people. You believed in Draco Malfoy, and you were right about him, weren’t you? He was doing everything he could to try to fight Voldemort, even though he had the Obedience Charm on him.”

“Yes, he truly was. And he could speak to no one about it. He was quite alone, isolated, and yet he still found the strength to do the right thing, even though he knew he would probably be vilified for appearing to be a traitor.”

Harry swallowed. “I couldn’t just let him die and be honored in death for what he did. I felt—I felt that he deserved to live, to be honored while alive, to have this be the beginning of a new life, not the last hurrah of his old one.”

He heard the rustle of Dumbledore’s robes and then felt his hand on his shoulder. “A very noble motive, Harry, to be sure. And one day I think he may be truly grateful to you for giving him this opportunity, this new beginning. When he has got past—”

“What?”

“Well, past the burden of being a hero. You know yourself that it is a not-inconsiderable burden. I fear that Mr. Malfoy is quite ill-prepared for what is to come....”

“You’ve already talked to him, have you?” Harry said through gritted teeth. *Talked to him but not to me.*

“Yes, Harry. I thought it wise. I needed to learn everything he knew, as we are still unearthing Death Eaters, and he was able to lead us to Miss Kirkner’s poor mother. He also requested a bit of privacy, so I arranged other quarters for him for the remainder of the term. I have thus far managed to keep him away from the public eye, but it has not been easy. The press are clamoring to speak to him—and to you and Miss Weasley. They will no doubt persist after the term is over. What plans do you have for the summer?”

“Well, I thought—I hoped to ask your brother for a job.”

He heard the headmaster laugh. “I think Aberforth would like that a great deal. And he will need someone else now that Sam is leaving him.”

“He is!” Harry said in surprise. “Because of Nita? What, a gardener isn’t good enough for her?” He bristled on Sam’s behalf, thinking about the way the Anderssens and Malfoys probably brainwashed her when she was young.

“Oh, no, not at all. He has decided to return to being an Auror.”

Harry’s jaw dropped. “That’s brilliant!”

Dumbledore made a noise of agreement. “Sam was a fine Auror in his day. He will be a valuable addition to the ranks. Especially considering—”

“—the people who died at Godric’s Hollow,” Harry said softly.

“And during the prison break, as well. Several guards at the Ministry were killed by another who was working for Voldemort. That was how the escape from the Ministry cellblocks was accomplished.” He sighed, sounding old and tired again. “So, Harry. You can honestly say that you are satisfied with the way everything has turned out?”

Harry swallowed, thinking about Ginny, about Draco Malfoy being alive and starting a new phase of his life; he thought about Ron and Hermione being all right, about Sirius marrying Alicia and Snape marrying Maggie. He thought also about Fred and Hagrid being dead, as well as Seamus, Colin, Tony, Parvati and her sister....

“Reasonably, I reckon. I wish so many people hadn’t died, and I’ve already heard people saying, ‘If he was going to bring back anyone, why couldn’t it have been—’”

“Yes, yes, that will persist for a while, no doubt. Well, there’s no way around it, you *did* play god, Harry. You decided who was to live and die. It’s not something to take lightly. No one can do that and *not* be second-guessed. At least *you* saved someone who sacrificed himself for another person, which led to the fall of the Dark Lord. When I saved Tom, as a young man...well, look what came of that....”

“You hoped he could make something of himself!” Harry said, awed that the headmaster was revealing his feelings over what he’d done.

“Yes, I did, and if I was confronted with another young man in a similar situation, I’d do the same thing again. If you had it to do over, would you save Mr. Malfoy again?”

Harry thought about it, remembering the look on Draco’s still face, the wide-open, staring eyes, his features frozen in shock. He also thought of the boy in the tent who had spent his life-force to help Harry fix the timelines....

“Yes, sir,” he said resolutely. “Yes, I would.”

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The wizarding world had been in an uproar for a week solid. The copies of the *Daily Prophet* that reached the school indicated that non-stop parties were the rule and not the exception in Hogsmeade and Diagon Alley, and even the Muggle newspapers Hermione’s parents sent her had stories of showers of owls and shooting stars. Different stories were circulating about which studio was trying to promote their new film with these stunts, with everyone denying the allegations. (This did not deter reporters from declaring it to be specific producers who had ordered the publicity stunts.)

A week had passed since the two battles and the memorial was finally being held on the Hogwarts Quidditch pitch for the fallen; Harry hoped this would serve to remind people that it wasn’t just a time to celebrate the fall of Voldemort, but to mourn those who’d fought the good fight and lost their lives. He had gone over what he was going to say many, many times, with Ginny’s and Hermione’s assistance, until he had everything perfectly memorized. When they were getting ready in the common room, he’d said to her, “So, I’ll get up, cast the Sonorous charm on my throat—”

“Oh, no, you needn’t do that,” Hermione had told him. “Professor Snape said that would be really tedious, every speaker casting the spell and taking it off. He enchanted a little piece of carpet on the podium. When you stand on it, everything you say is amplified so everyone can hear you, and when you step off it, your voice sounds normal again.”

He’d agreed that that was a better idea. He was wearing the clothes Mrs. Weasley had given him to take his N.E.W.T.s, to which he’d had Hermione pin his Head Boy badge. She’d also insisted on pinning his Order of the Phoenix and Order of Merlin, Second Class on him as well, as she was wearing hers and Ginny was also wearing her prefect badge and Order of the Phoenix, and Ron was also wearing his O.P. and O.M. (Hermione had done that one for him, so he wouldn’t need to touch the silver). Harry assumed that Draco Malfoy would be wearing his prefect badge and O.P. also. When Hermione told him to stop fussing and fidgeting, he felt a bit grumpy and answered, “Yes, Mum.”

“Very funny.”

Following the teachers, Harry and Hermione were to lead the students into the stadium, Head Boy and Girl. Harry felt the difference in textures when they reached the soft sand of the track around the pitch where he used to run every morning, something he hadn’t done since the battle. He missed it, the feeling of running, nothing in his way, no worries about stumbling or bumping into something. He tried not to think longingly about the running as Hermione led him up the steps to the top of the stands, where they were sitting. He’d been busy hoping that he didn’t look awkward, but when he overheard furtive whispers on the way up, his physical grace or lack thereof was not what they were discussing.

“*There he is!*”

“*Yes, blind as a bat.*”

“*Draco Malfoy?*”

“*That’s what I heard.*”

“*What about magical eyes?*”

“*That’s probably what he’ll do.*”

“*I should think so. There’s no reason for Harry Potter to be blind...*”

He had tried to ignore them. There was a general rumble of human bodies settling, bodies nervous about what was to come. It promised to be an emotional day and he was glad he’d thought to put several handkerchiefs in his pockets. So far, however, his eyes were dry. He felt strangely drained of emotion as he listened to the stadium fill. Hermione told him that hundreds of chairs had been set up on the pitch itself, to augment the seating in the stands, as even the parents of Muggle-born students were invited, including hers. He clutched the amulet, seeing Ginny sitting with Lucy Bailey, the surviving fifth-year Gryffindor prefect. Lucy’s counterpart, Karl Fauth, was in St. Mungo’s, awaiting a new arm to replace the one he’d lost battling the giants. Lucy’s blonde hair blew in the breeze, dark circles under her blue eyes. Ginny was sniffing into a handkerchief while Lucy put her head on Ginny’s shoulder. Their prefect badges glittered in the sunlight, and the fire on Ginny’s Order of the Phoenix badge flickered regularly, left, right, left, right.

Harry had continued to share his bed with Ginny, but even when Ron and Hermione had decided to move to the seventh-year girls' dormitory for some privacy (Lavender had still not come back from St. Mungo's), he did not turn to her in the night. Harry had thought, once or twice, that Ginny might want to do something when they were alone, something to lose themselves in physical feeling, a way of forgetting, but he'd tried that before, when Dudley had died, and had found it to be monumentally useless. Afterward he'd felt awful for trying to use Hermione to beat back the disturbing dreams about seeing Dudley leap from his Smeltings dormitory, Wormtail turning into a dragon with Draco Malfoy's voice, then finding himself at Godric's Hollow with Ginny, who turned into a skeleton....

He'd never understood the image he'd seen in that dream of the ruined Hogwarts, but now he reckoned it was a kind of warning, rather than a prediction. The giants *had* tried to pull the castle down, and had succeeded in half-destroying two of the towers.

The crowd sounds began to ebb and diminish; silence gradually descended upon the stadium. Dumbledore was to begin, but he waited for a long minute, letting them all listen to the twittering of the birds, feel the breeze blowing. Finally, he began to speak.

"Welcome friends, to this time of remembering, mourning, and celebration," he said slowly and solemnly. The last word surprised Harry, but Dumbledore went on. "We shall be remembering those who fell, and mourn them, but we shall also celebrate their lives and their bravery, as well as the bravery of those who fought and survived. Let not one of the fallen be forgotten for a moment; for they were all heroes of the highest order," he said firmly. "Reading the names of the fallen students from both the Battle of Hogwarts and the Battle of Godric's Hollow will be our Head Girl, Miss Hermione Granger."

Hermione stood and he heard the rustle of her robes as she approached the podium. Even amplified, her voice sounded very small. "Hannah Abbot," she began, "seventh year, Hufflepuff. Barry Bagshot, third year, Gryffindor..." He could tell that she was trying to keep her voice steady, but it wobbled occasionally; Harry wondered whether she would make it to the end. As each name was read, he heard sobbing start somewhere, sometimes near, sometimes far away. "Mandy Brocklehurst, seventh year, Ravenclaw. Colin Creevey, sixth year, Gryffindor," she choked out. Harry couldn't help the tears that stole into his own eyes as he remembered little Colin following him with the camera that had saved his life, even though he *was* petrified. No camera had saved him this time.

Harry thought she might need to stop altogether when she reached the Patils: "Padma Patil, seventh year, Ravenclaw. Parvati Patil, seventh year, Gryffindor..." She seemed to have a very bad head-cold now and was barely able to say the last few names. When she finally sat down again, Harry reached for her hand and squeezed it; she put her head on his shoulder and gave a brief sob; he handed her a handkerchief, not knowing what else to do.

"And now," Dumbledore said, "we shall have a musical selection in honor of our fallen students. We have not had a school choir in many years, but a number of students volunteered to form a choir for this memorial. I think that you shall all recognize the selection; you are invited to join in on the final stanza if you wish."

The orchestra struck up the introduction and Harry's throat tightened when he heard it. There was a low rumble of the students getting to their feet; the brass in the orchestra blared a fanfare and then the young voices were lifted in song, taking Harry back a year in time, as he stood on the parapets of the castle, preparing to take the members of the Dueling Club into battle....

*And did those feet in ancient time  
Walk upon England's mountains green?*

He remembered the feeling of solidarity among the students as the fifteen Dueling Club members flew into the forest for Snape and Malfoy, the sight of the others on the parapets, waiting, not knowing whether they would need to throw in their lot with the first fifteen....

The orchestra played an interlude and then, on his own, Will Flitwick's unmistakable voice piped up, singing the second verse. Harry remembered young Will standing up for him in the Great Hall, when others believed he had done something to Professor Flitwick and Cho Chang. His clear young voice echoed around the stadium; when he was done a brass fanfare preceded the last verse. The multitude sang now, voices full and strong:

*Bring me my bow of burning gold!  
Bring me my arrows of desire!  
Bring me my spear: O clouds unfold!  
Bring me my chariot of fire!  
I will not cease from mental fight:*

*Nor shall my sword sleep in my hand  
Till we have built Jerusalem  
In England's green and pleasant land.*

The orchestra finished the final fanfare and there was a moment of silence, followed by the muffled rumble of the choir sitting. Dumbledore spoke once more, this time about the teachers who fell in the Battle of Hogwarts: Professor Trelawney and Hagrid. Maggie stepped to the podium to eulogize Trelawney, while Dumbledore himself spoke of Hagrid.

"...Rubeus Hagrid's soul of generosity was as large as he was," Dumbledore said at the end, "and if I ever again have so great and loyal a friend, I shall be very fortunate indeed." His voice sounded strained to Harry. After a pause, he said, "Our Potions Master, Severus Snape, shall honor us and the memories of his colleagues with a musical selection." Harry swallowed, wondering what Snape was going to do. The orchestra began to play something that was vaguely familiar to him, and then the deep, strong voice of his stepfather boomed out into the stadium:

*The people that walked in darkness,  
that walked in darkness,  
the people that walked, that walked in darkness  
have seen a great light, have seen a great light....  
The people that walked,  
that walked in darkness have seen a great light.*

Harry listened to him sing, the perfectly enunciated phrases and runs going up and down the scale; it seemed that every breath was held while he sang, as they listened and thought about the darkness in which they'd walked since Voldemort had returned....

*And they that dwell,  
that dwell in the land of the shadow of death,  
and they that dwell, that dwell in the land,  
that dwell in the land of the shadow of death....*

*The land of the shadow of death.* Yes, Harry felt like he'd been living in the realm of the dead since the moment he dared open his eyes and look at Cedric Diggory's body. Perhaps that was really why it appeared to him that he'd gone to Hogwarts when he invoked Ereshkigal's realm; that also represented Death for him, the place where he lived every day. But now the entire world was a shadow to him....

*...upon them hath the light shined,  
upon them hath the light shined.*

The orchestra finished, going lower and lower. *For a song with a message that's supposed to be cheerful, it sounds mournful enough,* Harry thought, although he couldn't deny that Snape sounded quite powerful and authoritative while singing it. He heard Snape move to sit and Dumbledore rise again, his robes rustling.

"Thank you, Professor Snape. And now, Eustace Bean, former head of Magical Law Enforcement and newly elected Minister for Magic—" Harry was jolted; he hadn't heard about this. "—will read the names of those Aurors who fell at Godric's Hollow." Harry remembered Bean's full, authoritative voice from Lucius Malfoy's trial; as he read the names, Harry recognized the names of Aurors who had been imprisoned in Azkaban, men and women who had survived that only to be cut down before Harry's parents' old house. The stadium was very still while Bean read the names. When he reached the end and sat again, Dumbledore spoke once more. "And now we will have Miss Ruth Pelta, sixth year Gryffindor, singing Ravel's *Kaddish* in memory of the fallen of Godric's Hollow."

Harry heard Ruth making her way toward Dumbledore. When she began to sing, unaccompanied, her pure voice the only sound in the very still stadium, the hairs stood up on the back of Harry's neck; he remembered how she sounded at her father's synagogue, the clear notes dropping like pearls into still water....But suddenly, she began to falter, her voice wavering; he was near enough that he could hear her struggling for breath, and he whispered to Hermione, "*Help me. I need to get to her.*" They both rose and made their way toward Ruth, and when Harry had reached her, he put his arm around her shoulder, standing next to her on the podium, on the enchanted carpet. She was still struggling, but he joined his voice with hers, nodding at her, and together, they sang for the fallen, while the crowd listened in silence. Harry knew his voice wasn't up to Ruth's, but his support helped her regain her strength and push on. He knew she was really singing for

Tony, and he didn't know how she had even sung as much as she had. When the echo of the last note had died out, they stepped away from the podium. Ruth hugged him tightly and he whispered to her, "*You'll be all right. Eventually.*"

He felt her lips brush his cheek and she said, "Thank you, Harry," with a choke in her voice. "I don't know how you knew that," she added, a note of wonder in her voice, "but—thank you." Hermione helped him to sit, then squeezed him around the shoulders.

"As if I wasn't already crying non-stop, you had to do *that*, Harry," she half-sobbed.

"She taught me that," he whispered to her. "Learning it...that was how I mourned Jamie...I can never really thank her for that..."

"I think you just did," Hermione told him, patting his hand.

Dumbledore was at the podium again, thanking Ruth and Harry for singing and announcing that Eustace Bean was going to give some remarks. Bean returned to the podium with a heavy tread, cleared his throat and began to speak. Harry was appalled. Although Bean started off talking about what a dreadful year it had been, the many witches and wizards working for the Ministry who had fallen, his voice swung up as he promised the people, "—and I will continue to dedicate myself, as Minister for Magic, to eradicating all Death Eaters and guaranteeing the safety of each and every person in wizarding Britain!" There was enthusiastic shouting and stamping as the crowd roared its approval. Suddenly, it was no longer a memorial service, but a political campaign, it seemed to Harry. *You've already won*, he thought grumpily at Bean.

Bean continued, promising that no one who was even suspected of having supported Voldemort would be permitted a license to Apparate, that Veritaserum would be used in all future interrogations going forward, and that he would personally be overseeing the construction of New Azkaban. It would be built on the Isle of Drear, which was already unplottable. He would personally select the dangerous creatures experts who would subdue the Quintapeds living on the island, which would become part of the security measures taking the place of dementors. "...at least until we can find a way to approximate the effect of the dementors on the prisoners...." Harry choked in horror at these words.

"The Dark Lord no doubt thought it clever to try to draw off the headmaster and Head Boy and other trained duelists so that his giants could attack those left behind, the young and weak, just as the French did at Agincourt when they killed the unarmed boys who waited behind the battle lines for their knights to return."

Beside him, Hermione gave an indignant snort and whispered to Harry, "That's rubbish. There's no historical support for that. Shakespeare was just making things up when he wrote that in *Henry the Fifth*. And Neville and Dean are *not* younger and weaker. Nor were most of the Slytherins who were no help at all."

"Makes good propaganda, though, doesn't it?" Harry whispered back, feeling cynical.

She made a skeptical noise while Bean ranted on, saying that it must never be allowed to happen again, that to protect the children, Aurors would secure the school grounds, including the forest. "Never again will dangerous creatures camp on the very doorstep of Hogwarts and attack our precious children!" Harry bristled on Dumbledore's behalf; *he* wasn't to blame, but you wouldn't know it by what Bean said. Then Harry sat up to attention as Bean promised that the Ministry would also closely monitor *all* present and former *Slytherins*. He also vowed that the movements of part-human magical creatures—especially werewolves and vampires—would be closely monitored. "The heroes of Hogwarts and Godric's Hollow will not have fallen in vain!" he cried. The cheering started up again. Harry's head was pounding; this was wrong, this was *all wrong*.

When the crowd started to quiet again, Dumbledore spoke; he had evidently returned to the podium. "Thank you, for—for that, Minister Bean," he said, not sounding thankful at all. "And now," Dumbledore went on, "we shall be honored with another musical selection from our Head Boy, Harry Potter, who will sing to the old Welsh tune *Ar Hyd Y Nos*. Our Head Girl, Hermione Granger, will accompany him on the cello."

Harry and Hermione stood and she led him to his place. He waited while she sat in the chair that was waiting for her, with her cello already tuned and ready. When he heard her *draw the bow* across the strings, he took a deep breath, his heart pounding very loudly in his ears while she played the too-brief introduction; he was very glad he didn't have to see the crowd looking at him while he did this. Instead, he pictured his mother at his brother's bedside, and his sister, seeing again her pale, anguished face at their little brother's funeral:

*Darkness and light;  
Who the day for toil hast given,  
For rest the night;  
May Thine angel guards defend us,*

*Slumber sweet Thy mercy send us;  
Holy dreams and hopes attend us,  
This livelong night.*

*And when morn again shall call us  
To run life's way,  
May we still, whate'er befall us,  
Thy will obey.  
From the power of evil hide us,  
In the narrow pathway guide us,  
Nor Thy smile be e'er denied us  
The livelong day.*

*Guard us waking, guard us sleeping,  
And when we die,  
May we in Thy mighty keeping  
All peaceful lie;  
When the last dread call shall wake us,  
Do not Thou, our God, forsake us,  
But to reign in glory take us  
With Thee on high.*

Harry felt he could not go on several times, but he pictured Jamie valiantly singing in the graveyard and plunged on, even when his voice broke on the words, *Guard us waking, guard us sleeping, And when we die...* Before he left the podium, he felt Dumbledore's hand on his shoulder; Harry nodded at him before following Hermione back to their seats.

"Thank you, Mr. Potter. And now, I did say that we would be celebrating some people here today as well. Minister Bean and I have a number of honors to bestow upon the living and dead heroes of Hogwarts and Godric's Hollow. First—the Order of Merlin, Third Class. Please wait to respond until I have finished."

As Dumbledore read the names, Harry felt a swell of pride every time he recognized one of the members of the Dueling Club, whether they were still living to get their award or it was being awarded posthumously, which was the case for many; when he said, "*Williamson Flitwick*," Harry didn't know who he meant for a moment, before he realized that he meant young Will. He swallowed, remembering Will at his first Dueling Club meeting; Harry had suspected he'd be a good choice, and he was right, even though Will was only in third year. He wished now that he could see the expression on Will's face, being given the Order of Merlin in his third year. It was probably quite a sight....

Harry was jolted when the applause began; he, unlike everyone else, had not seen the signal when Dumbledore raised his wand and permitted the crowd to vent their feelings. After the O.M., third class recipients returned to their seats, Dumbledore continued. "Receiving the Order of Merlin, Second Class...." Another list of names washed over Harry; most of these seemed to be Aurors and teachers at Hogwarts, although there were some students. Millicent Bulstrode's was one of the first names, for fighting the other Slytherins and helping Mariah get into the lake to talk to the merpeople. Hermione's name was also called, and he remembered that she'd received the Order of Merlin, Third Class after the Azkaban rescue; now she had Second Class, like Harry and Ron. When Dumbledore read the last of the names, the applause went up again, a little louder now. Harry hugged Hermione when she returned to her seat.

"Now, then," Dumbledore said, "I believe many of you have been waiting to hear about the Order of Merlin, First Class. I will do the posthumous awards first, following with the awards for those still with us. These will not be in alphabetical order, and I will take a moment to explain exactly what each of the recipients did to warrant this honor...."

Among the posthumous recipients were Hagrid and Fred Weasley; Hermione stepped forward to accept Hagrid's on his mother's behalf, and Hermione told him that Mrs. Weasley went forward to receive Fred's, while she sobbed over Hagrid's award.

When Dumbledore finished the posthumous awards and moved on to those who were still living, Harry got a bit of a surprise: the first two recipients turned out to be Bill and Charlie Weasley! "*Bill and Charlie!*" Harry exclaimed in a whisper. "Did you know?"

"I just knew that they were going to tell us today what they've been up to. I didn't know it was going to be like *this*," she answered quietly.

Dumbledore explained that Voldemort had gained the support and trust of a number of vampires;

Bill and Charlie had been doing dangerous work for months, with the assistance of a vampire friend from Romania. (“*Dimitri!*” Harry hissed at Hermione.) She squeezed his hand, which he thought probably meant *Shut up and listen*. Dumbledore said that on the day of the battles, Bill, Charlie and Dimitri succeeded in preventing the vampires who were expected at Hogwarts and Godric’s Hollow from joining the battles; they imprisoned most of them and killed only in self-defense when any put up a fight.

When he was finished speaking, a roar of approval went up from the crowd; other Weasleys seemed to be responsible for a lot of the racket. (Dumbledore had not told the crowd to wait this time.) Bill, Charlie and Dimitri thanked Dumbledore, and Harry thought, *I should have known Bill and Charlie were doing something important*. He couldn’t imagine *vampires* joining either battle. It wouldn’t have been hard for Voldemort to cast a spell to darken the sky by sending clouds before the sun. Then he thought about the fact that Dimitri was here (probably shrouded), a vampire receiving the O.M. for fighting other vampires, as Ron had done with the werewolves. Bean’s rule about part-humans would likely negatively impact on Dimitri, too, unless he returned to Romania.

Dumbledore continued, “Next, I am quite pleased to honor a student who is finishing her sixth year. A prefect in Slytherin House, her quick thinking, ingenuity and good relations with the mer-people enabled us to subdue the giants and avoid further injuries and deaths. I am very pleased to award the Order of Merlin, First Class, to Miss Mariah Kirkner.”

Harry was pleased for Bill and Charlie, but now he pounded his hands together even harder, shouting and whistling as well, feeling smug about Eustace Bean having to pin an O.M., First Class on a *Slytherin*. He didn’t think it was a coincidence that Dumbledore had chosen to emphasize her house. The applause wasn’t as enthusiastic as it had been for Bill and Charlie, but he kept pounding his hands together anyway.

He heard her thank Dumbledore, when she’d reached the podium, and he said sincerely, “No, thank *you*, my dear, thank *you*.” When Mariah had left the podium, he spoke again. “And now—another Weasley. I have watched this young man grow from a boy who, in his first year was ready to sacrifice himself for the greater good and for his friends—as well as being quite a chess player—to a person who plunges into danger with no thought for his own personal safety, only for those he seeks to protect. He has shown his loyalty, bravery and ingenuity time and again, whether he is playing Quidditch for England, rescuing his Potions Master from an *Acromantula*, or battling fellow werewolves in unarmed, hand-to-hand combat. He went from being tortured at Godric’s Hollow to performing a spell that allowed the Aurors and others present to subdue their opponents and secure a victory. He went in one day from being Lord Voldemort’s hostage to one of the people responsible for the final victory over darkness. I am very pleased to award the Order of Merlin, First Class to Ronald Weasley.”

Harry and Hermione jumped to their feet, clapping and shouting wildly. Ron thanked Dumbledore in a deep, clear voice and Harry wished there was some way for him to congratulate Ron right *now*. But that would have to wait. Dumbledore cleared his throat again and continued. “The next recipient is the person with whom Ronald Weasley performed the spell that led to the Godric’s Hollow victory. But before that, she was one of three people directly involved in the fall of Lord Voldemort. She suffered the Cruciatus Curse and was willing to die to defeat him. To this end, she used her knowledge of his youthful experiences to goad him into killing her—and when he took the bait and attempted this, his own spell backfired on him and he perished. For cunning and sheer nerve I am very pleased to award the Order of Merlin, First Class, to Virginia Weasley.”

A roar shook the stadium and Harry and Hermione were on their feet again, clapping and cheering themselves hoarse. From here and there Harry heard cries of, “*The Girl Who Lived! The Girl Who Lived!*” He grinned and clapped until his hands were sore. At length, they sat again. Harry could faintly make out Ginny thanking Dumbledore and Bean. He wished he could see her face at this moment, then realized that he *could*; he grasped the amulet, seeing her standing beside the podium, shaking Dumbledore’s hand, her face shining almost as much as the gold Order of Merlin badge on her robes. Harry could see Dumbledore beaming at her as he clasped her hand and suddenly he felt such a wave of love for her overcome him that he had to swallow and bite his lip to try to hold back his tears. *And she loves me, too*, he thought, suddenly quite amazed by it all.

He continued to hold his amulet as she tried to return to her seat, but the crowd would have none of it yet, continuing to cheer and stomp and clap. Harry heard Hermione laugh beside him. “To think, she used to be afraid to talk to you,” she whispered to him. He watched Ginny duck her head and blush, finally edging away from the podium and trying to return to her seat; he remembered with affection the little girl who put her elbow in the butter dish, yet stood up to Draco Malfoy at Flourish and Blotts. The noise began to die down and when Dumbledore resumed speaking, Harry was jolted; he’d been so wrapped up in watching Ginny that he’d forgotten that Dumbledore still had awards to give.

"I was first made aware of this recipient's cunning and bravery when he worked to put his own father in prison for his Death Eater activities." Harry grinned; this was *exactly* the sort of reason he'd brought Draco back. Order of Merlin, First Class! That should change his life! Draco Malfoy, officially recognized as a hero. This was the new life Harry had wanted for him. It was beginning, and he felt his chest swell with more than a little pride. *I helped it happen*, he thought. *He's here today, getting this—and not posthumously—because I brought him back.*

What Harry couldn't work out was why Draco had not spoken to him since they'd returned from Godric's Hollow. He'd sent Hedwig to him with a note written by Ginny, because Draco hadn't been eating in the Great Hall and Harry didn't know where the private quarters were that Dumbledore had arranged for him. He'd sent back a note to Ginny, not to him, saying that he had a lot to think about and wasn't meeting with anyone just now. Ginny wrote other notes for him to send, but he received no responses....

"Were it not for the actions of this person, Lord Voldemort might still be alive to terrorize the wizarding world," Dumbledore continued.

"*Yeah, he probably only helped to get rid of him so he could take over himself!*" a voice cried across the stadium. Harry was jolted; he couldn't imagine anyone speaking like that to Dumbledore *ever*.

"It is therefore with great pleasure," Dumbledore said, ignoring the heckler, "that I award the Order of Merlin, First Class, to Draco Malfoy."

Harry had the impression that he'd meant to say more, but had cut it short. Harry started clapping, as with the others, and heard Hermione clapping, but it seemed that only a small number of people present were doing likewise, and some were following the example of the person who'd already shouted about Draco wanting to take over as a Dark Lord himself. Harry heard some bitter voices in the stands below and somewhere ahead of him.

*"Another stinking Slytherin getting the O.M.!"*

*"Now I've seen it all! Death Eaters should be kissed by dementors, not get the O.M.!"*

*"No more dementors, remember?"*

*"Then they should bring back the death penalty...."*

Harry swallowed, trying to clap more loudly; Hermione grasped his hands, stopping him. "No one else is clapping," she whispered.

Harry let his hands drop into his lap, dejected. "What's happening?" he asked quietly.

"Dumbledore is pinning the O.M. to Malfoy and shaking his hand. I think Malfoy's going to spew. He looks a bit green."

"He probably heard what some of these prats here were saying...."

"Probably." He couldn't tell from her matter-of-fact tone whether she agreed with the prats. She'd been clapping along with Harry at first, but that, he reasoned, was probably her usual polite reflex.

"And now, it gives me very great pleasure to give the following award. Now, although he is Head Boy of Hogwarts, he has not always been known for following the rules; in fact, he has probably received more detentions than any student I've ever known to become Head Boy—apart from his father." A laugh rolled through the crowd. "But what I find particularly remarkable about him is his capacity for justice and compassion. He will not hesitate to do what he thinks is right, whether that is the easy path or not. He is the third person who contributed to Lord Voldemort's fall, by using Voldemort's own self-confidence against him; he is the architect of the plan that eventually led to victory at Godric's Hollow; and finally, were it not for a great sacrifice he made, we would not have the previous recipient with us here today. I am most pleased to award the Order of Merlin, First Class, to Harry Potter."

His reception was nothing like the lukewarm response Draco Malfoy had received. He could hear shouting and cheering from all over the stadium, feet stomping, clapping that sounded like five times as many people as Harry knew were likely to be present. Hermione helped him to stand and make his way to the podium. When he reached it, he could feel Dumbledore pinning the O.M. to his robes and then reaching for his hand to shake it; the stadium shook from the uproar, and Harry decided that it had been useless to memorize his remarks, because now what he wanted to say to this crowd had nothing to do with what he'd prepared, and he was glad that his friends didn't know what he was going to say.

The crowd finally quieted again. Dumbledore, his voice still amplified, said, "And now we will hear a few words from Harry Potter." Harry felt him take his elbow as he stepped up onto the podium, trying not to shake, once again grateful that he couldn't see how many people were present. His heart was beating very fast and he almost wished he could just face down another dark wizard.

"Thank you, Professor Dumbledore," he began, trying to keep his voice steady. "Thank you for a lot of things. Thank you for believing in your students, no matter what house they're in. Thank you

for recommending Mariah and Draco and Millicent for the O.M., because they deserve it. Thank you for believing in Severus Snape and Arabella Figg and Alastor Moody, all of them Slytherins when they were in school. But there's one thing that I can't thank you for: I can't thank you for continuing to use the Sorting Hat."

He heard a rumble of confusion roll through the crowd as he took a breath, preparing to continue. "When I was about to enter my first year, a few things happened that changed my life forever. That is, after I found out I'm a wizard. First, I met Draco Malfoy and took an immediate dislike to him." There was laughter at that, which was fine with Harry; he'd been trying to lighten the mood. "I first heard about school houses from Draco, about Slytherin and Hufflepuff. I didn't know what they were, so I asked Hagrid." His nose started itching fiercely when he thought of Hagrid. "He told me that there hasn't been a single wizard who's gone bad who *wasn't* in Slytherin. Now, I know that that isn't true. And Hagrid did too, but he wasn't thinking about exceptions that day. And then I was Sorted. When I put the Hat on, I was appalled. It told me that I could be great, and that the house that could help me do that could be—*Slytherin*."

Harry heard a gasp and paused for effect; he'd never thought to tell this many people such a deep, dark secret of his, but he knew that he could keep it a secret no longer. People *had* to know if a thousand-year-old tradition was to be changed. "Yes. Harry Potter, a Slytherin. It could have happened." *And did, in my other life*, he thought. "I'd been influenced by meeting someone who'd already been Sorted into Slytherin, someone I didn't like, and by what Hagrid—someone I *did* like—had said. Even before I heard the Hat's song or knew anything about Salazar Slytherin, I knew that the last thing I wanted to be was a *Slytherin*. Before the Hat said anything, I had already thought, 'Not Slytherin, *not* Slytherin.' It wanted to know whether I was sure, and it finally put me in Gryffindor. I was enormously relieved to *not* be one of *them*."

Cheers went up from the crowd, which he wasn't expecting. He held up his hands to stop it and the noise died down again. "No, don't cheer. I was a stupid, ignorant prat. I didn't know anything about Slytherin but rumors and the opinions of a person I liked who was biased. And then, when I was in second year, I found out I was a Parselmouth. Slytherin was a Parselmouth, and some people thought it meant that I was his heir, that I'd opened the Chamber of Secrets. I wondered this myself. The heir part, that is. I told the headmaster that I was afraid it might be true, and maybe that was why the Hat had suggested Slytherin. I even asked the Hat whether I was in the right house. But Professor Dumbledore told me that I'd *chosen* to not be a Slytherin, that it's our choices that make us who we are, rather than just our abilities. Our *choices*," Harry said again.

"I sat with Viktor Krum as he was dying in the forest last year; he told me that he had *no choice*. Once he knew Voldemort was his grandfather, he thought his future was settled, that his blood decided everything. He was wrong! What message do Slytherins get when they're Sorted? Do you think many of them feel they have a choice except to live up—or down, rather—to their house's reputation? It's a rare Slytherin who doesn't feel this way, like Mariah or Millicent or Severus Snape. Or Draco Malfoy. Are we helping an eleven-year-old to tell him, essentially, 'You're a Slytherin now, so you're just as likely as not to be an evil, evil person.' Does that sound like he has a *choice*?"

He stopped and listened now; the stands were utterly silent. "We have no right to take people's choices from them! When I was preparing for my N.E.W.T. in History of Magic, my good friend Hermione told me that it's a lie that house elves *like* to be enslaved. She'd learned the name of the wizard who first cursed the elves—yes, cursed, not 'charmed,' which sounds rather friendly—into believing that doing anything but housework was horrid and that they should want to slave their entire lives for humans. The wizard who did it was a *Hufflepuff*, not a Slytherin. I charge the Ministry of Magic to lift the curse on the elves so that they can *choose* where they want to work—for pay. The Elven Army saved many lives at Godric's Hollow, and a good elf-friend of mine perished at Stonehenge, where elves also battled Death Eaters, and dragons and dementors, too."

"Lift the curse!" he heard Hermione cry. He heard Ginny's voice repeat the cry, then Ron's, and soon there was a stomping and clapping behind him that was starting to make him think the wooden stands would be shivered into kindling.

"*Free the elves! Lift the curse!*" the chant echoed through the stadium.

Harry bit his lip, remembering his promise to Dobby. He put his hands up to quiet the crowd again and continued. "Good! But don't just *say* it. *Make* it happen. Hold the new Minister to it. We do *not* have the right to enslave anyone, just because we *can* do it." He thought of something then, and went on, "Alastor Moody once said to me that just because you *can* do something doesn't mean you *should*. Just because Ravenclaw, Hufflepuff and Gryffindor pacified Slytherin by using the Sorting Hat to give him the students who were like him doesn't mean we should go on that way.

"I charge the board of governors to *stop using the Sorting Hat*. When first years come to the school, put them *randomly* into houses. There can still be a house competition, and Quidditch and all that. But what good does it do to let children just be around those who are similar to them for

*seven years?* How much of an education do they get if they don't learn how to get on with those who aren't *just like them?* And how many of us really feel, after seven years, that we're exactly the same person we were at eleven? We shouldn't be telling first years, 'This is who you are for the rest of your life.' Hogwarts should be about opening up possibilities, not closing them off."

He was still met with silence, so he barreled on. "If the Ministry wants to prevent the rise of future dark wizards, then make all students feel that they can be anything, regardless of house. It's *not* a solution to keep track of former Slytherins. At any rate, once the Hat is no longer used, 'Slytherin' won't mean what it once did. Now, I know that I said that when I first met him, I didn't like Draco Malfoy," he said, giving a small laugh. "But since then I've come to know a Draco Malfoy who is brave and selfless and puts his Slytherin cleverness to good use. If it weren't for him, Voldemort would still be here. If it weren't for Mariah Kirkner, Hogwarts, and probably Hogsmeade, too, would be destroyed, and Millicent Bulstrode helped with that. You were rather quiet when they received their awards, but this time I want to hear some *real* support for them. *To the Slytherin heroes of Hogwarts and Godric's Hollow!*" he cried, clapping loudly.

The crowd obliged him this time, stomping their feet and shouting for quite a while, and this time he didn't hear a single naysayer.

\* \* \* \* \*

"*I now pronounce you husbands and wives.*"

Harry grinned upon hearing Dumbledore say these words, and the resounding kisses he heard told him that the brides and grooms were fairly happy about it as well. A fortnight after the memorial, the small crowd in the Hogwarts Trophy Room, largely consisting of Weasleys and some of the operatives, clapped and cheered. Harry found himself hugged and kissed by the brides, Maggie and Alicia, while the grooms, Snape and Sirius, shook his hand and patted his back. As the best man, he'd kept checking his pocket for the rings, worried that it was a dreadful idea for them to have a blind best man. *I'd bloody well want my best man to see what was going on,* he thought, unable to get Sandy's prediction out of his mind, although he smiled and thumped Snape on the back in return and pumped Sirius' hand, all the while wishing he could see them both.

He spasmodically clutched at his amulet, wondering where Ginny was; there, he could see her on the other side of the room, standing and clapping with Ron, Hermione, Draco and Mariah. She wasn't in a dress like the one she'd worn for Alicia's wedding to Roger, she didn't have her hair up in some complicated style. Her simple rose-colored dress robes had no ornamentation and her hair fell down her back as usual. She laughed and clapped, her bright eyes crinkled up, and Harry's heart turned over. He didn't need her to be done up, he just wanted to see her like this always, looking like herself. On this day, he seemed to continually hear Sandy's deep voice in his head, from when she was enlarged:

*The Lion shall wed the Daughter.*

Perhaps it meant Sirius, who'd also been a Lion in the Prophecy? But Alicia wasn't the Daughter of war, and they were marrying *today*, not a year hence....

Bodies jostled him, and he put his hand out, asking, "I'm sorry, but whose arm is this?"

"Harry," came Maggie's voice.

"Sorry, Maggie," he said again. "I was just looking for someone who could help me get across the room to Ginny."

"We're going in that direction anyway, aren't we Severus?" she said to her groom, sounding quite proprietary now. He grinned at her.

"Got him on a bit of a lead, do you?"

"I'm not a dog, Potter," Snape growled, but Harry could hear that he was forcing the hostility; there was a note of amusement in his voice.

"No, you're not. You're a husband," he grinned. Snape gave a very satisfactory laugh.

But as they crossed the floor, Maggie reached into his mind and spoke to him, giving him a bit of a jolt. *What secret are you keeping, Harry, and from whom?*

*Erm, whatever do you mean, Maggie?* He'd almost forgotten she could do this.

*Your aura color doesn't lie. You're black at the edges. Secretive, that's what you are. Confess.*

*Planning to become an Auror?* he thought grumpily. *I've nothing to confess. I've done nothing wrong.*

*I didn't say you had, apart from keeping a secret. You're keeping it from Ginny, aren't you?*

He didn't answer her, but tried to concentrate on shutting his mind to her. He wasn't sure whether his aura color was due to his thinking about the prediction or the secret about what he'd intended to sacrifice. Perhaps both. He clutched the amulet and saw himself approaching Ginny

from just a couple of feet away. She threw her arms around his neck and kissed his cheek, then he saw her hug and kiss Maggie, and her new brother-in-law even warranted a shy peck on the cheek, Snape looking rather awkward about it; after all, she was still his student for another year. Harry could also see Ron shaking hands with their Potions Master as though he hadn't been their nemesis for years, grinning at the newest member of the family, while Hermione took her turn hugging and kissing Maggie.

"Are you all right, Harry?" Ginny whispered in his ear, making him release the amulet. He held her tightly and nodded, not daring to speak. *Why does Maggie have to go seeing auras all the time?* he thought, feeling out of sorts.

The Trophy Room had been closed off for the private party, the cases in the middle of the floor having been cleared out of the way for dancing. Harry took off his amulet, holding it between his hand and Ginny's as they turned carefully around the floor. Holding the amulet to see her allowed Harry to avoid bumping into people, but it was strange to see *himself* at the same time, turning round and round. It reminded him of the mind-body separation he'd learned, but now Ginny was always at the center of everything, he wasn't lying in a comatose state, and the world didn't move in slow motion.

Later, Harry was eating cake, standing with Sirius, Remus, Alex Wood, Bill and Bill's date. Harry wasn't clear about why Alex Wood was there; he knew he was a mate of Bill's from school, but he'd thought the ceremony and reception were going to be more private. He also wasn't clear on how Bill had been permitted a *date*.

"I'm don't want to be rude or anything," he tried to explain, "but why are you here, exactly?" he asked Alex. There was an awkward silence before Remus responded.

"Actually, Alex is my date. You needn't worry about security. Alex can keep a secret. Bill played matchmaker, you see—"

"Evidently, you can keep a secret, too!" Harry said in surprise. "When, er—"

"For a while now," Alex said, sounding happy. "But it was touch and go there for a while. I thought his undercover work was sure to get him killed. Made me bloody nervous every time he left the flat to go to a werewolf meeting..." Harry found it hard not to picture Oliver Wood; the brothers' voices were almost exactly the same. "Sirius is Remus' best friend in the world; I'd never dream of spilling on him and his lovely bride."

After that, Harry didn't dare ask Bill how he rated a date. Just then, Molly Weasley approached them and asked in a surprisingly imperious voice, "So. Bill. Would you mind terribly introducing me?" Harry stopped chewing his cake, realized that his mouth was open, and shut it abruptly, swallowing with difficulty. Evidently, Bill hadn't told his *mum* about his date.

"Erm, yes, Mum. I believe you might remember Juliet from when I was in school. Juliet Hathaway—I mean, McDonald—this is my mum, Molly Weasley."

"Actually," Juliet—or so Harry assumed—answered, "you were right the first time, Bill. It's Juliet Hathaway again, remember? Since the divorce."

"Divorce?" Molly said suspiciously.

"You remember, Mum," came Charlie's voice now; Harry didn't know when he had joined them. "When I went to the reservation in British Columbia between my fifth and sixth years and learned so much from Juliet's husband, Brendan, one of the handlers."

"Ah, yes. The handler," she said vaguely. "And just how long has this been going on?" she said pointedly. Harry felt extremely embarrassed on Bill's behalf.

"Well, I ran into Juliet in Diagon Alley a little over a year ago, and we started seeing each other again..." Bill said; Harry thought that only he could pick up on the nervousness in Bill's voice, but Molly had also caught it.

"And you were afraid to tell me about this *why?*"

Charlie cleared his throat. "Don't you think you had better tell her, Bill?" he said to his brother in an undertone.

"Tell me what?" Molly said sharply.

Harry could hear Bill and Charlie shuffling their feet; he wondered what on earth had got into them. He pulled on Sirius' sleeve, whispering, "This sounds like a family matter—"

"Well, you're very close to being family, Harry," Molly said to him. "Perhaps I should help my two eldest sons a bit, neither of whom had the decency to tell me, for nearly *sixteen years* that I had a granddaughter!"

The room was very still after she said this, and all Harry could do was drop his jaw in disbelief. Next to him, he heard Sirius mutter, "*Oh, there'll be hell to pay...*"

"You know!" Charlie cried. "So—you didn't need me to remind you about the dragon reservation

at all!"

"Yes, I know, thanks to Juliet. We've been corresponding for years. *I* can keep secrets, too." Harry knew that already, because of the secret of her older daughters.

"Juliet!" Bill cried.

"Well," Juliet said nervously, "I didn't think it right for your mother not to know. I wrote to her years ago. It was while you were still at the reservation, Charlie. I wanted to let her know how grateful I was that you were with me, Natalie's own uncle—"

"Natalie!" Harry said suddenly, unable to stop himself. "D'you mean—Natalie McDonald?"

"That's right," Juliet said quietly.

As the entire story came out, Harry understood now why Mrs. Weasley had told her sons that if they got a girl "in trouble" she'd kill them. She didn't mean it literally, of course, but her feelings about this hadn't just come out of the blue; she'd had some experience with the problem, unbeknownst to Bill, the perpetrator, and Charlie, the de facto Secret Keeper. It was Charlie who got the brunt of Mrs. Weasley's anger, as he'd kept it from her—and Bill—from the start.

"Well, erm—there was that whole thing about the Daughter of War being from our family," Charlie stammered. "How did I know that it wasn't Bill's daughter? It just seemed like a good idea to keep her a secret, safer for her and all...."

"Mm hm," Mrs. Weasley said, sounding unconvinced. She didn't let Bill off completely, though, despite the fact that he'd only learned he had a daughter a year earlier.

"Well, there just didn't seem to be any good time to bring it up, with the war and all," Bill mumbled sheepishly. Harry wished he could see his face, not to mention Molly Weasley's. Harry still couldn't believe that the unassuming fourth-year Gryffindor named Natalie McDonald was Ginny and Ron's niece.

*Ginny!* He looked for her with his amulet, finding her standing with Ron, just a few feet away, an expression of utter shock on her face. He hugged her.

"So you heard?"

"That I've been an aunt since I was about a year and a half old? Yes, I heard. The thing is, I have a feeling that *Natalie* is the only one who *doesn't* know about her real dad being my brother."

"Well, actually, no she doesn't," Juliet admitted. "Bill and I talked about that. It's very awkward. Brendan and I parted amicably, and Nat's always thought of him as her dad..."

"It's up to you, dear," Molly Weasley said to her, surprising Harry. "No one wants the poor girl to be upset. But you've described Brendan to me as a very understanding person. I don't think Natalie needs to feel that she's losing the father she's always known; she's just getting another one, not to mention, perhaps I can stop sending jumpers and fudge to her with just the excuse that her mother was my son's girlfriend ages ago!" She was actually laughing, and Harry grinned, wondering how much champagne she'd had.

"You sent her Weasley jumpers and fudge?" Ron said, sounded affronted.

"Oh, pish, I sent them to Harry, too, and you never cared," she reminded him.

"Still—we've had a niece right in our own house all this time and never knew it," Ron pressed; Harry remembered how upset he'd been about finding out about his lost sisters.

Harry felt Ginny leave his side and he clutched at the amulet; she was whispering something in the ear of a pretty dark-haired woman with blue eyes. She looked familiar, and he realized both that she must be Juliet and that Natalie had her mother's face. Unlike her mother, he remembered that Natalie's hair was a mix of red and brown. He shook his head in amazement as he watched Ginny speak to the mother of her niece, then they both lifted their heads to look at the others, grinning.

"We'll be right back. We're going to find Natalie and tell her, so she can join the party—" Ginny said excitedly. Before she and Juliet left, she jostled Harry's arm as she kissed him on the cheek.

"I'll be right back. I'm off to get myself a niece!"

He laughed, continuing to hold onto the amulet while she and Juliet found Natalie in the Gryffindor common room. They hugged and cried and hugged some more before they led her out of the portrait hole and down the stairs. He released the amulet and smiled, knowing that however many new members of the family were added to the Weasleys, it would never make up for Fred's absence, but he also thought it unlikely that a stray member of the family would ever again be permitted to languish without the rest of the clan about to give love and support.

And so the party went on into the wee hours of the night, with all of the living members of the Weasley family together at long last. Harry held Ginny and danced and thought about Sandy's prediction, and thought some more, holding her tightly and feeling that although he'd given up a family in his other life, he had been given another one.

\* \* \* \* \*

The rest of the term passed very quickly, it seemed to Harry. It didn't hurt that he and Ginny had been given a room in the staff wing, authorized by none other than Severus Snape. (*"I'll deal with Molly if she gets wind of it,"* he'd said.) Maggie had led him there after the wedding, and he'd been surprised by Ginny already being there in a diaphanous pink dressing gown and nothing else....

Suddenly, his resolute celibacy, maintained since he'd returned from Godric's Hollow, crumbled into nothing. He couldn't remember why he'd denied himself, but lying with her in his arms afterward, listening to the approaching dawn, he remembered. Something to do with feeling like he didn't deserve happiness when Fred was dead, and Hagrid, and Tony and all of the others. As he held her warm body, he thought about the wedding, and Natalie meeting her family for the first time, and realized how utterly stupid this was. To deny himself happiness because others had died would be to put the lie to their deaths. Was it all for nothing? No, it wasn't. Life went on and they owed it to themselves and those who were gone to clutch at as much happiness as they could while they could.

He squeezed Ginny tightly and started to drift off, but then forced himself awake again. "Ginny?"  
"Hmm?"

"I meant to talk to Draco at the reception, but I never got a chance. Do you think he also has a room in the staff wing? Maybe you could help me find it and—"

"Harry," she interrupted him.

"What?"

"Well, erm, I was talking to Draco at the reception, and—well, I wanted *him* to talk to you. But he said you're the last person he wants to talk to right now." Her voice was very quiet.

"Did he say why?"

"No."

He'd been unable to speak to Draco during the remainder of the term, as well. Now his final day at Hogwarts had arrived, and he felt rather numb, sitting at the Gryffindor table for the Leaving Feast, clutching the amulet now and then so he could see Ginny, but also so that he could see what bits of the Great Hall were visible around her, the house banners, the other students, the teachers off in the distance, at the head table. Dumbledore had not named a winner of the house competition, but declared that they were all victorious over the darkness that had threatened to swallow up the school and, indeed, the entire wizarding world. Surprisingly, there was a good bit of cheering at this news. Harry had great hope for the future; in September, the first years would be placed in their houses by a random drawing. The board of governors had agreed to Harry's idea.

After the feast, it was time to go to the station. Professor McGonagall gave him a warm hug, which surprised him, and then Mrs. Figg did the same, which was even more of a surprise. For a moment he wondered whether he should ask *her* to somehow get Draco to talk to him, but decided against it. He said goodbye to the other teachers who'd come to see him off, Severus Snape last of all with a fiercely back-slapping embrace, before walking out of the entrance hall. He was no longer a student.

Ron guided Harry up the steps and into the horseless carriage; Harry took off his glasses (which he still habitually wore) and closed his eyes, feeling the gentle swaying movement as they rolled down the drive toward Hogsmeade. When they were nearly at the station, Sandy's voice piped up from under his sleeve, saying the same thing she'd said before he'd entered Dumbledore's office to speak to him. *Not that again,* he thought. *You shall see.* Not really, not the way I'd like to....

All too soon, they had arrived, and Ginny was the one leading him this time, helping him step up onto the platform. He hesitated and felt her pulling on his arm. "Come on, Harry, so we can get a good compartment, all of us together."

He gently pulled away. "I'll be along, Ginny. Give me a minute, all right? You and Ron and Hermione go on ahead; I'll find you."

She sighed and he heard her footsteps recede from him. Taking a deep breath, he turned toward where he thought Hogwarts should be. He imagined it very vividly, the turrets and parapets, countless windows flashing in the sunshine. He'd seen it so many times, and now that he was leaving, he couldn't even have one last glimpse of it. He thought fiercely, *I wish I could just see it one last time....*

He hadn't been able to see Sirius one more time before he left with Alicia for America. They'd departed the night after the wedding, and Harry swore that he'd find a way to come visit them when they were settled. He wasn't sure how he would do it, since the idea of traveling without his sight was daunting, but he was determined to find a way.

"Harry," said a gentle, familiar voice.

"Dumbledore! I mean, Professor Dumbledore...."

The headmaster gave a laugh. “I *would* suggest that you start calling me ‘Albus,’ but I do not think you are ready for that.”

Harry swallowed. “Erm, probably not quite ready, sir.” He wished now that he could see him *and* the castle. *Wishing won’t just make it so*, he reminded himself.

“You don’t usually come to see us off,” Harry said, feeling awkward. He blinked; his head felt strangely heavy, as though he needed to put it down.

“No, that is true. However, it is not every day that Harry Potter leaves Hogwarts....”

Harry’s face felt hot. “You came just to see me off, sir?” There it was again; his head felt strange, almost as though it didn’t belong to him. There was a rush of wind in his ears that reminded him of when he’d returned from the Realm of the Dead. He felt distracted and thought again, *I wish I could just see Hogwarts and Dumbledore one more time....*

Unaccountably, he thought he *did* see something, a small pale glow like a distant light on a night with no moon. The glow grew, but then something blocked it, a shadow sitting in the center, while light emanated from either side, not unlike the way Maggie had described auras to him. The something was blurry, but Harry could tell it was tall and bluish. Harry blinked again, unable to make sense of what was happening.

“Are you all right, Harry?” The headmaster sounded more like a concerned father than a headmaster.

“I’m—I don’t know what I am,” he whispered vaguely. The glow became brighter and brighter, finally filling his entire range of vision. *Vision!* he thought. *I can see!*

“I—I can see. I think,” he added uncertainly.

“*What?*” Dumbledore said sharply. “You can *see*? What is it you see?”

The glow was too bright, making it impossible for him to tell what the tall bluish thing was. Harry blinked some more, shaking his head, trying to focus his eyes. Then he remembered—he wasn’t wearing his glasses. He reached into his robe pocket and pulled them out. Even with them on, everything didn’t immediately come into focus, but he was able to make out the tall thing that was in the middle of the light now.

“*I see you.*”

Harry blinked some more, his focus improving with each blink, and then there he was: Albus Dumbledore, wearing robes of pale, icy blue and a tall matching hat. The robes made his hair and long beard look slightly bluish too, and Harry looked up into the twinkling magical eyes, grinning at the old man.

“I can see you!” He lunged at Dumbledore, throwing his arms around him, and Dumbledore returned the embrace, patting him on the back.

“My dear boy,” he choked, and Harry thought he might actually cry.

Harry backed up from him, laughing. “I can *see*, I can really see!” he crowed. He shook his head. “I don’t know how, or why, I just know—oh, bloody hell, I don’t know anything, except that I can *see!*”

Dumbledore smiled warmly at him, and it was very hard for Harry to believe that the twinkling blue eyes weren’t real. “I am very, very happy for you, Harry.”

Harry couldn’t stop grinning. “That makes two of us. I—I was thinking that I’d like to see Hogwarts one last time, and you too, and it just—it started happening....”

Dumbledore narrowed his eyes now. “How very curious,” he said quietly, surveying Harry. “I wonder why the goddess decided to return your sight....”

Harry shrugged. “I don’t know. Hermione thought—well, I guess it doesn’t hurt to tell you now. I asked her not to say anything to anyone, but—she wanted to know what I was thinking when I offered to sacrifice my eyesight, and I told her that I didn’t. I offered—I offered my magic. But then, when I got back, I was blind. Hermione’s theory was that the goddess saw I was willing to sacrifice something huge and took it easy on me. Of course, it didn’t feel like that when I realized I was blind, but—but she must have decided the sacrifice didn’t need to be permanent! I can see again!”

But suddenly, where Dumbledore had looked touched and happy for him, he now appeared unspeakably sad, and Harry marveled again at how expressive the magical eyes could be. “What’s wrong, sir?”

Dumbledore took a deep breath. “I am—I am just afraid that it may not be as simple as you think, Harry. This—this would be quite out of character for a god or goddess....”

“You mean—you think she might take a different thing from me instead of my sight?”

Dumbledore sighed. “No, Harry. I fear that she already has,” he said very quietly.

Harry stared at him. “What do you mean?” But then he happened to look over the headmaster’s shoulder, and what he saw in the valley before him made him drop to his knees, sobbing, pushing

at his eyes with his hands, under his glasses.

*"No, no no, it can't be..."*

Where Hogwarts castle should have been, nestled in the leafy vale, was the ruin of a fortress that had seen far better days. It appeared to have been abandoned for hundreds and hundreds of years. Gone were the grand towers, flying the Hogwarts standard. Gone were the flashing windows. Where the front door should have been, a vine-covered empty archway led to a hall without walls, the remnants of the white marble stair stopping in mid-air, winding up into nothingness.

He shook his head, the truth pounding on his brain, but he resisted, closing his eyes, rubbing them until it was painful, sobbing, *"No, no, no..."*

Dumbledore held out his hand. "Get up, Harry." He said nothing more, but raised his eyebrows and Harry took his hand, standing slowly, his eyes going again to the ruins of Hogwarts castle. He turned to the left, and where he should have seen the bustling village of Hogsmeade was a collection of decrepit shacks, the dry, warm wind blowing the overgrown grasses around them. Turning, Harry saw that even the Hogsmeade station looked long-abandoned, the paint peeling so that one couldn't actually read the name of the village that he'd always seen in shining gold letters picked out against red, on the sign that hung above the platform on twin chains. One of the chains (both of them were rusted) was broken now, so that the illegible sign hung vertically, flapping in the wind.

And the Hogwarts Express...He turned to look at the train, which seemed to have been left on the old tracks at least eighty years earlier. Rust and peeling paint were the rule and not the exception here, as well, and Harry could see no one through the filthy windows. It appeared to be empty and useless.

He whirled to look at Dumbledore again, his mouth working soundlessly. The headmaster put his hand on Harry's arm. The warm reality of the hand grounded Harry, forced him to think, *It hasn't all been a dream. I didn't just imagine that I'm a wizard, that Hogwarts exists, I didn't just concoct it all in my head...*

*"Why?"* he choked, the only sound he could force from his throat.

Dumbledore shook his head mournfully. "I do not know, Harry. It could be that the blindness was temporarily visited upon you by the goddess to shield from you the truth of your sacrifice. Or to shield others from the truth. Your struggles to cope without your sight *did* serve as an effective distraction to those around you, none of whom seem to have caught on to your no longer being magical."

*"But-but-I can still understand Sandy, my snake, when she speaks..."*

Dumbledore looked thoughtful for a moment. "Interesting. It could be that the goddess took just the magic with which you were born. You were not born a Parselmouth, but accidentally received that ability from Voldemort when he attempted to kill you. What were you thinking, exactly, when you decided upon the sacrifice?"

Harry forced himself to meet Dumbledore's eyes, to stop gawping at the run-down train and station, at the abandoned-looking village, and especially at the ruined castle. "I thought-I thought, *Take it, take every bit of magic I had from the day I was born...*"

Dumbledore nodded. "Well, that is precisely what she did."

*"But why should she hide from me, or the people around me, what my true sacrifice was?"*

Dumbledore raised one eyebrow. "I said that was one possibility, and I do not know what the motive might be for doing such a thing. Another possibility is that the goddess is not responsible for your blindness at all."

Harry frowned. "Who then?"

Dumbledore gave him a very penetrating look. "You do not anger easily, Harry. You tolerated the Dursleys for quite some time, yet when your aunt insulted your parents' memories, you performed accidental magic and inflated her. Why do you think you reacted so strongly to her remarks?"

Harry thought back to the horrid things Aunt Marge had been saying. "Because-because I didn't know anything about my parents yet. I-I think a part of me was afraid that she was right. I couldn't argue back-I didn't have anything I could say to prove her wrong."

Dumbledore nodded. "You were angry with her because you feared she told the truth." Harry nodded, swallowing, as something, a sort of reluctant knowledge, prickled along his scalp. "After you told me of your reaction to Dr. Chaudhri's medical opinion, I spoke to Dr. Anderssen about it," he said. "She told me you were very angry at the suggestion that you were suffering from hysterical blindness."

Harry swallowed, looking around him. "So, you're saying you think she was right? That I *made* myself blind so I would think *that* was the sacrifice?"

Dumbledore squeezed his arm. "Your sacrifice, Harry, was the soul of selflessness. But just

because someone is capable of such an act does not mean that they will not feel remorse or regret, even though they also believe that, in the same circumstances, they would do exactly the same thing again. You told yourself it was the right thing to do, and you believed it, but a part of you couldn't bear to think about the consequences, and so you found a way to avoid doing just that. The blindness let you ignore the real sacrifice. Remember, Harry, how very suggestible you are...."

Harry peered into the twinkling blue eyes. "I thought that was just in connection to my magic." His voice shook, even as he admitted to himself that, yes, he had attempted to hide his sacrifice even from himself, an exercise in denial that robbed him of his very sight.

Dumbledore shrugged. "Muggles have been known to do the same thing, Harry. They simply do not have enough magical genes turned on to be able to use it to augment spells. Clearly, you still have this ability, even without the magic with which you were born."

"Leaving me with being a Parselmouth," he said bitterly. He waited for a second in case Sandy commented, but for once she didn't. "And not being able to see Hogwarts, or Hogsmeade, or—"

"Oh, you can see them," Dumbledore said simply.

Harry threw up his hands. "Well, yes, I can see a ruined castle—"

"That is *you*, Harry. You see ruins because you believe you should. I suspect that you were able, so successfully, to convince yourself that you were blind because you feared, above all, that you would not be able to see Hogwarts again, knowing as you do about the anti-Muggle charms. What you see now," he said, waving his hand at the distant crumbling stone walls, "is what you *expected* to see upon returning, and you could not face that, so you didn't. But you know as well as I that you needn't see the castle this way. You've allowed your fear to override your *knowledge*. Without your magic, you are a Squib, not a Muggle. Squibs can see through anti-Muggle charms. And even Muggles who *expect* to see something magical can see it, as you know from Miss Granger's parents. They attended the memorial here at the school, and you have seen them in Diagon Alley, yes?" Harry nodded, staring at the castle, but failing to see any change. "*Believe, Harry,*" said Dumbledore in a soft, urgent voice. The hair stood up on the back of Harry's neck as he remembered Rodney Jeffries healing his burns....

*Believe....*

He thought of Draco Malfoy *expecting* to be in hell for what he'd done, believing that he should be punished....

*Believe....*

And then he thought of Maggie and Hermione, who'd seen photographs of the ruined version of Stonehenge, unable to see it as it really was until they made a concerted effort to get past their expectations, to *change* what they believed about the place....

*Believe.*

Harry blinked repeatedly; slowly, the castle as he knew it came shimmering into view, as though it had been hidden by the Chameleon Transfiguration. He heaved a sigh of relief, seeing the castle as he knew it was, tall and strong and *home*. In its way, Hogwarts would always be his home, there was no doubt about it. He turned to Dumbledore.

"I can see it—"

And then, all at once, it shimmered and shifted, becoming again a pile of ruins. He frowned, but Dumbledore, perhaps seeing the disappointment on his face, squeezed his shoulder. "Give it time, Harry. Start small, with the train, say, since you need to take it back to London." Harry looked at the train again, thinking very hard, remembering the first time he ever saw the Hogwarts Express when he was eleven. He remembered the sight of the scarlet steam engine, of the many carriages, watching Ginny run to catch up with the train, the look of longing on her face as her brothers went off to school; he remembered meeting Ron for the first time, and Hermione, both on the train....

It shimmered into view, but did not revert to a ruin. "I can see it, sir. I—I think I'll be all right. The rest will come with time, you're probably right." He heaved a great sigh and felt a relief wash through him, even as he thought, *Bloody hell, I'm a Squib.*

"Harry," Dumbledore said, putting his hand on his arm as Harry started moving toward the train. "Don't put it off too long."

"Put what off?"

"Telling the others. Your friends. Miss Weasley. And—Mr. Malfoy."

Harry's lip shook and he surveyed the scene of the ruined castle again. He'd only been able to hold the image of the intact castle in his mind for a few moments. "Draco hasn't talked to me since we got back anyway. I'm still not convinced he's going to forgive me for saving his life, any more than Snape wanted to forgive my father. And obviously, I didn't want the others to know about it or I wouldn't have gone to such lengths to hide the truth even from myself. *How* do I tell them that I'm

no longer magical?"

Dumbledore pulled him into a firm embrace and then held him at arm's length, smiling warmly at him. "Harry Potter, even as a Squib, you are still the most magical person I have ever known." Harry ducked his head, feeling unaccountably shy, hearing the headmaster say this. "You shall find a way," Dumbledore went on. "Trust me. More importantly—trust yourself. And those about whom you care the most." He released Harry's shoulders and nodded. "Better hurry. They're waiting for you."

Harry turned to see a conductor far down the platform, leaning out of a carriage window, looking at him expectantly. Harry nodded, striding toward the train. When it started to move, he was still standing at the door of the carriage; he opened the window so he could lean out and wave to Professor Dumbledore, who was the only person on the platform. Behind him, the village wavered slightly and appeared, then disappeared again, as though Harry weren't really seeing it, but a mirage. *Give it time*, he reminded himself. He was on the train and could see everything on it with perfect clarity. That was a start.

*I can see Ginny again*, he realized, his heart leaping at the thought. *And not just with the amulet*. He grinned as he walked down the corridor, lurching when the train went around a slight curve. *I can see Ron, and Hermione, and Snape and Maggie, and—*

He stopped, hearing Hermione's distinctive, incisive voice behind the door of the compartment he was passing. He hesitated before entering, staring at the frosted glass in the door, really seeing for the first time the swirling pattern in the glass. He could also see shadows moving behind the glass. The two red heads were likely to be Ron and Ginny. The two dark ones seemed to be Mariah and Hermione; the light blur could only be Draco Malfoy.

*Draco Malfoy*. Draco would *have* to talk to him now.

He took a deep breath and slid the door open, looking round at them all, trying to tell himself that he'd rather be able to *see* than do magic. He forced a grin and entered, sitting between Ginny and Ron. Hermione, Mariah and Draco sat opposite them.

"That was very good, Harry," Hermione said, sounding far too much like a dog-trainer for his taste. "If I didn't know better, I'd say that you could actually *see*—"

Harry turned to Ginny, looking deeply into her enormous brown eyes before kissing her, feeling her surprise for a split second before she succumbed. But after only a moment, she pulled away and stared at him in disbelief, her eyes boring into him.

"*You can see!*" she breathed, tears in her eyes. Harry gave her a genuine smile.

"Yes. I can see."

With an inarticulate cry she pulled him to her again, initiating the kiss this time. When she allowed him to come up for air, he turned to find the other four staring at him in disbelief.

Ron recovered first, letting out a joyful laugh and slapping Harry on the back rather too hard, so that he was knocked to the floor. Hermione helped him stand.

"Sorry, mate, I just—this is brilliant!"

Hermione hugged him quickly, beginning to cry. "Oh, Harry! It's so wonderful! But—but *how?* When?"

"So *that's* what Sandy meant when she said, *You shall see!*" Ginny exclaimed. "She didn't mean *understand* this time...."

"What?" Harry said, frowning at her. "You can understand Sandy?"

"I have done, ever since—well, you know. I thought you realized?"

"No, I didn't!" He stared at her in shock. She laughed.

"But the important thing is that you can see! Only—I don't understand how...."

Harry looked up from her face; Draco Malfoy was visibly shaken. Harry wondered how he'd ended up in this compartment. Perhaps Ginny had talked him into it. Harry looked back at Hermione and Ron. "I'll explain everything, but first—" He held out his hand to Ginny. "I need to talk to you, Ginny. There's—there's something I need to tell you."

Ron looked a bit alarmed. "Now, Harry—don't you think she's a bit young to—"

"Sod off, Ron. I said 'tell,' not 'ask.' And mind your own business."

"I think it must be advice about being a Parselmouth," she said, laughing, as Harry took Ginny by the hand and opened the compartment door again, staggering into the corridor and dragging her behind him. They weren't far from the end of the train, so he opened the door to the rear platform. When they were standing together, grasping the rail, Harry could feel the rhythm of the train vibrating through his body. He looked at the greenery on either side of the track but didn't dare look at where he knew the castle should be; he was vaguely aware of it out of the corner of his eye, but he doggedly avoided looking. Instead he looked at Ginny, cupping her cheek with his hand.

She was no longer laughing.

She seemed to be shaking from more than the train's movement, and suddenly he realized that she might be thinking the same thing that Ron had been, that he was going to ask her to marry him. Nothing would have made him happier than for Ginny to agree to spend the rest of her life with him, and he knew that Sandy's prediction practically guaranteed it, but how could he ask her to be with him now? *I'm a Squib*. He suddenly realized that although his mother had told him that he couldn't simply give up Ginny as his sacrifice, by giving up his magic, he *had* given her up as well. How could he expect her to stay with him when—

"Oh, Harry! Doesn't the castle look beautiful like this? I've never stood back here when we've been going home on the train—"

He looked at her profile as she gazed rapturously at Hogwarts castle. She had turned away from him, reddening and he decided that he'd better just tell her before she started expecting him to pull out a ring. He took a deep breath and turned to look. Where he knew the edifice of Hogwarts castle should be, nestled in its green valley, he saw the crumbled walls, the vine-covered ruins, getting smaller bit by bit as they moved away. He didn't have the energy at this moment to try to see what he knew should be there. He shook his head, tears stealing into his eyes.

"Ginny," he choked. "I—I can't see it—"

She turned in alarm. "Oh, Harry! Is your sight going again? Oh my god—" She covered her mouth in horror, then quickly grabbed the rail again to keep from falling. Harry pulled her to him, burying his face in her hair. He couldn't look at her face while he did this, he knew he should, but he couldn't. He held her tightly, whispering the truth into her ear, the words coming in a rush. Her knees started to buckle and he continued to support her limp body as she cried into his neck.

"No, no, tell me you didn't—"

"I had to Ginny," he choked out. "There was nothing else that—"

"I hate him!" she cried. "I hate that you did this for *him*—" She backed up, her face collapsed in anguish.

"But Ginny—how could I not? He saved your life—"

She bit her lip. "I know, I know—I know I'm being petty...." She took great gulps of air, her hands on his chest. "I love you, Harry. I love how—how selfless you are—"

"No, you don't, not right now. And that's okay, Ginny. It was still the right thing to do," he said quietly. She nodded, her lips drawn into a line.

"I know that, Harry, I really do," she whispered. "And—and I'll get used to this...."

"No, Ginny, I can't ask you to—"

"You are *not* breaking up with me, Harry Potter!" she suddenly growled, throwing her arms around him. "You didn't let Ron walk away from Hermione when he became a werewolf. I love you, not your magic. I'm not upset for myself—I'm upset for *you*—"

"You did *what*?" a familiar voice exclaimed. Draco Malfoy stood in the doorway, his hand on the door handle, his mouth open in shock.

Harry caught his breath. "How long have you been standing there? You won't *talk* to me, but you'll eavesdrop?"

"What, only *you* can eavesdrop on people?" he sneered. "And I'm talking to you now." Harry swallowed, glancing at Ginny.

"Can you give us a few minutes, Ginny?" he asked her, hoping Draco wouldn't bolt.

She nodded and kissed him quickly, slipping past Draco as though afraid to touch him. Draco walked onto the platform, closing the door behind him. He grasped the rail, staring at the receding landscape as the train rattled on, not looking at Harry.

"I wouldn't have done it for you, Harry."

"Yes, you would have. You *did*. If Ginny had died, it would have killed me."

He nodded. "Believe it or not, I thought of that. Not in the split second before I—well. When I first saw that you and Ginny were there. I knew what he would want to do—"

"You've told me that already."

"Don't interrupt," Draco snapped, still not looking at Harry. "I remember thinking—you probably really would fall apart if anything happened to her. I mean, look what you did when she died before—you changed the world."

Harry shook his head. "But that world should never have existed, should it?"

"I know that. And yet—it wasn't all bad, was it?" he said, his voice cracking. "Your sister was in it, after all." Harry looked at his profile now. A slow tear was trickling down his cheek. One of the rare times Harry had seen Draco cry was in his other life, when he was mourning Jamie—

"You remember!" Harry cried. "Not just from seeing my Pensieve. When you died—"

Draco finally faced him. "Yes, genius, I bloody remember the other life. God, it takes you so long to work things out. Why do you think I didn't want to talk to you?"

Harry was shaken to the core, staring at the other boy, his best friend for so many years, the boy his sister loved, with whom he'd traveled across the country in order to fix the timelines. "So, you—you really remember—"

"Everything, yeah." He grinned for a moment. "I remember being in Granger's flat in London and making her squirm—"

Harry groaned. "Oh, god. Do *not* tell her that you know about that. There was a *reason* why I didn't put that in my Pensieve. Especially if you don't want Ron to rip your lungs out."

Malfoy snorted. "Don't worry, I like my lungs where they are, thanks." He paused, then said, "For what it's worth, though, I *do* like the memories of some of the pranks we played on Weasley. Very satisfying...."

"Yeah, well, we were right little prats when we did those things," Harry said, looking at the passing scenery, not daring to look at Draco.

"I don't know; some of them were really quite clever—"

And then Harry got the surprise of surprises: he got his best friend from his other life back. They stood on the platform, reminiscing about their childhood together, laughing over things Simon and Stuart had done, remembering the pranks they'd pulled with Jamie, being Sorted in their first year, making the Slytherin Quidditch team....

"So why wouldn't you at least talk to me after I told everyone what pillocks they were for not recognizing what you'd done, at the memorial? Not a single word."

Draco swallowed and ducked his head. "Because I hated you. I had asked you to make sure I wouldn't remember that life, and when you brought me back from hell—you plunged me into a *different* hell. All of these memories came rushing back. All of the girls I'd been with because I couldn't be with Jamie, because she was too young. All right, not all of that was *dreadful*....But the memory of losing Jamie was, and something else that I wasn't prepared for at all...."

"What?"

He looked at Harry grimly. "I finally told you, when we were at Godric's Hollow, about the basilisk's egg. But I don't think I'll ever really feel like I deserve to be forgiven for that. You and Ginny could both have died. It was stupid and cowardly. And here I am, walking and talking and *alive* because you gave up your bloody magic for me, the one who did *that*." He swallowed, and Harry saw the guilt etched painfully in his pale features; in the summer sunshine he looked very strange, as though he'd been kept inside for a year, which was perhaps not far from the mark.

"You more than made up for that," Harry said quietly. "I haven't thought about it for ages. Are you still eating yourself up inside about that?"

Draco looked discontented as he said, "Yeah, well, I just got fifteen years of memories dumped in my brain about a month ago and I'm having rather a difficult time sorting all of it out. And now—bloody hell, it was bad enough when the entire wizarding world thought you were *blind* because of me. What's going to happen when everyone finds out that you're a *Muggle* because of me?"

"Squib."

"Whatever! Everyone will want my head on a platter! I'll be getting Howlers around the clock! And death threats, and—" Harry laughed. Draco glowered at him. "What's so funny about getting Howlers and death threats?"

"No, it's not that—I was just remembering that time we sent that Howler to the twins—"

They talked some more, and remembered Jamie quite a lot, and Draco looked a little calmer. Harry put his hand on his shoulder. "Don't worry about what the rest of the world will think. We could keep this quiet, if you like. I was going to keep a bit of a low profile, anyway. I can make a public appearance or two, carefully calculated to let people know I can see again, and I'm sure the hostility against you will go away. I'm going to go back to working for Aberforth this summer. What are your plans?"

He shrugged. "Don't know. I'm heading to the Leaky Cauldron after I get off the train. Staying there until I can get a flat somewhere."

"Well, I contacted my aunt and uncle and they're letting me stay with them for the summer, until I get on my feet. The original theory was that I know my way around their place blindfolded, so it was a better place for me to be than Ascog Castle. I'll make sure I get the story about my sight into the *Prophet* as soon as possible, and job offers will start pouring in for you...."

Draco shook his head. "What about you? I can't bloody believe you can't play Quidditch again. When I remember that game where you played Keeper for hours and hours—"

Harry grinned. "Youngest captain in the school's history."

Draco punched his shoulder. "And still a braggart, in *two* lives. Some things never change." Harry continued to grin happily at him. "No. Some things never do."

\* \* \* \* \*

When they returned to the compartment, the others were gasping and saying, "No! What will your mum say?" to Ron and Ginny.

Harry sat down next to Ginny as Ron said, "Well, that's why I don't think Charlie's about to tell my mum...."

Harry frowned; he'd thought they were discussing him at first. "What about Charlie?"

Ron looked about furtively, as though his mother might actually be lurking about, listening. "Well, I heard him talking to Bill at the reception, and it seems that he and Dimitri do more than just 'work' together...."

Hermione hit his arm. "You're becoming a terrible gossip, Ron Weasley. I should put a spell on you to stop up your ears."

"Too late, love," he said cheerfully. "And anyway, I talked to Charlie after that and he told me himself."

Harry's jaw was open. "Well," he said, "I can see how your mum might be a bit, well, surprised. Did you suspect anything?"

"Nah. And then there's the vampire thing, too, but I have to admit, Dimitri seems a good one. But Charlie told me more that he doesn't want mum to know about.... Seems he and Dimitri frequently get together with *another* friend...."

"Erg," Draco responded. "Yeah, your mum might be able to handle your brother with *one* bloke, even a vampire, but *two*? I don't think she's that open-minded."

Ron grinned at him. "But the third person *isn't* a bloke. It's that Romanian Seeker, Natasha Whats-er-name. The three of them became *very* close when Charlie used to be on the reservation in Romania...."

Hermione hit Ron again, but he just laughed at her. "S'all right, Hermione. We're not bloody likely to tell my mum what we get up to during the full moon, either, are we?"

Hermione turned deep red at that and Harry couldn't help laughing at her expression. He took Ginny's hand, saying, "Well, then, my bit of news probably won't seem too earth-shattering now, will it?" Taking a deep breath, he explained to the others that he was a Squib.

He was wrong, however, about what their reactions would be; Ron and Hermione were devastated, and Mariah clutched at him, crying, "*Tank ye, oh tank ye, Harry.*" He realized that she was thanking him for making the sacrifice to bring back Draco, and he patted her back awkwardly.

They laughed and talked about many things during the rest of the trip, cried a little over the lost friends, and even discussed the Prophecy.

"I still think that makes you a traitor," Ron said truculently, crossing his arms and glaring at Draco. "I mean, it *says*, 'but the Dark Lord's servant shall betray...'"

"Yeah, but it doesn't say who *gets* betrayed, only that I was going to do it. And yeah, I betrayed *him*, didn't I?"

"I think you betrayed both him *and* Harry," Hermione said logically.

"Yeah," Ron grumbled. "An equal-opportunity traitor."

"He didn't have any choice!" Ginny and Mariah said together.

"Here now," Harry chided them, trying to make peace. Changing the subject slightly, he said, "What I don't understand is that bit at the beginning. How's it go, Ginny?"

"You mean the very beginning? 'In days to come, the Dark Lord's fall is split by silver into gold...'"

"Yeah. What does *that* mean? I thought once we'd fulfilled the prophecy it would all be clear..."

Draco Malfoy rolled his eyes. "Well, it's bloody *obvious*, isn't it?" The rest of them stared blankly at him. He threw up his hands. "It means 'seventeen!'" They still stared blankly. "As in seventeen years?" he prompted them, starting to look very exasperated.

"Um," Harry said, "how do you get 'seventeen' from 'silver into gold?'"

"Oh!" Hermione exclaimed. "There are seventeen silver Sickles in a gold Galleon!"

"And Granger leaves the rest of them in the dust again..." Draco drawled, his lip curled. "Of course, I left *you*, in the dust, *Head Girl*..."

Hermione ignored him. "Yes! It's been about seventeen years since the first fall...Not precisely seventeen years, but seventeen calendar years, at any rate. Nineteen-eighty-one to Nineteen-ninety-eight!"

Harry shook his head. "I don't think I ever would have thought of that. How did you, Draco?"

He shrugged. "Once you don't have money, you tend to think about it a lot. After my mum disowned me, I had *dreams* about dancing silver Sickles and gold Galleons, taunting me."

"Ah," Ron said, nodding. "That explains it. Your basic greed helped you solve the riddle." Harry thought Draco would be upset, but even he laughed at that. Despite Harry's best efforts to distract the others, however, the conversation kept coming round to his being a Squib. He tried to reassure the others during the rest of the trip, and by the time they were approaching London, Ron and Hermione were no longer looking like they wanted to hex the life out of Draco. As King's Cross drew nearer and nearer, however, Harry held Ginny closer to him, unwilling to let her go.

"We'll work out how we'll see each other during your holiday," he said. It was strange: *your* holiday. He was going to work for Aberforth; no more summer holidays for him. It was the busiest time of year for landscapers. She nodded, her eyes wet.

"I know, I know...."

And then they were all standing on Platform Nine-and-Three-Quarters, hugging and kissing and saying their farewells. Harry noticed Bill and Juliet hugging their daughter, as well as another man, big and burly, who must be the father she'd always known. Something gold flashed on Natalie's robes, and he blinked, thinking he was dreaming. He whispered in Ginny's ear and she nodded; they strode over to them and Ginny greeted Bill and Juliet, then leaned over slightly to examine Natalie's amulet. It was a very simple design, a lion in exactly the same posture as the one on the keystone of the fireplace in the Gryffindor common room. There was a small red stone set in it for the eye.

"Natalie—where'd you get that?" Ginny asked her.

Her niece smiled at her and looked down at the amulet, then up again. "It used to be my mum's. Dad gave it to her for her birthday, before I was born. She gave it to me when I left home to go to Hogwarts. It's nice, isn't it?"

"Yes," she agreed. "Very nice."

"Hold it often, when you're not at home, and you'll feel all right," Harry told her.

She nodded, looking mystified. "I do, and—and that's just how I feel. But—how did you know? And—and can you *see*, Harry?"

He grinned at them all and nodded, and was again in the middle of a circle of people patting his back and pumping his hand. Natalie was shaking his hand convulsively, laughing, and he told her, "Don't let that amulet get away from you, Natalie." She smiled and agreed that she wouldn't.

He and Ginny watched her go through the barrier with her three parents, and then more people found him to say goodbye. Neville was pumping his hand for half a minute before he realized that Harry could see him, then gave him a crushing hug, while Harry laughed at his amazement. Behind Neville's eyes, however, there was a shadow; he and Parvati had had only a little time together before she died. Harry knew how that felt....

Finally, even Draco Malfoy hugged him goodbye, whispering to him, "*I'm not hacked off anymore. I like remembering her. She's—she's a bit like Mariah, yeah?*"

Harry patted his back, replying, "Yeah, there are similarities...." Draco grinned at him before walking toward the barrier, pulling his trunk behind him.

When everyone else was gone, Ruth Pelta was the last to hug Harry and Ginny goodbye; she was also shocked that he could see.

"That's brilliant! Well, you *know* where you *have* to go on your honeymoon now that you can see all of the beautiful sights, don't you?"

"Our *what?*" Ginny squeaked.

"Oh, come on," she said. "You two *are* getting married at some point, right?"

Harry put his arm around Ginny, and, looking down into her eyes, said, "Yeah, of course we are. In about a year. Isn't that right, Ginny?"

She swallowed and answered in a small, shaking voice, "That's right. We—we didn't think anyone else knew." She looked up at him for an instant with shining eyes before turning back to Ruth. "So do tell, where should we go on our honeymoon?"

"Well, it's a Muggle city with images of winged lions everywhere, very appropriate for Harry...."

*Not anymore*, he thought, remembering flying with Ginny as a golden griffin. But they weren't revealing that to Ruth at this time.

"There is no such place," Ginny said, laughing. "A Muggle city with golden griffins?"

"But in the place I'm talking about, they don't call them golden griffins. Tony and I were going to go..." she said wistfully, quickly wiping away an errant tear. "I'm talking about Venice, of course, you Ninny-Ginny. How often did I tell you about it?"

"Don't call me that," Ginny laughed. "You know I hate it. I'd forgotten about the winged lions,

really.”

“It’s just too bad that next summer is probably too soon....”

“Too soon for what?” Harry wanted to know.

“For the opera house to be rebuilt. It was *glorious*; if I could get someone to grant me one wish, it would be to someday sing there....Unfortunately, it burned down two years ago, but I’m sure it will be rebuilt eventually. It’s not called *La Fenice* for nothing.”

She bade them goodbye again and turned to walk toward the barrier. Suddenly, Harry thought of something. “Wait, Ruth! What does *La Fenice* mean?”

Ruth smiled benevolently at them both.

“*The Phoenix*.”

And then she was gone. Ginny turned to Harry and he swallowed, gazing into her dark eyes. “So—did you mean it?” she breathed, looking frightened.

“Mean it?”

“The proposal!” she said, looking as though she feared it was a joke.

Harry’s heart was thumping painfully in his chest. “I did propose, didn’t I? Well, in a way.” He frowned. “I didn’t make a very good job of it, did I? Not like Percy....”

She laughed. “If you’d proposed to me the way Katie told me Percy did to her, I’d think you were an impostor using Polyjuice Potion. It was *perfect*,” she assured him, rising to press her lips to his. He gathered her to him, trying to show her how much he loved her and wanted to be with her, no longer afraid of making her miserable. When their mouths separated, they leaned their brows together, and Harry felt a slight spark when their scars touched.

“We’ll get married after your seventh year, and we’ll go on a wonderful honeymoon to Venice,” he promised. “And we’ll look at the winged lions and remember flying together over the Forbidden Forest.” She nodded, starting to cry; he laughed, kissing away her tears. “Don’t cry, Ginny,” he whispered, holding her tightly again.

“I can’t help it. I first saw you here, on this train platform, and now you’ve proposed to me here....You’ll just have to put up with some tears, I’m afraid. Happy ones, of course.” She smiled lovingly at him and he smiled back.

“All right, then. That’s permitted. Shall we go? We have to create an uproar and tell everyone the news, after all.”

She laughed as he took her hand and they walked purposefully toward the barrier.

\* \* \* \* \*

Harry saw that the Dursleys did not look happy while the Weasleys and Hermione hugged and kissed him and Ginny upon finding out that Harry could see and hearing their good news about the engagement. His aunt and uncle stood awkwardly at the edge of the car park, and Harry could see the slight distance between them, as though they didn’t want to stand too close to each other. After he’d hugged Ginny goodbye one last time and she climbed into a taxi with Ron and Hermione (who was staying at the Burrow for a little while), he walked toward his aunt and uncle, pulling his trunk on a station trolley, Hedwig perched on top in her cage as usual.

And then he had it. He knew what he could say to make them happy.

“I’ve got some good news,” he said, smiling, for to them it *would* be good news, very good news. No one else he knew would take it that way, but suddenly he was very pleased that they would. He’d never thought he could do *anything* to make them happy, and for the first time in his life, he had the perfect gift to give them:

A non-magical Harry.

His aunt gasped and his uncle looked flabbergasted. “You mean it? No more—inflating my sister and all that rot?” Vernon Dursley said suspiciously. His news seemed to have distracted them from the fact that he clearly wasn’t blind, as Ginny had written in the letter to them. They didn’t say a word about this.

Harry assured him that he couldn’t do a bit of magic, thinking it wasn’t really necessary to tell him about the exception of Sandy, since he’d never told his uncle he could talk to snakes in the first place. His uncle didn’t even flinch at his use of the “M” word. His aunt, clearly recovered from losing her magic and also clearly determined to return to her life-long quest for normalcy, sniffed and walked to the car and climbed into the front passenger seat, not speaking.

She stared at Harry in the mirror for some time as they drove. Harry reckoned that all she could probably see of him were his forehead and his hair, and he was prepared to be ordered to get a haircut. She didn’t say anything at all until they were on the motorway, heading toward Little Whinging.

“Well!” Aunt Petunia finally said. “Perhaps now you can be talked into getting rid of that *ridiculous* scar!”

— *THE END* —