

## Harry Potter and the Junior Year Abroad Who Are You And What Have You Done With Dudley?

### Chapter One

#### *Who Are You And What Have You Done With Dudley?*

Rain pattered across the windows of number four, Privet Drive, and the teenaged boy in the small upstairs bedroom looked out uneasily. He was a slim young man of slightly better than average height, with a shock of unruly black hair and green eyes hidden behind glasses with seriously unfashionable frames. A lock of hair falling across his forehead almost, but not quite, concealed a distinctive lightning-bolt shaped scar on his forehead. He wore a faded T-shirt which had apparently been purchased for someone much larger in frame than he, and a pair of patched jeans far too wide for him, cinched tight with a worn leather belt. His name was Harry Potter, and he was not happy to see the change in the weather. Last year had been one of almost solid drought, and this summer had been little better. There had been just enough rain to green up the yards and gardens a bit, but not enough to fill the streams or replenish the reservoirs, so water restrictions remained in place. Until now, Harry and his cousin, Dudley Dursley, had been able to avoid each other. Harry woke early, to do chores for Aunt Petunia in the morning, and escape for the afternoon, usually about the time Dudley managed to drag his carcass out of bed. Harry had no idea where Dudley was going these days; he'd seen the various members of Dudley's old gang about town, but Dudley was not with them, and his friend Piers Polkiss seemed to have taken over the leadership role. Harry had no idea what (or even whether) Dudley had told them about last year's encounter with the dementor in the alley, but they pointedly ignored Harry, and he stayed away from them in return.

In truth, the Dursleys hadn't been too much of a problem this summer. The warning given to them by Moody at the train station had had a quelling effect for all of about three days, after which the fright wore off and Uncle Vernon, anyway, was back to his usual bluster. During those three days, however, some things changed. Dudley decided he needed his second room back to house a new computer desk, and Harry was moved into the guest room. It wasn't needed during the summer since Aunt Marge had been the only regular guest and she didn't visit when Harry was home any more. This meant that Harry now had a larger, more comfortable bed, an actual closet, and Dudley's old desk on which to do his homework. It also meant that he lost his hidden space under the loose floorboard where he'd kept things, but he was now allowed to keep his trunk in his room to make up for it. He was allowed to do his summer homework, to read his textbooks, and to keep a window open so Hedwig could go out to hunt when she wanted, on the condition that there was "none of that funny stuff" in the house. He still had to put up with the humiliation of the cat flap in the door, since Uncle Vernon made him swap the doors and move the deadbolt between the two rooms, but at least neither the locks nor the flap had been used so far this summer.

Dudley was now on some sort of training diet, which involved moderate portions of lean meats and whole grains, lots of fresh vegetables, and no sugar or white flour. As usual, if Dudley was on a diet, the rest of the family adhered to it as well, which meant, on the whole, that everyone was eating much better than the previous summers. Harry still got the scorched chop, the overripe tomatoes, the wilted lettuce, and the smallest potato, but he was used to that.

Even the housework situation had lightened. Most weekday mornings, he was simply handed a list of chores, and what got done got done and what wasn't done was the start of the next day's list. It was only when Uncle Vernon was home on the weekends that things were unpleasant.

Frankly, Harry didn't mind the work. It kept his mind off other things. It kept his mind off Sirius. Off Dumbledore. Off Voldemort and Bellatrix and a whole laundry list of things he hadn't wanted to think about at the beginning of the summer. Now, a month into the holiday, he'd begun to get some perspective on the events in the Department of Ministries – enough to put the majority of the blame for Sirius' death where it belonged: on Voldemort's skinny shoulders. Harry had started off by taking the lions' share of the blame for himself, since Sirius wouldn't have died if he hadn't fallen for Voldemort's trick and gone haring off to the Ministry on the ill-fated rescue mission. And in the middle of the night, it was still all too easy to think it was all his fault. But he'd started parcelling out some of the responsibility to Snape, some to Dumbledore, a large chunk to Bellatrix Lestranger, some to Sirius himself for doing exactly the same thing in coming to rescue him, and the majority to Voldemort for luring them all to the Ministry in the first place. The share he kept for himself was a bearable pain, and reminded him not to be such an idiot again.

Harry spent many of the afternoons visiting with Mrs. Arabella Figg, who lived on Wisteria Walk, not far away. When he was a child, visiting with Mrs. Figg (and her multiple cats) was pretty close to the bottom of his list of things he'd like to do, but since finding out that the old woman was not only a Squib but a member of the Order of the Phoenix, and had been watching out for him all those years, his feelings had changed and he now stopped by regularly to check in with her. Not only did this fulfil the conditions Professor Moody had set down, that he report in to them periodically or else Privet Drive would be the scene of a major Wizard incursion, but it got him out of the Dursley house, where things had been getting increasingly tense. Mrs. Figg was getting on in years, and Harry found himself doing many little things around the house for her. Somehow doing the basic housekeeping and gardening was not as onerous when he was doing it for someone he liked. Mrs. Figg, for her part, kept her pantry filled with all sorts of treats, both Wizardly and Muggle, to tempt Harry's appetite – she thought he was far too thin for a boy his age. He was not quite as thin as she thought, for hidden under Dudley's old T-shirt was the frame of a young athlete. Despite his ban on playing Quidditch at school last year, Harry had kept up with his training exercises, just in case he might be able to play again, and at the age of almost sixteen, he was beginning to develop his adult musculature. But such growth needed to be fed, and so he was not about to turn down Mrs. Figg's plentiful offers of sandwiches, cakes and biscuits.

But with the rain coming down this afternoon, welcome though it was for the garden, Aunt Petunia wouldn't be letting either Harry or Dudley out of the house, for fear they'd track mud all over her pristine floors when they returned. She had always been house-proud, but apparently had become even more fixated on cleanliness and tidiness than ever before during the last year. The lounge was spotless, the dining room gleamed, and the kitchen would have done a surgery theatre proud. No, this afternoon would be spent helping her, as the mornings were, and then probably this evening too, scrubbing and rescrubbing any surface that dared to have a speck of dust on it. Dudley, he was sure, would wind up sitting around making messes that Harry would have to clean up. At least Uncle Vernon would not be burdening them with his presence. He had been working late every night for the past few weeks, and Harry had thankfully seen even less of him than he had of Dudley.

Harry was on his hands and knees in the downstairs bath scrubbing its already pristine fixtures when he heard Dudley come *kerthump kerthump kerthump* down the stairs. Aunt Petunia was humming to herself in the kitchen, as she often did when she was fixing lunch for her poor starving Duddikins. Harry expected to hear Dudley slam his way into the kitchen and turn the television on, but instead Dudley's heavy steps turned toward the bathroom and his wide shadow fell across Harry, who was extremely displeased to be caught in such a demeaning (and vulnerable) position. "Erm. Harry?" Dudley's voice had a hesitant tone, something Harry wasn't at all used to hearing.

"Dudley." He kept his own tone cool and neutral, while continuing to scrub the pipes under the sink.

"Can I talk to you later, Harry? When you're done, I mean ... I don't want my Mum to get annoyed at you."

Even from his awkward position, Harry managed to turn and gape at Dudley. This was the first time Dudley had ever said anything that showed any concern for Harry or the way Aunt Petunia treated him. Dudley was leaning against the bathroom doorframe, the tension in his face belying his casual pose. There was no trace of his usual viciousness. Harry realized it was the first time he had made eye contact with Dudley, indeed the first time he had really looked at him, all summer. Dudley was truly huge now, but not with the massive rolls of fat that had characterized him as a child. Between his working out for the boxing team, and a late growth spurt, he now stood well over six feet tall and was as solid as a brick wall. He massed easily twice what Harry did. But since last summer, he seemed to have started taking more care of his appearance; he was dressed in a neat style that didn't scream "thug" at the top of its lungs, and his blond curls were shorter and neatly trimmed. Almost with a start, Harry realized that Dudley was waiting for an answer. "Yeah, sure, after you've had lunch and I'm done here. Is that all right?"

Dudley smiled widely, a smile with no deceit or cruelty in it, which looked totally out of place on his face. "Great! Come on upstairs to my second room when you're free." He heaved his bulk off the doorframe and vanished in the general direction of the kitchen; Harry heard him greet his mother with his customary greeting of "What's for lunch?" before the television clicked on to mask any further conversation. Harry shook his head in puzzlement and returned his attention to the pipes.

Harry finished off the downstairs bath and took his time with the upstairs one, deliberately delaying until he heard Dudley coming back up. He had carefully calculated the time span he should wait before joining Dudley. Too soon, and he would seem anxious and Dudley might feel rushed; too late, and Dudley would be angry for being kept waiting. Figuring out Dudley-times was a skill Harry had honed to razor sharpness over the years. Cautiously, he rapped on the closed door to Dudley's second room, the one he used to store all his extra "stuff." Dudley opened it rapidly and practically pulled Harry in, sticking his head out into the hall to check that they hadn't been seen before closing the door again silently. Harry stood warily in the centre of the room. Dudley was acting very strange, and while he'd never actually tried to beat Harry up in the house, there was always a first time for everything. Harry didn't like being trapped in such close confines with his cousin.

"Here, here, sit!" said Dudley, pulling a chair away from the wall. He plopped himself down on the bed, the mattress sagging under his bulk.

Harry sat as directed, not at all sure what was going on, and seriously wishing he carried his wand with him in the house, regardless of the strictures on Underage Use of Magic. Dudley shifted nervously. "Harry, I, um ... I'm not very good at talking about stuff so I don't know how this is going to sound, but ... well, first of all, I want to thank you for saving me last summer when those things, you know ..."

"The dementors?"

Dudley shuddered at the mention. "Yeah, them. Mum told me, later, when you were gone and I started to feel better again, what they were and what you had done. I know they were after you and I know you didn't have to save me and you got in a lot of trouble for what you did ... even if I don't know the details, I just wanted to thank you."

"You're welcome." Harry was still unsure where this unprecedented soul-baring was going, so kept his reply as short and non-committal as possible.

"It took a while ... a long while ... before I started to feel better again. For a while I didn't think I'd ever be happy again. And then when I did start to get better, I realized that I'd never been really happy in the first place. I mean, if you look at it, I've got all this ..." Dudley waved at the stacks of his possessions on the shelves. "But it's all just stuff. It didn't make me happy. And food didn't make me happy. And pushing people around never made me happy. So I've been working on it ... with some people ... and I've finally been learning how to be happy." Harry quirked an eyebrow. *Dudley in therapy, who would have thought it?*

"One of the things that I've learned is that in order to be happy, you have to try to help other people be happy." Dudley leaned forward seriously. "I've really, really been trying to make this work. It's hard. I really have to think about it sometimes ... it's so easy to go back to just banging things up. Mum and Dad don't understand it, they just pretend like nothing ever happened, and go on the old way. I'll have to work on them, I suppose. And then there's you."

"Me?"

"Well, I know I've spent most of my life making you *un* happy. And Mum and Dad ... I can't apologize for them, but I can apologize for myself. I'm sorry."

"You'll pardon me if I say that doesn't exactly make up for the last fifteen years."

"I know it doesn't. I don't expect you to forgive me, or to trust me. I haven't given you a reason to do either. I just want you to know that I'm trying to change, and why." Dudley got up and crossed to one of the shelves. "Anyway, I wanted to give you something. It's little enough, but ... I remember last year you kept trying to listen to the news on the telly, and my Dad kept shouting at you ... I still don't know why you'd want to watch the news, of all things, but ..." Dudley shrugged and pulled down a small television set from one of the shelves. "Here. This is small enough you can hide it in your room so my Dad doesn't find out. He's paid the license fees for it, and he'll keep on paying them as long as he thinks I'm using it." He thrust the television at Harry, who took it automatically. "Oh, and here ..." Dudley fished a brown paper bag out of a desk drawer. "This is a little earphone thingy for it ... so Dad won't hear it when it's on." He tucked the bag on top of the television. "It's early, but ... Happy Birthday, Harry." As if embarrassed by his unwonted display of generosity, he mumbled something about being late, and rushed out of the room, leaving Harry, still holding the television set, gaping in his wake.

Harry was not at all sure what to do about the unusual "gift." Was it really a gift? Perhaps a joke? Or a trap? Would Dudley come storming into his room later in the day, accusing him of theft and ready to give him a good whumping? Perhaps he should just put it back on the shelf ... and that's exactly what he did. He did take a good long look at the contents of the room, which had been rearranged in the past few weeks. The spare bed was made, the new computer desk was actually visible instead of buried under the documentation for a zillion computer games, and there were no half-consumed soft drinks balanced precariously over the computer keyboard. Outdated toys were organized on the shelves that covered one wall, and there seemed to be far fewer of them nowadays than there used to be. Aunt Petunia must have been busy in here, as well as in the rest of the house. Harry left the bag with the earphones on the shelf next to the TV, and hurried out, lest his thought of her conjure up her presence.

From downstairs there came a slamming sound as the front door shut. Dudley had gone, rain or no rain, and Harry didn't see him for the rest of the day.

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The next day's duty was weeding the flowerbeds in both the front and back gardens. The rain had left the soil thoroughly moist, and the little weed sprouts came out easily. Harry actually didn't mind weeding much. Some of the little sprouts were plants he'd learned about in Herbology, and not a few were good basic potion components. Anyplace else, they'd be valued herbs; here they were weeds. Poor little plants. He kind of sympathized with them. He wondered if herbs grown in a Dursley yard would make potions good for anything other than giving one a stomach ache. The downside to weeding was that the knees of his jeans were soaked through from kneeling on the wet lawn, and the sun was beating harshly down on the back of his neck.

The other downside was the likelihood of Dudley catching him on his knees again. He was working on the bed of impatiens (red and white, spaced alternately and pinch-pruned to within an inch of their lives into a neat checkerboard pattern) in the back garden when Dudley came out of the kitchen door. Harry kept his head down as he worked, deliberately not looking up at his cousin, but keeping Dudley's feet in his peripheral vision. He didn't want to be "accidentally" kicked - again. Dudley's ham fists came into view ... one carrying a glass of lemonade and the other a paper plate with a ham sandwich. Dudley put the food down next to Harry, went back into the kitchen, and came out with another glass and plate. He had a huge grin on his face, and Harry thought his eyes glittered a little oddly. He sat down on the grass nearby and tucked in to his own sandwich. "Go on, eat!" he urged Harry.

"Thank you, but I'm not hungry."

"Don't worry, I haven't done anything to it."

"Not like blowing bogies in the sandwich or spitting in the lemonade?"

"We were six! And I only did it the once!"

"That's because I never accepted anything you gave me after that."

Dudley finished his sandwich in silence. Harry kept on weeding. Finally, Dudley got to his feet and went back in the house with his empty glass and plate. Harry kept weeding, and after a while his stomach decided to make sure that he noticed the sandwich. Cautiously, he picked up the plate, and took the sandwich apart. There didn't seem to be anything suspicious in it. Everything looked fresh - no bogies or doubtful substances pretending to be mayonnaise. Suddenly ravenous, he put the sandwich back together and ate it, washing it down with the lemonade. He tore up the paper plate afterwards and tucked it in the bottom of the compost bin, then went in to rinse the glass.

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Weekends were the worst. Uncle Vernon was home on the weekends, instead of going in to the office. He tended to alternate between periods when he behaved relatively normally - "normally" meaning sitting morosely in the lounge, his moustache twitching as he watched endless sports shows on the telly - and periods of extended shouting at Harry, blaming him for everything from the state of the economy to the weather. It was "BOY!" this and "BOY!" that, and even Dudley stayed out of his way at those times.

On Saturday morning, Harry discovered that something had been pushed through the cat-flap in his bedroom door. It was that television set again, along with the headphones, and a note attached. "I really mean it - this is yours." Harry sighed, and hid it in the back of the closet. If he could keep it hidden for the next two days, he could put it back in Dudley's room on Monday. Then his birthday was on Wednesday - surely he could count on getting notes, at least, from his friends - that was something to look forward to - and then there would only be one more long, endless month before heading back to school.

As usual, Harry cooked breakfast - after this many years he was practically a specialist in eggs, bacon, sausage, and toast. Aunt Petunia cleaned up after him, practically jerking the pans out of his hands the instant he'd finished serving the food out onto the plates. She sat down long enough to gulp her eggs, but when Uncle Vernon started in about how Harry had burned the toast ("You lot just don't *understand* about rye bread!"), she

leaped to her feet and started wiping up the counter. Harry was watching her idly while listening to Uncle Vernon with half an ear, when suddenly the salt and pepper shakers, instead of waiting on the countertop to be put into their proper places, slid into their spots and aligned themselves precisely with the S and P facing exactly front. An instant later, Aunt Petunia's dishrag swept across the place where they had been. Harry blinked. He couldn't have just seen that. He looked again. The shakers remained properly motionless, but he could swear the ketchup had just positioned itself so as to show its label at best advantage. *Who knew ketchup was female?* he thought, rather inanely, before catching himself. "BOY! Are you listening to me?" bellowed Uncle Vernon in his ear.

"Actually, Uncle ... no." Uncle Vernon turned a nasty shade of puce as Harry stood up and started scooping dirty dishes off the table. "Here, Aunt Petunia, let me finish that." Gently, he took the rag away from her.

She looked at him almost blankly for a second, then turned briskly to another task. Uncle Vernon hollered about how the lawn wanted mowing. Dudley sat in his chair and grinned that manic grin while lavishly smearing butter over his last piece of toast. Harry set to washing and rinsing the dishes, his body working automatically while his mind turned the mystery over and over. If he'd been at Hogwarts, he would have thought nothing of the condiments putting themselves away. But he wasn't at Hogwarts; he was in Little Whinging, the very epicentre of thundering mundanity. Somehow he found the behaviour of the ketchup bottle more threatening than he had the arrival of the dementors the year before, and he wondered what interest either Voldemort or the Ministry for Magic would have in the pepper shaker. Or was there another answer? He wished he knew.

Harry spent the rest of Saturday (when he wasn't employed on Uncle Vernon's makework jobs, like cleaning out the garage) keeping an eye on Aunt Petunia. It wasn't until the mid-afternoon, when she returned from doing the marketing, that he saw something else strange, in this case the groceries neatening themselves up on the shelves as Petunia packed them away. He was reminded, abruptly, of Tonks' comment when she and the other members of the Order of the Phoenix came to get him last year: "Funny place. It's a bit *too* clean, d'you know what I mean? Bit unnatural." Harry had attributed a lot of the home's hypercleanliness to his own efforts, but he now realized that it was like this *even when he was not here*. Aunt Petunia by herself would not be able to maintain this level of precision, no, and Dudley and Vernon were not exactly the types to help out ... but Aunt Petunia – and magic? Just a little? Harry didn't get to sleep until the wee hours that night, and when he did sleep, his dreams were haunted by little bottles of cleanser following him and scrubbing up his footprints.

Sunday Harry spent with Mrs. Figg. Uncle Vernon had awakened in an even more angry frame of mind than usual, and had progressed from blaming Harry for the late delivery of the Sunday paper to the deplorable way his favourite football team was playing. Mrs. Figg's place, even with its redolent odour of cats, was vastly preferable to the Dursley home, so he escaped as soon as possible after doing the breakfast dishes. He helped her clean the kitty boxes, which helped tremendously with the odour problem, and then mowed her lawn, after which she made a luncheon of overstuffed sandwiches, snack chips, and a variety of little pastries for dessert, all washed down with glasses of cold milk. She fed her cats little plates of the leftover cold cuts after lunch was done. Harry watched her talking to the cats, and watched how they reacted to her.

"Here now, Mr. Tibbles, here's some nice turkey for you, and some ham for Tufty, and ..."

"Meow," said Mr. Tibbles.

"What? Oh, quite right, we can't forget what terrible gas the ham gave Tufty last time, thanks for reminding me ... Here, Tufty, you get the turkey, then, and some mayonnaise on it, you like that."

Tufty mewed as if in assent, nudged her plate delicately under the table, and consumed it at her leisure there.

Snowy, standing next to Mr. Tibbles, meowed impatiently. "Of course, here, Snowy, you have the ham. There, and where's Mr. Paws?"

Mr. Tibbles meowed again. "Taking a nap in the front window, is he? Well, we'll just save this last bit of ham for him, then." Mrs. Figg wrapped the last plate and put it in the refrigerator.

"Could I ask you something Mrs. Figg? About ... about the cats?"

"Of course, dear, ask anything you like."

"Well, last summer, the night the dementors got into the alley ... you said you'd 'stationed' Mr. Tibbles under the car, and when Mr. Fletcher left, he came to get you, and that's why you were there to see the dementors."

"Yes, and it was a very good thing I did so, don't you think?"

"I'm not questioning that. It was a very, very good thing, and I don't think I'll ever be able to thank you enough for that ... and for testifying for me at that awful hearing later."

"Pshaw, that was nothing."

"It was not nothing, and I'll always remember it. It must have taken some nerve for you to go to the Ministry. But what I would like to know is ... is there a difference between your cats and, well, normal cats? Are they wizard cats?"

"My cats are the best that the RSPCA shelter had to offer. And I've been keeping my eye on that little tabby kitten that's been nosing around the rubbish bins in the alley, there's some fine potential there, since Mr. Paws will be retiring soon. He's been with me seventeen years now, and deserves his rest." Her voice was soft and sad, and Mr. Tibbles jumped into her lap to rub his face against her, purring. "Some of the best familiar material in the country is being wasted, if you ask me, wasted in the alleys and the shelters, while the finest pedigree lines aren't putting out half the talented kittens they used to. Not unlike the wizarding families themselves," she said, with a haunted tone, and Harry knew she was talking about her own status as a Squib, the daughter of wizard parents, who had no magic of her own.

"So they are wizard cats?"

"Heavens, no, just familiars. Like your Hedwig. They're capable of understanding instructions, and simple conversation, and they're very, very sensitive to the emotions of their people. Animals understand emotions better than people do, Mr. Potter, but they're not very good at logic. They're probably the better off for it."

Tufty, finished with her treat, jumped up into Harry's lap and shoved her head under his hand, uttering a cry that sounded like an insistent "Now!" He petted her absently, and she settled down to purr a deep, rumbling purr.

"Then how do you understand them? All I ever get from Hedwig is hoots, and I can mostly figure out what she's on about, but you seem to have, well, conversations with your cats."

"That I do, that I do." She cuddled Mr. Tibbles in her arms. "It's the only gift I have, the only touch of magic that was granted to me. I speak to the cats, and they speak to me. It's been such a comfort to me over the years, you can't imagine."

"Do ... do other Squibs ... sometimes have a spot of magic like that? Or is this a subject that bothers you to talk about? Should I just shut up now?"

"No, no. Oh, sometimes it hurts, and I see my cousins doing their little spells and enchantments and I wonder what it would be like ... but I've made a place for myself here, between the Muggle and wizarding worlds. There are those of the great ones who can respect those with lesser gifts and don't hold it against us – Professor Dumbledore is one, such a good man he is, always kind to us. Even to those of us who don't appreciate it, who have let themselves get bitter and envious."

A little light went on in Harry's head. "Filch! The caretaker at Hogwarts. He's a Squib, but the way he talks to Mrs. Norris ..."

Mrs. Figg nodded. "Yes, yes, Argus Filch has the same talents as I do, and for good reason. He's my brother."

Harry's eyes widened. "Your brother?"

"Yes, poor thing. He was never able to come to terms with being a Squib. He thought magic was his right, and that he'd been cheated of it somehow. The little bit that he does have, his contact with cats, just reminds him of what he could have had – *should* have had, as he sees it. But where I learned how to live in the Muggle world, Argus never could adapt – so Professor Dumbledore graciously allows him to live at Hogwarts, even though a less pleasant person I've never seen. He's my brother and I love him, but I don't like him very much."

"I've been wondering – a little – about how magic happens, and how it runs in families. My Dad was from a family where they were all wizards, but my Mum ... well, you know she was the first in her family ever."

"That's true. Not a trace of talent in the other sister."

Harry looked down at Tufty in his lap. "I'm beginning to think that may not be the case. That there may be ... just a little ... magic there." Mrs. Figg's eyebrows shot up. "Aunt Petunia has always been very ... focused, I guess is the best way to say it, on house and home. She's the best housekeeper, the best cook, the best gardener on the block, and it's not just because she's had me as slave labour. Nowadays, I'm only here for a month or two at most each year, and sometimes less than that. But the house is spic and span all the time, and recently I saw ... it sounds weird, but ..." and he found himself spilling out the story about the condiments and the shopping. Mrs. Figg dropped her pose as a dotty old woman and leaned forward, listening intently.

"Hmm. Yes, it is possible. I suppose she could be tested, and possibly enrolled on the list as a Squib. But given how violently she has turned against magic all her life, it might possibly damage her to know that she is what she has always hated. And I hate to think about what her husband might do if he found out. And Dudley. Have you noticed anything odd about Dudley?"

"Well, Dudley's always been best at hitting people."

"And he won a boxing trophy in his very first year of competition? Possibly that's his outlet. If so, however, he'll have to be watched for the rest of his life. Magic, even a little magic, expressing itself as violence, could be dangerous. Very dangerous indeed." She sighed. "He could wind up as a world championship boxer. Or in jail. Or both. Like that fellow in America."

"Dudley's been changing since last year. Or he says he's changing, anyway. He's been trying to be nice to me, and to be honest, it's kind of frightening."

"Any change of that sort has to be for the better, don't you think? But I can see that it might be disturbing for you. Dudley's anger at you has been one of the constants of your life. You knew where you stood with him. Now things are changing, and you're not quite sure how to react, am I right?"

"That's it, that's it exactly!" exclaimed Harry, relieved that Mrs. Figg had been able to put into words what he could not.

"Change, fortunately or unfortunately, is part of life. Nothing stays the same, whether for good or for ill. And really, we wouldn't want it to. You're at a time in your life when things change very rapidly, perhaps more rapidly than you think you can bear. If you try to resist the change, it will, indeed, tear you apart. Or leave you stranded in a dark place, unable to move or to go back. But if you accept the change and embrace it, you'll find you have different options, and new ways to go." She petted Mr. Tibbles gently. "I know this because I've been through it, as has any youngster standing on the edge of adulthood. But every teenager thinks they're the first person ever to face that choice. I don't pretend that my challenges were anything like yours, but they were frightening enough. Perhaps I'll tell you about what life was like during the War sometime. But I think you have enough to think about for now."

Harry put Tufty back on the floor. "I think I should use your fireplace to check in with Professor Moody, and then go on home. You're right, I do have a lot to think about."



## Harry Potter and the Junior Year Abroad How To Be Happy

### Chapter Two

#### How To Be Happy

Monday brought new questions, though not relating to the problem of Aunt Petunia and magic. Harry waited until Uncle Vernon had gone to work, and Aunt Petunia had gone to the garden centre to pick up some marigolds to stick into a corner of the garden that she regarded as needing some perking up, and then quickly tucked Dudley's TV back in the other room. Hopefully, that would be the end of it.

But, of course, it wasn't. As it got later in the morning and Aunt Petunia still wasn't back from the garden centre, which boded ill for the number of plants Harry would probably find himself installing this afternoon, Harry found himself with the luxury of some spare time to read yesterday's paper, Uncle Vernon having taken today's off with him. He found it interesting comparing what was in the *Daily Prophet* with what was in the *Daily Mail*, to which the Dursleys subscribed. There was virtually no overlap; as far as the *Prophet* was concerned, the Muggle world had no impact on the wizarding world, and vice versa. Muggles and wizards might as well live on two different planets. Also, while the *Mail* had extensive sections on what was happening abroad, the *Prophet* had at most a cursory article about some amusing thing happening overseas. It was almost as if the *Prophet*, and by extension the Ministry of Magic, for which it was the main mouthpiece, did not care to admit that anything outside of the British wizarding world existed. Harry had studied enough Muggle history during his years in the local school system, and remembered enough wizarding history from the interminable classes with the late Professor Binns, to understand why this was so, but he could not help but think it an unfortunate state of affairs. Sooner or later, one was bound to cross over the border into the realm of the other, and then there would be Hell to pay.

Fortunately, neither paper had any stories of the sort he would have expected if the Death Eaters were out and about and wreaking havoc in any numbers. Neither had he seen any evidence of anything untoward in his neighbourhood – after last year, he knew the signs to look for. He was quite well aware that he was being guarded constantly, but it was relatively easy to dismiss that, as the Order of the Phoenix was being remarkably discreet. Aside from Mrs. Figg, once he'd seen Kingsley Shacklebolt passing in the street, and he thought he'd seen Mad-Eye Moody disguised as a homeless person terrorizing pigeons in the park, but that was it. Tonks, of course, could be anybody he passed on the street, and he would never know. Not for the first time, he envied her her metamorphmagus abilities. He thought they were letting him see them just enough to be reassuring, while allowing him to pretend everything was normal the rest of the time, and for that he was grateful. He didn't want to imagine what life would have been like if he had been unable to leave the house at all for the entire summer. *I'd probably have gone mad and been written about as "one of those loner types, quiet boy, never gave any trouble until he suddenly blew up the school ..."* It made him wonder, vaguely, about those other people who *did* blow up the school, and then he became aware of Dudley standing behind him and all thoughts of anything else suddenly flew out of his head.

"You put the telly back again," said Dudley.

Harry considered his answer for a moment, then decided to risk a candid reply. "I had to," replied Harry. "I appreciate what you did, but I don't think you really understand how much trouble it could lead to if I accepted a gift like that. If your father found out, he might throw me out entirely."

Dudley parked himself in one of the other living room chairs. "Would that be so bad? You go off in August every year ... and you don't come back for Christmas or Easter break so you must go somewhere else then."

"No, I stay at school then."

Dudley blinked. "Really? It would never occur to me to do that. Isn't it all depressing then? Kind of *Christmas Carol* -ish?"

"No, there's always someone at the school. The staff live there, you see, and there's a big feast ... and sometimes some of the other students stay, too."

Dudley was still digesting the idea of someone wanting to stay at school when they didn't have to. "Well, okay. So you've got someplace to be. I've never understood why you keep coming back here. I certainly wouldn't."

"I don't particularly want to, but I have to. I'm not sure I understand it all, but there was something about how my mother died – she sacrificed herself for me – and that protected me then. And there's something about living here – with Aunt Petunia and you – that keeps me protected."

"Didn't much last year, against those dementoid things."

"No, that's because those were sent by someone else. I'm protected against Voldemort – the one who murdered my parents – but there are others ... it's all kind of hard to explain without sounding like a total egotistical git ... but the end result of it is, I have to stay here at least part of the year in order to be protected all year. And if Uncle Vernon throws me out, that's the end of that. I could always go somewhere else, but I wouldn't be protected any more, and I'd be bringing the danger onto my friends and into my school. I don't want to do that." Harry shrugged. "It'll be for this

summer, and next summer, and then I'll be done with school and an adult and I won't have to come back here. I figure I can handle anything you ... your family throw at me until then. After I leave here next summer, you'll be out of my life and I'll be out of yours, and I think we'll all be much happier for it."

"Maybe, but that doesn't leave me much time to try to make up for what I've done. And that's important to me, Harry. I told you that, and I hope you believe me."

"I suppose I do. Otherwise, I wouldn't have told you half the things I have. The 'old' Dudley wouldn't have sat still for it, much less understood it."

"Maybe I can give you something else. I told you I've been working on this happiness thing, right?"

"Yeah. In therapy, I guess?"

Dudley snorted. "Not hardly. Mum and Dad wouldn't admit that anything was wrong with their 'Ickle Duddykins'. No, I found a group on my own ... sort of an informal discussion group, where it doesn't matter that I'm underage. There's lectures and things, and sometimes we get together in small groups and just ... talk. And we help each other feel better. Anyway, there's an introductory lecture being given tonight down at our old grade school. I thought – maybe – if you came with me tonight – well, if you got something out of it, it might make up a little bit for everything, and maybe you'd be able to trust the 'new Dudley' a little more."

Harry thought about it a little, and finally agreed. He was more than a little curious about the changes in Dudley, and the way Dudley had been totally nonspecific

about what went on at these meetings made him wonder if his cousin had maybe fallen into a 'New Age' group or a meditation cult or some such thing ... This could be a very interesting evening. Dudley fished a battered paperback book out of his back pocket. "Here, this is a book by Dr. O'Dwyer, who leads the group. I hope you can read a little bit of it before tonight. I've read it myself, like, four times already."

Harry looked at the scuffed cover. *HowTo Be Happy*, by Dr. Peter O'Dwyer. A smiling moustachio'd face, presumably O'Dwyer's own, filled the lower half of the cover. "I'll take a look at it if I get a chance, but ... oh, no. Your Mum's home, and I swear she just bought out the garden centre ..."

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By evening, Harry's back was sore, his neck was sunburned, and the knees of his jeans were irreparably stained green. He'd skipped dinner, feeling an urgent need to take a shower instead. He was now cool and clean, his hair wet enough that it was lying down and behaving itself for a change. Once it dried, it would be back to looking like a haystack in a high wind, of course, but at the moment he was presentable. Dudley was still eating when Harry slipped out the front door. While he was waiting at the park for Dudley, Harry thumbed through the book. It seemed to be fairly simple, standard stuff. Think good thoughts, be nice to other people, some stuff about affirmations and creative visualization that Uncle Vernon would consider "flaky" but that was actually fairly simple and effective ... hmm, a chapter on herbal dietary supplements ... Harry was just about to look into that when Dudley, finally finished with dessert, joined him and tossed him an apple. "Here, I grabbed this for you on the way out. There will be biscuits and punch at the lecture, too, so you can at least snack on something. Ready?"

"As I'll ever be."

The school was a short walk from home. Harry found himself noting all the hiding spaces that he had so carefully memorized during those years in an effort to get home without being ambushed by Dudley and his gang. Most of them were too small to accommodate him now, of course, and it had been several years since he had to use any of them, but he still felt a pang when he realized that the tree he used to scramble up in back of the dry cleaners had been cut down. Dudley was silent on their walk, and Harry had no clue as to what was going through his mind. As they approached the school, however, Dudley licked his lips, almost with anticipation, and broke into a trot down the last block. Even though he'd lost a lot of weight, he was still ungainly while running, and Harry suppressed a snicker.

There were a number of cars in the parking lot and bicycles chained to the rack in front of the school, and the lights of the lobby and auditorium were on. Dudley exchanged casual greetings with a few adults and other youths as they approached the building, and introduced Harry to a few of them. They all greeted him warmly, and shook hands and welcomed Harry, assuring him that he'd get a lot out of tonight's lecture. Harry was slightly disturbed by the identical smiles they all sported.

In the lobby of the school, tables were set up with plates of biscuits, old-fashioned seedcakes, and bowls of punch. Dudley headed towards them with an alacrity that denied that he'd just had a huge dinner, Harry in tow. People were clustered about the tables, but cheerfully made space for them. Dudley pressed biscuits and cakes and a glass of punch into Harry's hands, then claimed large portions for himself. He began wolfing down his portion even before they had moved away from the table. Harry nibbled at a seedcake. It was good, with a strong liquorice flavour, probably a lot of anise in it, he thought, but with a slightly bitter undertone. The bitter taste was even more marked in the punch, but it seemed to disappear after a sip or two. It reminded Harry of something ... something vaguely medicinal, like the potions Madame Pomfrey used. He rolled the punch across his tongue, seeming to savour it. There it was, that tingle that you got with a well-made potion. It was dilute, otherwise even the sweet fruit punch flavour wouldn't be able to cover it, but it was there. On the other hand, there were the cookies and cakes ... probably if you ate enough of them (and Dudley was definitely eating enough of them) you'd wind up getting a full dose of whatever potion it was ... While Dudley wasn't looking, Harry quickly tucked the remainder of his seedcake into a napkin and pocketed it. It would be crumbs later on, but that wouldn't matter for his purposes. The punch he poured surreptitiously into the base of one of the potted plants in the lobby.

"Good, aren't they?" said Dudley, licking crumbs from his lips. "I don't know who bakes these; probably some little old lady somewhere with a secret family recipe. I'd buy 'em by the dozen if I knew where to get them. I think the lecture's going to start soon; finish your punch so we can find good seats." Dudley snagged a last biscuit from the table on his way into the auditorium, and quite a few other people did the same.



The auditorium was nowhere near full, but still was more crowded than Harry expected. He and Dudley settled down into seats in the fifth row as the lights came down. What followed was, to Harry, both puzzling and excruciatingly boring, but it seemed to hold Dudley fascinated. Several people came to the dais and spoke about how unhappy they'd been before discovering Dr. O'Dwyer's work and how he'd helped them. Finally the great man himself took the stage, and Dudley eagerly leaned forward, as did a number of the audience. Harry anticipated learning something new, but there was nothing new in the lecture. It was basically a rehash of what was in the book, maybe presented with a greater sophistication of language.

Harry sat back in his chair and allowed his eyes to unfocus slightly as he watched the man in the white suit stride back and forth across the stage, gesturing ... his nose itched slightly and his head ached ... and then he suddenly snapped back to full attention. The burn he felt in his nose told him some kind of incense was being burned nearby, probably in the air-conditioning system, and whatever it was was getting gradually more powerful. While he'd been watching, he suddenly realized that O'Dwyer's repetitive hand gestures were similar to those of a wizard. Harry watched his hands intently for a moment, imagining a wand held in those well-manicured fingers. Swish ... flick ... loop ... loop ... stick the hands in the pockets for a moment, pull out a handkerchief, mop brow ... swish ... flick ... loop ... loop ... there was the pattern, but Harry was quite sure it was not a spell he knew. The incense was getting stronger. He couldn't remember a word O'Dwyer had spoken in the last few minutes.

Fortunately, Harry was seated at the end of the aisle; he made a break up the aisle with that crouching walk that people use when they don't want to distract other people in the theatre, but he was sure that by this point nobody would have noticed if he'd pranced up the aisle in a tutu. He slipped out of the auditorium into the lobby and breathed great gasps of clean air, untainted by the incense, and then went to the public washroom to wash his face with cold water and moisten his handkerchief. Returning to the auditorium, he sat all the way at the back and held the handkerchief over his nose and mouth, which cut down tremendously on the amount of incense smoke he was getting. Even so, he found it very hard to follow what O'Dwyer was saying now, especially as he seemed to be whispering occasional words that were not quite English ... if Harry wanted to hear more, he would have to move up, but that would mean inhaling more of the incense. He stayed in the back.

An unguessable time later, the incense faded and O'Dwyer wrapped up his speech, announcing that he would be answering questions and signing books out in the lobby. Harry spotted Dudley coming up the aisle and slid in next to him; it seemed almost that Dudley didn't even know he hadn't been there the whole time.

"Wasn't that great, Harry? What a speaker he is! I get a little more out of it every time I hear him, you know?" Dudley was uplifted, almost exalted, and there was lightness in his step. Harry made non-committal noises as they made their way into the crowded lobby. O'Dwyer was holding court next to the potted tree that had been the recipient of Harry's punch; someone had removed the punch and snack trays and replaced them with stacks of books, and an attractive young lady was selling copies of O'Dwyer's books and bottles of some kind of capsules.

"What are those, Dudley?" asked Harry, as Dudley got in the queue that was forming in front of the table.

"Those are Dr. O'Dwyer's own brand of nutritional supplements, you know? Herbs and vitamins and stuff like that. Nothing harmful or anything, you can see what's in it right on the label. I've been taking them for a while, and they're really good for those times I start to feel all depressed. There's one for nighttime, that helps me sleep, too. Tell you what, I've got to buy myself some, I'm out, but do you want some? I know you don't have any pocket money so I'll spring for them. I know you get nightmares sometimes, I can hear you saying things in your sleep, so maybe the night formula will help. And how about a copy of the book, too? I'd like mine back 'cause I made notes on some of the pages, but you should have a copy too, and you can even get it signed."

"Wow, thanks." Harry tried to appear appropriately grateful and impressed as Dudley got to the front of the line and picked up a copy of the *Howto be Happy* book and two bottles each of Dr. O'Dwyer's *Cheer-Up* and *Sleep-Well* herbal formulations, patents pending. Harry peered at the label on the *Sleep-Well* formula while Dudley steered him over to yet another queue, this one for book signings. *Hops, mugwort, valerian, skullcap, passionflower ... It's no surprise you'd sleep with this in your system*, he thought. *I wonder what else is in it that isn't on the label?* Shortly they were at the head of the second queue. Dudley handed the dapperly clad O'Dwyer the new book he'd gotten for Harry. "Dr. O'Dwyer, this is my cousin Harry, I really want him to meet you, could you sign this book for him? You've done me so much good, I know you'll be able to help him, too ..." and as Dudley babbled happily away, O'Dwyer's eyes lifted from the book he was signing to Harry's face, and recognition flashed as his eyes fell on the lightning-bolt scar on Harry's forehead. Harry kept his face calm and smiling, pretending that he had seen nothing whatsoever amiss this evening. O'Dwyer's answering smile was just as false.

"Of course, of course ... Dudley, isn't it? I've been hearing good things about you from your group leader." Dudley preened, pleased to have been noticed and remembered. "And this is your cousin? I'll be happy to sign a book for him ..." and he did so with a flourish reminiscent of Gilderoy Lockhart at his best. "If you boys want to stay for a few moments, I'd like to have a few words with you after I've dealt with this queue. You will do that for me, won't you, Dudley?" A flashing glance went to Dudley.

"We'll be glad to stay, sir," agreed Dudley eagerly. "You don't mind, do you, Harry?"

"Er, no, not at all. I'd like to talk with you, Dr. O'Dwyer. Your lecture was fascinating, absolutely fascinating." Harry's grin was fixed, he felt like his face was made of plastic, but O'Dwyer seemed to accept it and relaxed, smiling and nodding to the next person in the queue. Dudley and Harry waited nearby, Dudley still chattering away about how great it was that O'Dwyer had noticed them, while Harry smiled and agreed with him.

It took a while for O'Dwyer to get rid of his last admirer, and Dudley's conversation had run down, so Harry was pretending to be engrossed in the opening chapters of the book.

"Now then, boys, perhaps we can take a few moments before things close up. I'm really happy to meet you, young Harry, it's always good to meet family of my group members, and Dudley's told me a little about what's going on in the family, oh, don't worry, nothing personal, he's been very discreet," and there was a flash of anger on his face for just a second, almost as if to say, *And if he'd told me enough to identify you beforehand, things would be different right this second, yes they would be* ... The lobby was almost empty now. "But I think we may be able to help you, I do believe we can ... *Imperio!*" he spat. Harry felt the familiar floating sensation that he had first experienced when the fake Moody had cast the Imperius Curse on him two years ago. With the residual effect of the potion and incense still lingering, it would have been very easy indeed to slide

into the welcoming mindlessness. He allowed his stance to become as relaxed as Dudley's, apparently eagerly waiting the next words from O'Dwyer.

"Well, that wasn't as hard as I thought," muttered O'Dwyer to himself. "Boy-Who-Lived or not, catch 'em by surprise with a good Imperius and they're putty in my hands. Harry! Do you understand me?"

"Perfectly, sir," replied Harry.

"Good. You seem to be a reasonable boy, I don't see any reason for you to attend any group sessions, do you?"

"No, sir."

"So if Dudley suggests you come to group or any more of my lectures, you won't, will you?"

"Of course not, sir."

"And you won't remember any of this conversation, will you?"

"Remember what, sir?"

"Good boy. As a matter of fact, it would probably be best if you didn't remember much at all about this evening. You went to the lecture with Dudley and it was perfectly boring, wasn't it? Not worth remembering at all." Harry murmured agreement. "Now, you'll go home with your cousin and go straight to bed, and when you wake up, you won't remember any of this ever happened. *Finite Incantatem!*" Harry and Dudley both blinked as if waking from a deep trance, which was true in Dudley's case. Harry thought it entirely possible that it was Dudley who wouldn't remember a thing about this evening. O'Dwyer clapped them both on the shoulder and sent them off home, since it was late and he didn't want their family to be worried.

Walking home in the dark, Harry repeated the conversation over and over in his head, making sure he wouldn't forget a word of it. Dudley kept silent, still in his bemused state, and he wished Harry a good night and then went straight to bed. Harry was tempted by the thought of bed, but he stayed up much later, writing down everything he could remember of the night's experiences. It was quite a long scroll before he was done. He tiptoed down to the kitchen to get a plastic sandwich bag and a larger freezer bag with no one the wiser, and bagged up the crumbled seedcake and the two bottles of herbal capsules. Then he wrote a short note to Arthur Weasley, asking him to meet Harry at Mrs. Figg's house the next morning, and sent the note off with Hedwig. Then he finally collapsed into a well-earned sleep.

## Harry Potter and the Junior Year Abroad Fan Mail From Some Flounder

Chapter Three

### *Fan Mail From Some Flounder*

Harry's alarm clock was set to go off at the godawful hour of 5:30 a.m. so he could receive his copy of the *Daily Prophet* and actually have time to read a little of it before the Dursley family started to stir. On the morning after visiting Dudley's meeting, it was particularly difficult to get the energy to turn the alarm off. Harry smothered it with his pillow and went back to sleep until he woke to find an annoyed owl pecking at his hair. He paid the bird, took the newspaper, and decided he might as well stay awake. He was exhausted, and couldn't figure out why, at first. He'd actually come home early after that boring meeting of Dudley's and gone straight to bed ... hadn't he? Then he saw a scroll on his desk, neatly rolled up, and a book and a plastic freezer bag next to it. Where had that come from? He picked up the scroll and was mildly surprised to see his own handwriting on it. He unrolled the scroll and started to read.

By the time he'd got to the end of it, he remembered everything, and was almost shaking with fury. That ... that ... O'Dwyer *person* had tried to put him under an Imperius Curse and make him forget what he had seen! And it had almost worked! Between the potion and the incense and the Curse itself, he had almost forgotten it. It was fortunate that he'd written it down in order to preserve the details. He'd found himself remembering more and more of it as he read the scroll, and now he had all the memories back again, from the taste of the biscuits to the smug look on O'Dwyer's face. He managed to calm himself while getting dressed, and managed to fix breakfast normally, though his stomach was so twisted in knots he wasn't able to eat any of it. Fortunately, Dudley was still abed – Harry didn't think he could stand seeing that big soppy grin right now. Not knowing what caused it.

Uncle Vernon reeled off a long string of chores Harry was to do today, to which Harry responded with grunts and the occasional "uh huh" to indicate that he was listening, which he really wasn't. As soon as his uncle was out of the house on his way to work, Harry grabbed one of Aunt Petunia's shopping bags out of the closet and took the stairs two at a time. Stuffing the scroll, book and freezer bag in the shopping bag, he was back downstairs in a bare minute and headed out the door, leaving Petunia spluttering in his wake.

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Harry had no idea what proper working hours were in the Misuse of Muggle Artefacts Office, or even whether this matter fell under their jurisdiction, but Arthur Weasley was the only reliable connection he had with the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. He was also pretty sure Mr. Weasley would come if he asked, and sure enough, when he got to Mrs. Figg's house, he found the red-headed man finishing a cup of coffee in Mrs. Figg's parlour. "Harry, my boy! Got your owl last night, figured I'd come right on over before work today. Your handwriting was all over the place and Hedwig was that upset, I was tempted to come over right then. But there didn't seem to be an immediate need, and Molly thought your Aunt and Uncle might not appreciate my visiting at midnight. I dare say she was right. So, what's in the bag?"

Harry explained, as briefly as possible, and thrust the scroll at Mr. Weasley. While the older man read through the scroll, Mrs. Figg provided Harry with a breakfast he could actually eat. Mr. Weasley was frowning mightily by the time he had finished. He opened the freezer bag and the smaller sandwich bag, and sniffed at the crumbled seedcake remains, then carefully inspected the bottles of herbal capsules, though he didn't open them. "You realize this is very serious, Harry. This O'Dwyer, if that's his real name, which I doubt, is in serious violation of the Muggle Protection Act, using potions, fumes, and mind-control spells on unprotected and unsuspecting Muggles. God knows what he's been convincing them to do ... Not to mention using an Unforgivable Curse on you, regardless of whether it worked. The problem is, of course, that you, our only witness at this point, are underage so can't testify against him when we catch him ... so we'll have to be careful. I believe that the Aurors can use this information, however, to stage a raid operation, and hope that it turns up some independent evidence." The slightly fuddled air that Mr. Weasley so often had about him was gone now, replaced by a crisp and efficient law enforcement agent.

"What about the people he's been dosing with his potions and pills and things?" asked Harry. "Like Dudley?"

"That's another reason to be very cautious with this. Until I have these capsules analysed at the Ministry, we don't know what they're being dosed with or what the results would be if their supply were to be cut off. We may have to work with Scotland Yard on this one, treat it as an ordinary Muggle drug case, get them into treatment ... Well, I have my work cut out for me – technically this isn't quite my department, you understand, but if I bring it in, they can't very well keep me off the case, can they?" Mr. Weasley swept the bags and the scroll into his briefcase and snapped it shut briskly. "Thank you for drawing my attention to this, Harry. We'll try to keep your cousin out of it as much as possible, don't worry. Now, if you'll excuse me ..." he pulled a handful of Floo Powder from the can on Mrs. Figg's mantel and vanished in a burst of green flame.

Now that the evidence was safely in Mr. Weasley's hands, Harry felt strangely let down. Tufty jumped up on the table and scarfed the rest of his egg yolk, and he just sat back and let her. "Well, that was interesting," said Mrs. Figg. "I'm sure the Ministry folk will get to the bottom of it."

"You trust the Ministry?"

"Not the higher-ups, of course ... I haven't thought well of certain figures in high places for years, not that my opinions matter to anyone ... but

the people that actually do the work, like young Mr. Weasley there and the Aurors, they're solid."

"I've been thinking of becoming an Auror when I'm done with school, you know. I think I'm suited for it."

"That's a worthy career goal. It's dangerous work, you know, but exciting. Were I a little younger ... and a witch worthy of the name, of course ... I'd be considering it myself. I was actually thinking of becoming a policewoman when I was younger, but then I met Mr. Figg, and well, there you are." The old woman smiled dreamily, as she often did when speaking of the late Mr. Figg. "Of course, back then it was mostly making coffee for the male officers and typing reports. These days it's all different, especially for young ladies like our Tonks. But if you want to be an Auror, you've got to have the O.W.L.s for it. Have you got your test results yet?"

"No, I haven't. I thought they were supposed to come in July some time, but we're almost out of July. We should be getting our school letters any day now."

"Well, now, I have yesterday's mail for you, perhaps it's in there."

Mrs. Figg had kindly been allowing Harry's friends to send their owls to her house instead of risking Uncle Vernon's ire. Other mail was being delivered to the Weasleys and passed along in a bundle to Mrs. Figg; a fresh package was in the parlour where Mr. Weasley had been sitting. As a result of the mail drops, Harry was in far better communication with Hermione, the Weasleys, and others of his schoolmates than ever before. The letters so far had been innocuous, though ... none of the frustrating half-hints that had characterized last summer's letters. Well, Ron was frustrated – since Sirius' death, the Order of the Phoenix had had to relocate their headquarters from Grimmauld Place to somewhere else, and this time the adults had decided not to let the younger set know where it was. So Ron, Fred, George, Ginny, and Hermione were all as out of the loop as Harry himself was. Ron was also suffering random flashes of memory, presumably from the brain attack he'd suffered at the Ministry. Sometimes the flashes were innocuous, simple data injections (for example, he now knew twenty-seven different recipes for making quiche), but in the middle of July he'd started reciting the minutes of the September 30, 1957 meeting of the Ministry Committee on the Abuse of Muggle Artefacts that had led to the ban on flying carpets in Britain. Mr. Weasley had found the recitation quite interesting at first (especially since he had found a logical flaw in an argument that he thought he could use to get the ruling reversed), but after the sixth full recital, and with no sign that Ron was going to stop any time soon, he and Molly had hustled Ron to St. Mungo's for an emergency Pensieve treatment to remove the memory loop.

Hermione was on a holiday trip with her parents, still recovering from her injuries in the Battle of the Ministry, so her letters were not frequent, but were accompanied by little souvenirs from various places in Italy, and photographs of herself posing in front of various historical places. Neville had written as well. His grandmother had allowed him to have a small greenhouse where was propagating some cuttings as a summer project for Professor Sprout. The broken nose that he had suffered during the Battle was only a memory now. And Luna had sent several notes from Sweden, where she and her father had failed to find any trace of the Crumple-Horned Snorkack, but rather fancied they'd found evidence of a race of dwarves living in tunnels under the glaciers.

Perhaps as a result of the interview last spring in *The Quibbler*, followed by the Battle of the Ministry and subsequent revelations, Harry found that he had also developed a small but fervent (and mostly female) fan following. Most of them were known to him, of course, being his own classmates, but he found he was getting mail from unknown witches in Ireland, Scotland, and France as well. He was able to answer the requests for autographs well enough, though he hadn't figured out how to get pictures of himself to send yet. He thought perhaps he'd ask Colin Creevey to take some, though he hated to encourage the younger boy in his photographic mania. Many of the letters contained pictures of the senders, which Harry had found himself unwilling to dispose of, so in his trunk he now had hidden a collection of pictures of young witches, most smiling or waving shyly, but also including two rather disturbing ones of older witches. One of them was doing something unusual with a broomstick. Those he had put back in the original envelopes and stuffed way, way at the bottom of his trunk. They gave him strange feelings that he wasn't quite ready to examine yet.

Today's batch of mail included a note from Hermione and a photograph that showed her sitting on the bow of a picturesque fishing boat on a picturesque beach somewhere in southern Italy, wearing a bikini which was anything but picturesque. She had a nice tan and smiled brightly, and Harry was glad the picture was a Muggle one that didn't move, because if she inhaled deeply, he was sure she'd fall out of that bathing suit. He wondered if she was sending similar pictures to Ron, and found that he sort of hoped not. Her note said that she would be in transit on Wednesday, returning from the continent, but that she hoped he had a very happy birthday. There were two more fan letters and an advertisement clipping for Fred and George's joke shop promoting their Portable Swamp product, with a handwritten note across it promising him a free one if he wanted it. He spent a few minutes happily considering the notion of putting a swamp in the middle of the Dursley living room, but regretfully gave it up as a Bad Idea. There were no O.W.L. results and no school letter. Somewhat glumly, he took his letters and returned to Privet Drive, where he had to listen to Aunt Petunia go on about "rudeness" for the rest of the day.

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Wednesday was his birthday, and he woke early to the arrival of multiple owls bearing notes and gifts. His own Hedwig had returned, having spent yesterday at the Weasleys. She carried with her a bundle which proved to contain a batch of Molly Weasley's best biscuits, and a note from her saying she hoped he'd be able to join them at the Burrow soon. A note from Ginny informed him that she had helped make the biscuits and she hoped he liked them, and she would be glad to see him when he got there. Hedwig also carried a freshly killed vole in her beak, which she placed carefully on Harry's nightstand; apparently that was her present to him. Ron's owl, Pigwidgeon, brought a three-pack of Chocolate Frogs from Ron (that being about all the tiny bird could carry) along with a note wishing him a happy birthday and informing him about several notable historical happenings that had happened on July 31 in years past. Apparently either Ron had done some real research, or his brain flashbacks had burped up some semi-relevant information for a change. But besides Hedwig and Pig, there were a number of strange birds perched on his windowsill, all bearing packages. There was a raven from Cho Chang, bearing a gift of a leather bookmark that only he could remove from a book, thereby insuring that he'd never lose his place, and a note that said she looked forward to seeing him in school. The note was lightly scented with a floral perfume. Harry frowned at it; was she going to try to start up a relationship with him again after all the trouble they'd had last year?

Three medium-size owls brought notes from some of the girls who'd been writing to him; one included a present of a tie pin in the shape of a Golden Snitch, and one a small bottle of cologne, but the third had laboured in with a larger package. Under the outer wrapping was an inner

wrapping of silky material, and inside that, a book with a pink leather cover. On the cover was the title, "Messages to my Love". The inner pages were blank, except for a note on the first page from the sender, Genevieve du Lac, a student from Beauxbatons who had previously sent him a few unexceptional notes. He had tried to be cordial and polite in his responses, and apparently she thought his pleasantries meant more than they did. The note read, *"My dearest Harry, when you write in this book it will appear in the matching book I have. We can correspond privately, much faster than by owls. I look forward very much to getting to know you better."* Tucked into the book was a picture of her wearing a silky black nightdress that revealed more than it covered. As he looked at it, the picture gave him a smile and a sexy little wiggle. His surprise turned to shock when he realized that the inner package wrapping was the very nightdress she was wearing in the picture! He wrote a quick and very non-committal thank you note and sent it by the owl, not in the book. The book and nightie went into the bottom of the trunk, with all his other dubious "treasures." He didn't want to risk anyone else finding them. He had fastened the picture of Hermione inside the lid of the trunk, where he could see it every time he opened it. Maybe when they got together, he could ask her for help in dealing with these girls and women. He had to admit he didn't understand what was going on at all, and she had been able to translate what was happening with Cho so well last year, perhaps she could straighten things out this year. But on the other hand ... he looked at her picture again. He was beginning to think his feelings for her might be just a little more than friendship, and discussing other women with her now ... maybe not.

The final owl was a very large barn owl with a very large package. It didn't wait for a response or thank-you note, just deposited its burden on Harry's bed, accepted an owl treat, and left. Puzzled, Harry did the wrappings, revealing a large book entitled *Travels in the Wizarding World*. Harry opened it and looked at the table of contents. It was a combination history book and travelogue about all the places in the world that were part of the international wizarding community. A bit of parchment stuck out between the pages about halfway through the book. Harry opened it to that section ("Wizarding in America: Old Ways in the New World") and pulled out the parchment.

Scrawled on it in untidy handwriting was the note: *"Give to Harry on bday?"* Harry felt his eyes burn with unshed tears as he recognized the handwriting of Sirius Black. Returning to the Muggle world and the Dursley household had given Harry a respite from the grief of losing his godfather; here he could pretend that Sirius' death hadn't really happened. But seeing his handwriting brought it all back to him afresh. He blinked back the tears, to read a second note written beneath the first on the parchment, in a more elegant but just as familiar hand.

*My dear Harry,*

*This book was left for you among Sirius' belongings. He obtained it last spring and thought you would find it useful. I thought it best to forward it to you for your birthday, as he wished. I hope it does not grieve you, but brings you some happiness to know he was thinking of you.*

*I shall be seeing you soon, and hope to have a gift of my own to give you at that time. Happy Birthday.*

*Yours sincerely,*

**Albus Dumbledore**

Harry closed the book slowly and hugged it to his chest. He didn't know why Sirius would have chosen this book for him. Perhaps he was making plans for both of them to go away together once Harry was done with school and he himself was able to leave the confines of Grimmauld Place. Perhaps it was a hint that Harry should not forget that there was a big world out there, bigger than Hogwarts or even Britain, and that he should be ready to explore it. Whatever his purpose, it was his last gift, and Harry would treasure it always. He carefully stored it in his trunk with his other books. His trunk was beginning to get very crowded and heavy, but he had no other safe and private place in which to keep his belongings, and after last year's hasty departure, he felt it best to keep it always packed. He would start reading the book when his eyes didn't burn quite so much.

## Harry Potter and the Junior Year Abroad The Royal Surrey County Hospital

### Chapter Four

#### The Royal Surrey County Hospital

Harry came awake in the middle of the night, quite suddenly. He wasn't sure if it was still Wednesday night, or Thursday morning. He lay still in his bed, listening intently for any sound that might have disturbed him. Hedwig was out hunting, and the only sound he could hear was the sighing of the night breeze past his window. Then he heard a groan, a sound of pain and anguish, issuing from somewhere on the upstairs floor of the Dursley house. Harry got up and padded over to his door, opening it silently. He stuck his head out into the hall. There was a moment of silence, and then the moan came again. It was coming from Dudley's room. He padded across the landing, and paused before Dudley's door. Dared he open it and try to wake his cousin from whatever nightmare beset him? Or should he try to awaken Aunt Petunia so she could help Dudley? That would, unfortunately, result in waking Uncle Vernon as well, and he decided against it. Before he could decide whether to open Dudley's door, however, he heard a loud yell from inside the room, followed by Dudley's feet hitting the floor. Harry backed away from the door just before it was yanked open, crashing against the bedroom wall. In the darkness, Harry could just barely see Dudley's hulking form filling the door, but Dudley could apparently see Harry well enough by the moonlight coming in from the stairwell window. "YOU!" Dudley roared. "It was YOU!! YOU BETRAYED HIM!!!" He charged across the landing at Harry.

Harry leapt backwards into his own room, slamming the door and locking it. The door creaked under the impact of Dudley hitting it. A second blow came, and the centre panel split and the upper hinge started to tear away from the frame. Harry tried to drag his wardrobe against the door to brace it, but was only successful in moving it a few inches before Dudley's third blow smashed the door in entirely.

By now, Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia were awake, and Harry could hear Vernon yelling from the neighbouring bedroom, "What in the name of God is going on out there?"

Dudley, now incoherent with rage, was forcing himself through the shattered door. Harry was trapped in the small bedroom with not enough space to use his Quidditch-trained agility to get out of Dudley's way entirely. He darted over to the desk and grabbed his wand in one hand and Hedwig's cage in the other. Turning to face Dudley, he blocked his cousin's ham-like fist with the cage, which bent and wrapped around it, trapping it. Dudley roared and paused to rip the bent metal from his fist, giving Harry the chance to jump up on his bed and get past him, making for the door. The doorframe, however, was now filled with Uncle Vernon. Vernon's heavy hand slammed against Harry's bare chest, propelling him backwards, and Harry's wand went spinning off into the dark wreckage of his room. "Where do you think you're going, BOY?!" he shouted. "I want an explanation for this!" Harry ducked as Dudley grabbed the lamp from his desk and threw it at him; it crashed against the wardrobe and covered the floor with broken glass. Caught between Dudley and Vernon, and wandless, there was only one way for Harry to get away. Nimbly he jumped onto his trunk, spun and leaped straight for the square of moonlight over the dresser that marked his open bedroom window.

Harry made it through the opening, but struck his knee painfully against the frame as he slithered through. He had trained in Quidditch practice to be able to fall from a height and roll out, but those lessons assumed that one had momentum from a speeding broom, and enough height to position oneself. Here, Harry plunged almost straight down into the garden, head first. He managed to protect his head with his arms as he landed, but the shock made his shoulder scream with pain. Probably the only thing that saved him from a broken neck was the extreme softness of the garden soil. He rolled out and lay flat on his back with his head in the marigolds and his body on the lawn for a second, trying to see if all his body parts were connected and remembering how to breathe. From inside the house, he heard continued shouting from both Vernon and Dudley, crashing noises, and a scream from Aunt Petunia. Lights were going on in houses all up and down the street as people were awakened by the noise. He hauled himself painfully to his feet and staggered across the lawn to the sidewalk. He had to get to Mrs. Figg's house. It was the only place of safety that he knew.

The front door of number four burst open before he was more than past the neighbour's house, and Dudley charged off after him in a berserker rage. Harry fled, but his banged-up knee betrayed him, and he fell trying to make the turn from Privet Drive onto Wisteria Walk. Dudley was almost upon him. He scrambled to his feet again, but that only put him where he could be hit, and Dudley's meaty fist struck him along the side of the face, knocking him down again. Then once Harry was down, Dudley kicked him, knocking his breath out of him again. The only thing that saved Harry then was that Dudley was not wearing shoes. Barefoot, he kicked Harry again and tried to stomp on him. Harry curled up to try to protect his face and stomach as best he could and tried to roll away. His hands came across something with a remembered feel, slim and hard ... a wand? The feel of it gave him courage, and he shouted, "*STUPEFY!*" even as Dudley aimed another blow at him. The red beam of the spell revealed the demonic hatred twisting Dudley's face in the split second before he collapsed on top of Harry, knocking Harry's head back onto the pavement. Harry tried feebly to push him off, but hadn't the strength. He thought he heard sirens in the far distance, and saw flashing lights, before he went down into welcoming darkness.

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He woke briefly to motion, the sirens louder now. Someone cried, "He's awake!" and flashed lights in his eyes. "Pupils equally responsive." He struggled to sit up, and found he was strapped to a rigid surface and unable to move. "Please try to be still," said the unknown

voice. "We've got you immobilized until we get you to hospital."

"Dudley?" gasped Harry.

"The big brute that did this to you? Don't you worry, the police have him safely in custody."

The ambulance hit a bump, and the unknown voice cursed as Harry spiralled down into the dark again.

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Harry had never been in a hospital other than St. Mungo's or the Hogwarts infirmary before, and was unprepared for the bustle and rush of a Muggle casualty ward. By the time he regained consciousness, he had been transferred to a sort of rolling bed and was surrounded by people. Some of them were touching him in various places and then calling out numbers to someone else who wrote them down on a clipboard, and a very nice-looking young lady was attempting to remove his pyjama bottoms. He grabbed at the waistband before she managed to get them over his hips. "Wups! He's awake," she said. "Come along now, let me get them off so we can check that leg out. This is no time to worry about your modesty." Expertly, she got him to release his grip on the pants and covered him with a sheet as she removed the tattered, blood-stained pyjamas. Then the person with the clipboard started asking questions, such as his name, age, and address. While he was distracted by the questions, there was a stab of pain in one hand, and Harry realized there was now a needle in his hand connected to a thin tube which was in turn connected to a bottle of fluid hanging over his bed. The nursing sisters cleaned the blood off the side of his face and swabbed something brown over the scrapes and abrasions he had received from the sidewalk. A young man wearing a white coat came in and looked at him briefly.

"Send him up to X-Ray. Head and neck, chest, left shoulder and right knee." The man, a doctor, Harry presumed, scribbled something on the clipboard, then requested that Harry answer a series of simple questions, track movements of the doctor's fingers with his eyes, and wiggle his fingers and toes. "He seems alert enough now, but call Neuro and alert them so they'll be ready if he crumps out. If he doesn't show neurological symptoms in, say, an hour, transfer him to Ortho instead."

"My glasses? Did they break?" Harry asked the room in general. "Can't see."

"Your glasses are OK, but you can't wear them until we check your face and head out. We'll keep them safe, just relax."

Another man and an older sister steered his bed out of the examination room and into the hall. A police officer had stopped the doctor and was trying to find out when he could talk to "the victim." The doctor was insisting that they had to finish their diagnostics, and they'd let the officer know. As the orderlies steered Harry's bed down the hall, they passed an open cubicle; another team was working frantically on Dudley, who was handcuffed to the bed. Two more police officers were standing by the bed. "Wait, wait," Harry raised his hand to try to get the orderlies to stop. "My cousin. What's wrong with my cousin?"

"The big brute is your cousin? They can't wake him up. Think he hit his head when he went down. Don't you be concerned with that, though. That's the doctor's problem."

Harry was rather puzzled by the place they called X-Ray, where they made him lie down on a cold hard table and pointed a large device that looked rather like a giant version of Colin Creevey's camera at him. They draped Harry's groin with a large heavy apron. The attendant would do something under the table, scurry out, there would be a brief buzzing noise, and then he'd come back in again to point the camera somewhere else. After several rounds of this, the orderlies transferred Harry back onto his rolling bed and pushed it out back into the hall. Here he waited for a time until the attendant came out with a large envelope which he put in the bed with Harry, and the orderlies pushed his bed back to the emergency room. It was, by now, even more crowded than it had been they left. They seemed to be having a special on assaults tonight; the place was filled with bloodied bodies, raving assailants, and harried police.

Dudley's gurney was now out in the hall, with Dudley still unconscious and the police guard looking bored. By now Harry had a clearer memory of what had happened, and knew his cousin wouldn't come out of his Stupefaction until somebody administered the countercharm, but he was damned if it was going to be him.

"What, is it a full moon tonight?" one of Harry's orderlies asked the other, just before they pushed him back into his examination room and left to whisk another patient off to somewhere.

The harried doctor came back in and put a series of very interesting pictures up on light panels on the wall. As far as Harry could tell, they showed the bones inside various parts of his body, though he couldn't see clearly because he still didn't have his glasses on. The doctor pulled a small device out of his pocket and started talking into it. "Patient Potter comma Harry. Subject is a white male, approximately sixteen years of age, victim of assault. Injuries include trauma to face and head with contusion, possible soft tissue damage to the neck, dislocated left shoulder, two cracked ribs, abdominal bruising, blow to the exterior right knee with possible damage to the ligament. Patient is conscious and coherent. No indication of closed-skull injuries; evaluation required for spinal involvement. No immediate indication of internal injuries, but monitor urine and stool for occult blood. Transfer to Ortho indicated for treatment of shoulder and knee." The doctor pulled the pictures down, put them back in their envelope, wrote something more on the clipboard, and left again. A few minutes later, a nursing sister came into the room and briskly announced that Doctor had ordered pain medication for Harry, by which time he was most grateful for it indeed. Muggle medicine didn't seem to be as efficient as Wizard medicine, but it did well enough for pain relief. Harry was just starting to drift off into a drug-induced fog when the police officers finally made it into the cubicle and started asking questions.

"Son, I know you've had a bad night, but we need to ask you some questions about what happened. Can you talk to us for a few minutes?"

"Don't know what they gave me, but I'll try. Keep wanting to go to sleep."

"We'll make it fast, then, and finish in the morning."

Harry heard the second officer, the one who was taking notes, mutter to himself, "Why do they always medicate them *before* we get to take the report?"

"What's your name, son?"

"Harry Potter."

"Middle name?"

"James."

"Address?"

"Number four, Privet Drive, Little Whinging."

"You live there with your parents?"

"Parents're dead. Live with my aunt and uncle. And cousin."

"Their names?"

"Vernon and Petunia Dursley. Cousin's Dudley."

"What happened tonight, Harry?"

Slowly, with many pauses, Harry talked through the events of the night, starting with waking up to hear Dudley's nightmare. He didn't tell them about casting the *Stupefy* spell, though ... he made his description of the fight as vague as possible.

"Do you know why your cousin fell, Harry?"

"Dunno. Maybe kicked his foot out fr'm under'm. Don' 'member."

"And do you know why he attacked you? You said he said, 'You betrayed him.' Do you have any idea who he was talking about?"

Harry had a very good idea, but it wouldn't do to tell the police that. Let them dig up the O'Dwyer connection themselves. "No 'dea." He let his eyes close, tired of keeping them open for so long. "Lemme sleep."

"All right, son. Sleep now." The officers left, and Harry began to drift off.

His respite from pain was short-lived. A squadron of nursing sisters and orderlies arrived, and a heavy-set sister briskly roused him from the grey place where he had been floating happily. "Now, Mr. Potter, I'm afraid we have to do something about that shoulder. It's badly dislocated, and we have to put it back where it belongs. There's only one way to do this, and I'm not going to lie to you, it's going to hurt, even with the pain killers we've given you. But after it's done, we'll bandage you up and get you up to a room so you can sleep. Do you understand me?"

Harry nodded. Hurt a little more, then sleep. He could deal with that. He doubted anything these Muggles could do would come near what he'd experienced only six weeks ago when Voldemort possessed him at the Ministry. Or a Cruciatus Curse. Two of the nurses grabbed him across the chest, and the two orderlies seized his injured arm. The third nurse held his legs. "Wait a sec ... what ...?" The orderlies pulled hard on the arm, and it felt to Harry like they were trying to pull it off. The nurses grimly held him still on the gurney as he arched his back and tried to fling them off.

Somewhat fuddled by the drugs, Harry lashed out with power, but with no control. Bolts of rainbow energy coursed around his body, then leaped to all the light fixtures in the room. The fluorescent bulbs in the ceiling, the portable examination lights, and the wall mounted X-Ray panels exploded, sending glass flying everywhere. The nurse holding his legs screamed and ducked away, but the older nurse flung herself across him, shielding his face from the glass. A rainbow bolt struck one of the orderlies full in the chest and he fell to the ground, yanking Harry's arm even more painfully, and then there was a pop as his arm bone slid back into the shoulder joint. The orderly let go of his arm, the pain lessened almost immediately, and Harry lapsed gratefully into unconsciousness, unaware of the chaos around him.



## Harry Potter and the Junior Year Abroad Telling The Truth

### Chapter Five Telling the Truth

The combination of bright sunshine in his eyes and a full bladder brought Harry out of a deep sleep. He tried to reach for his glasses on the nightstand to his left, but his left arm was sore and immobilized. Something was clinging to his right hand, and his pyjama bottoms seemed to have disappeared during the night. He opened his eyes – or rather eye, because one eye was swollen and wouldn't open more than a slit – and saw a totally alien white room. Curtains had been drawn around his bed, which had raised railings. There was one window, from which he could see the tops of trees outside. He was obviously in hospital somewhere, not the familiar Hogwarts infirmary, but a Muggle hospital. He took inventory. He was sore, he was confused, he couldn't see straight and his glasses were nowhere to be seen, his left arm was bandaged to his torso, his right knee was also bandaged to immobility, there was a clear hose of some kind connecting his right hand to a bag of liquid hanging from a pole alongside the bed, he was naked and he had to go to the bathroom. But nobody was trying to kill him at the moment. So far, so good. He was trying to work out how to make a toga out of the bed sheet so he could find the bathroom when a middle-aged nurse came in. She tsked at him, ignored his blushes, and provided the necessary items so he didn't have to get up, including a hospital robe which opened down the back. With his left arm strapped down, he could only put the right one through a sleeve, with a little help to get the intravenous bag through as well, but it was better than nothing. She took his temperature and his pulse briskly and asked if he was hungry. He said he was, and she said she'd have breakfast sent in directly. In the meantime, he was *not* to get out of that bed for any reason, was that clear? She showed him how the call button worked in case he needed anything.

After about fifteen minutes, a brunette aide in a blue uniform brought him something that was probably supposed to be breakfast, but if he'd ever served anything that badly prepared, Aunt Petunia would have clocked him one. The aide put the tray on a bed table and cranked his bed up. Then she winked at him. "Watcher, Harry!"

"Tonks!" he cried in gladness. "Am I glad to see you!"

"Keep it down." She laid a finger across her lips. "Don't need the Muggles overhearing." She looked at him critically. "My, we are a mess, aren't we? Amazing what one bloody great Muggle can do."

"Dudley! What happened to him? I Stupefied him, they couldn't wake him up, somebody will have to do the countercharm ..."

"Already taken care of. Moody got up to the Neuro floor an hour or so ago, dropped an *Ennervate* on him. The great oaf came awake still raving, they had to put him out again with drugs, but at least next time he wakes up, he shouldn't be violent."

"I think he'll always be violent. It's his gift, you see."

Tonks quirked an eyebrow. "I'd return that particular gift to the store, y'know?"

"Well, so would I ... so when are we leaving? You are here to get me out, aren't you?" he asked, his heart sinking as she shook her head.

"Sorry, luv, but you've got the Muggle bureaucracy interested in you now, and it'll be harder to get you out of here than the Dark Lord's dungeon. We're working on it, but for now you're stuck, so just relax and heal up. I think I heard the charge nurse say something about notifying the police that you were up, but with all the craziness that went on in this town last night, it may be a while before they get here."

"What sort of craziness? Why would the police want to talk to me?"

"Well for starters, try a whole rash of assaults and attempted suicides that kept the emergency squads busy all night. Then top that off with ... what did they call it? Oh yes, an 'electrical fault in the casualty ward wiring causing an overloaded circuit to short out the bulbs in half the examination rooms.' They still don't have an explanation for how all the waiting rooms became filled with frogs. I think those last two were you."

"I don't remember doing that. Wouldn't I remember something like that?"

"It happened when they were trying to put your arm back together. Strange things happen when you're under stress. You know."

"Things like blowing up aunts. I know. But in that case, I'm surprised we're not buried under owls from the Ministry demanding the surrender of my wand."

"Too public a place. Doing that would violate the Secrecy statutes worse than anything you've ever done. Don't worry, we're on that, too. Push comes to shove, we'll just give him the wand you used on Dursley."

"Give it to him?!" Harry almost squeaked.

"Harry, all you had in your hand was a twig from somebody's privet hedge. He can break that all he wants." Harry's mouth dropped open in

shock. "Now, you just try to get some of this breakfast bilge down, and we'll see about getting you some real food for lunch. Then we'll try working the bureaucracy and see about getting you out of here. Just don't go causing any more frog invasions, hm?"

Harry's next visitors were the police, this time plainclothes instead of uniformed officers. By this time he'd found his glasses in the drawer of the table next to his bed, so he could see them clearly. They went over the statement he'd given the previous night, and then asked questions in greater detail, taking him through every step of the fight. Harry was very careful to keep everything in Muggle terms, and maintained his ignorance of the cause of Dudley's rage. Finally one of the officers brought it up. "Did you ever hear your cousin refer to someone named O'Dwyer?"

"Yeah, as a matter of fact he took me to a lecture by the guy a couple of days ago. Pretty boring."

That started them on a whole new line of questioning. They took him through a detailed description of the O'Dwyer lecture, as edited for Muggles. He did mention the strange tastes to the punch and biscuits, and the incense, but didn't let on he knew what they were. The two investigators looked at each other significantly when he mentioned the herbal capsules. "Would the bottles have looked something like this?" they asked, showing him a photograph of a bottle of the Cheer-Up capsules.

"That's one of them. He had something else, too, for sleeping. Dudley bought some of both."

"We know, we've searched the Dursley home. Including your room, since it was the scene of the attack." Harry blinked. "Does that bother you?"

"Not particularly. I don't have anything to hide." And fortunately he'd put away all his schoolbooks and the essays he'd written over the summer when he locked up his birthday presents. The only thing that might be in the room that looked odd would be his trunk, which was locked, and... his wand. That was somewhere in the room, too. Maybe they hadn't found it, or recognized it for what it was. But it would be a serious pain getting his wand out of the evidence room at the police station if they'd taken it.

"We couldn't open that trunk by the foot of the bed."

"That's my school trunk – my books and stuff. The lock is tricky. Sometimes it sticks."

"When you're released from hospital, perhaps you wouldn't mind showing us what's in it? Just so we can make the report complete, you know. We don't want to go poking into your private things."

*The hell you don't*, thought Harry. *That's your job. And if I did have anything illegal in there, you'd want to know about it. I don't know how I'm going to explain the magic textbooks. I'll just have to cross that bridge when I come to it.* "Sure. Do you know when I'm going to be released?"

"That's up to the doctors, I'm afraid. Probably a while." The inspector shot him a glance over the top of his notebook. "I'd think you wouldn't want to go back there, given what happened and all."

"I don't, particularly. It's just that ... I've nowhere else to go."

"No other relatives?"

"Not that I know of. Possibly a sixteenth cousin somewhere in Outer Mongolia, but my Aunt Petunia and Dudley are the only relatives I have that I know of."

"Mm. You don't live there all year, though." It was not a question.

"No, most of the year I'm at school."

"And where do you go to school?"

The lie, so ingrained in him, popped out. "St. Brutus' Secure Centre for Incurably Criminal Boys," he said in a flat, uninflected voice.

"You know, I don't think that's quite right," said the Inspector, jovially. "We asked some of your neighbours in Little Whinging, and they all said that's where your Aunt and Uncle sent you. Some of them were quite concerned about a boy with criminal tendencies roaming the neighbourhood. So we checked. Not only ..." he said, flipping back to a previous page of notes, "not only do you not go to St. Brutus' Centre, there isn't even a St. Brutus' Centre for you not to have gone to. Not to mention the fact that we, the police, have never heard of you before. Plus there's that crest you painted on your trunk. School crest?"

Harry nodded, afraid to say anything else.

"I don't recognize it. What school?"

"Hogwarts. It's in Scotland."

"Hog ... could you spell that for me?" Harry did. "Can't say I've ever heard of it, but there's lots of small schools. We'll check, just to confirm, of course." Harry wished him luck.

"Do you have cats?"

"No." The abrupt change of subject took Harry by surprise.

"Why is there a cat flap in your bedroom door then?" The Inspector was no longer smiling jovially. Harry gave him a long, considering look, and decided. *To hell with Dumbledore. To hell with blood protection.* "They feed me through it sometimes. After they lock me in." The Inspector had obviously expected something like that, but he still recoiled.

"And how often is that, Harry?"

"Any time they have to go somewhere and don't want me left home alone where I might touch some of their precious things or steal food out of the fridge. Any time they're angry at me. Any time they feel like it, really. I'm sure you noticed the lock on the outside of the door." He kept his voice carefully neutral.

"Yes, we had noticed."

"It's better than when I was little, though. Then I didn't have a bedroom at all. They made me sleep in the cupboard under the stairs until I got too big for it."

"The cupboard under the *stairs*?"

"Where else do you put things you don't want around and don't want to be reminded of?" There was more note-taking.

"Your neighbours say you do a lot of work around the house when you're home from school."

"I have chores."

"Including ..." he consulted the notebook again. "Mowing the lawn, taking care of the garden, washing the sidewalks, the driveway, and the car. Painting the garden shed ... twice so far this summer?"

"Aunt Petunia couldn't decide which shade of white she wanted it."

"And indoor chores?"

Harry closed his eyes and recited. "Cook breakfast, clean the dishes, clean the kitchen, clean upstairs and downstairs bathrooms, vacuum the downstairs, wash the windows, do the laundry and fold it but not put it away because that would mean I'd have to go in their bedrooms. Clean up from lunch and dinner." He opened his eyes again. "That's for starters. Somewhere in there I also keep up with my schoolwork – summer assignments, you know. And sometimes I go over to help Mrs. Figg with her housework, too."

"Do they make you go help Mrs. Figg?"

"No. She's a nice old lady. I was terrified of her when I was a kid, of course, and they made me stay with her whenever they took Dudley somewhere, but it's different now. She sometimes needs a little help around the house, to get things done, you know. And I'm good at it, so ..." he shrugged. "And she gives me lunch."

"You know we'll check with Mrs. Figg."

"You do that. She lives on Wisteria Walk. Her cats' names are Mr. Tibbles, Tufty, Snowy, and Mr. Paws. Send somebody who's not allergic."

"When they lock you in, what do they feed you?"

"Last time, it was tinned soup for three days. Cold."

"And when you're not locked up?"

"Well, since I cook breakfast, I eat that. Usually I work through lunch. Unless I'm at Mrs. Figg's. Dinner is what's left after they eat."

Harry fought to keep his voice low and even. Bad though his life was, somehow it sounded even worse in his answers to this man's questions. His head ached, and his eyes stung with unshed tears.

"Do they make you stay at home all the time?"

"No. No, they don't. I go out in the evenings sometimes. Just to walk around. I sit in the play park. I just have to be in by the time Dudley's in. Whenever he decides that is."

"And we're back to Dudley. This wasn't the first time he's hit you, I gather?"

Harry laughed humourlessly. "Ha! No, I've been his favourite punching bag since I can remember. He and his gang used to think it great fun to chase me up trees when I was little. It has let up some in the last few years, though. Ever since he got the idea I might hit back."

"Have you ever hit back?"

"No. Well, not except this last time. I just got good at running away. But I made him *think* I might hit back."

"How about your aunt and uncle? Do they ever hit you?"

"I used to get hit with the frying pan or the poker when I was little. Not for the last couple years. Not since I got big enough to take things

away from Aunt Petunia. I get slapped sometimes, though. If I'm too slow, or I talk back, or say something they don't like."

"And do they yell?"

"That, they do. For all they're concerned with what the neighbours may think, they certainly yell loud enough for people to hear their business all the way in London. Uncle Vernon turns the most amazing shade of puce. It's not a good colour for him."

"What do they yell about?"

"Oh, let's see, what a complete loser I am, what a waste of space I am, how they wish they'd never taken me in after my parents died, how my mother was a whore and my father was a bum and I'm no better than I should be with parentage like that ... 'freak' is one of the nicer things they've called me."

"Why a freak?"

"How should I know? They don't like my hair, I guess."

"The things they said about your parents ..."

"Aren't true."

"Who were they?"

"Lily Potter, formerly Evans, and James Potter. If he had a middle name, I don't know it."

"What did they do?"

"I think ... mind you, I don't know a lot, but I think my mum was a housewife, and my dad had some money from his family. I don't know what he did for a career. I don't even know for sure where they lived. They met in school, married just after they left school, and had me a few years later. Then they were killed in a car accident when I was about a year old, and I went to live at the Dursleys'."

"If your father had money, what happened to it?"

"Well, some of it was apparently in a trust with the school, because somebody's been paying for my education, and it sure isn't my Aunt and Uncle. I don't know about the rest of it. I figured I'd have to wait until I was grown up and had a job and could hire somebody to find out if there was more. I only just started realizing about it a year or so ago, you understand. Before that, money was kind of mythical to me. Something other people had."

He could see the story coming together for the police. Well-off couple killed in car crash, relatives set up as trustees for infant heir, they treat the child as a slave while siphoning off the trust fund. It was as good a story as any, he supposed, and would keep them busy for a while investigating it until he was safe back at school. Who knew, it might actually be true, if his dad had any accounts in Muggle financial institutions. He wished them luck trying to get Gringott's to cough up the records on his parents' accounts there.

"Look, can you come back and ask me questions some other time? I'm getting pretty tired and my head is killing me."

"Okay, Harry. We're going to clear it with the doctors to come up with a police photographer to take some pictures of those bruises before they fade. Maybe this afternoon, maybe tomorrow. Do you have a problem with that?"

"No."

"And we're going to talk to Child Protective Services about getting a foster family to take you in for a while so you won't have to go back to the Dursleys. It's clear enough to us that it's a bad environment for you, and CPS will agree with us, I'm sure. Even with both your cousin and your uncle in hospital, you shouldn't go back there."

"Wait a minute! My uncle? Why's he in?"

"Nobody told you?" Harry shook his head. "It seems that in his hurry to get down the stairs and go after you, your cousin took grave exception to the fact that his father was in his way. Broke his jaw."

Harry gaped at them, then he laughed, with a slightly hysterical edge to it. "Oh, that's rich! He's going to hate that! Yelling is practically his favourite sport! Now how's he going to do it with his jaw wired shut? He'll probably explode within a week!"

"Yes, well, he's going to do any exploding as far away from you as possible. You're safe now, Harry. You'll never have to go back there again." Patting Harry on the good shoulder in an avuncular way that was meant to reassure him, the inspectors took their leave. Harry lay back on the bed and closed his eyes, to get some relief from his headache. Child Protective Services was going to set him up with a foster family? How the hell was he going to get out of that? *Tonks, if you know any magic to untangle me from the coils of Muggle government, you'd better do it fast!*

## Harry Potter and the Junior Year Abroad Enter Agatha Stone

Chapter Six

### *Enter Agatha Stone*

Lunch was a vast improvement over breakfast. Tonks had managed to smuggle in a full meal from the Leaky Cauldron, complete with a bottle of butterbeer, and sat with Harry while he ate. He told her about the potential Child Protective Services problem. And the situation with his school trunk. "That, at least, is not a problem," she reassured him. "We got into the house this morning, after the police left. Found your wand – it was under the bed. Arthur Weasley's got it for safekeeping. And I put a little Wizzywig Charm on your trunk. If and when you open it for the police, they'll see exactly what they would expect to see in a sixteen year-old boy's trunk. Schoolbooks, dirty socks, sticker for your favourite football team, girly magazine hidden all the way at the bottom, you know. Very useful charm, that – we use it all the time. You might want to get Arthur to teach it to you."

"I'm kind of surprised I haven't seen Mr. Weasley yet. But I suppose he's at work now."

"No, I've been busy Wizzywiggling myself," came Mr. Weasley's voice from the doorway. "How are you, Harry?"

"Very, very sore, sir, I ... wow." Harry gaped at Mr. Weasley, transformed from vague-looking wizard in shabby robes to the very picture of the mid-level bureaucrat in precisely tailored pinstripe suit, shoes polished to a gleam, hair and moustache trimmed with military precision, and bulging briefcase. He even had the bowler hat. The only touch wrong was the lurid purple of his tie and pocket handkerchief. It clashed badly with his hair.

"What do you think? Arthur Weasley, Assistant Undersecretary to the Minister for Education, at your service. I have cards that say so, so it must be true."

"That's really impressive, sir. Though that tie is a bit over the top."

"Really?" Mr. Weasley looked down at his chest. "Ron gave it to me for my Muggle Disguise Kit when he was eight. I was glad to finally get a chance to use it."

"Well, that's perfect then, sir. Over the top ties are acceptable when they're gifts from children."

"I'm going to go over things fast, Harry. I suspect it won't be long before the Child Protective Services people get here – they can be remarkably efficient when they choose to be. Arthur Weasley, of the Misuse of Muggle Artefacts Office, isn't going to get anywhere with them, but" and here his voice changed to a more pompous, self-important tone obviously modelled after Percy, "Arthur Weasley of the Ministry for Education probably will." He changed his voice back to normal. "You've been doing a good job of putting things in Muggle terms for them, so we'll just keep that up and tell as much of the truth as possible. I'm going to try to get them to assign us as your foster family. If that doesn't work, we'll have to try to 'kidnap' you or have you 'run away' from where they do assign you, but that would really cause difficulties for you later if and when you try to interact with the Muggle world, so we'll try to avoid it."

"You'll be my foster family, sir? I'll get to come live with you?"

"Yes, Harry."

"But ... but won't that be dangerous? I mean, wherever I stay, Voldemort ..."

"I've discussed that with my family. Everybody but Percy, anyway. What do you think took me so long to get here? We're all fairly high up on the list of You-Know-Who's enemies anyway, so we're really not taking on much additional risk. And you know we love you."

Harry broke. All the pain and frustration came to the surface, and he couldn't hold back the tears any more. Tonks whisked the tray full of dirty dishes out of the way and Mr. Weasley moved closer to the distraught boy to hold him as he cried. Harry held tightly to the older man with his one good arm, and Mr. Weasley, in turn, cradled him in his arms despite the mess Harry was making of his suit.

"Well, now, isn't this an affecting scene?" came a woman's voice from the doorway. Harry jumped, embarrassed at being caught in such a vulnerable position, and so did Mr. Weasley. They both looked towards the door, and Harry, at least, jumped again. The woman who filled the doorway reminded him so much of Dolores Umbridge that he almost screamed. She was short and wide, with the same broad face, wide mouth, and slightly bulging eyes that Umbridge had. This woman, however, was very, very black. Her hair was drawn back tightly into a bun on the back of her head, and instead of the incongruously feminine style of dress Umbridge had affected, she was dressed in a business suit of such sharpness that it put Mr. Weasley's current garb to shame. Her face also held none of the slackness that Umbridge's had had; rather, it was filled with strength and vitality. Her voice was rich and deep, like chocolate, easily her best feature. "You are Mr. Potter, I assume?" she said to Harry.

"Yes ma'am," Harry replied.

"And you are?" She advanced into the room and leveled a glare at Mr. Weasley.

"Arthur Weasley, Ministry of Education," said Mr. Weasley. He had recovered faster from the surprise than Harry had, and arose from where he was sitting on the bed. He reached into his inside jacket pocket and produced a gold card case. "My card."

Now that the wide woman was out of the doorway, Tonks took the luncheon tray and fled.

"Agatha Stone, Department of Child Protective Services. I'm the worker assigned to Mr. Potter's case. I assume from the touching scene I just witnessed that you are a friend of his?"

"Harry is a classmate of my son Ron. He's visited with us on occasion during school holidays."

"I'd say it's a little deeper than that," she said, looking meaningfully at his shoulder.

Only then did he seem to notice the mess Harry had made of his jacket front. He pulled the purple handkerchief from his breast pocket and mopped ineffectively at it. "Well, we've come to care about the boy. And when I heard on the news about what had happened, I had to come and see how he was doing." This was the first Harry knew that the story had made the Muggle news. The Minister was going to be furious!

"I'd have to say he's doing better than I expected to find, Mr. Weasley. Possibly thanks to you. However, if you would wait outside while I talk with my client privately, I'd appreciate it."

Mr. Weasley nodded gravely and picked up his briefcase. Before he left, he clasped Harry on his good shoulder and winked at him out of Ms. Stone's sight.

Harry pulled up his sheets a little higher. He felt very apprehensive at being left alone with the woman who reminded him so of his former tormentor. Especially in his current extremely vulnerable, unclad state. Ms. Stone hitched a chair up next to his bed and opened her case, withdrawing a yellow file folder with his name on it. "Now then, Mr. Potter, I want you to understand that I am your advocate. My interest in this case is what is best for you. The police are dealing with the matter of the individual who attacked you. My job is to make sure you are properly taken care of. Are you clear on that?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"I've been given a copy of the police notes on the assault, and on the interview you gave earlier today. I understand that you have been in the custody of your aunt and uncle from a very early age?"

"Since I was about a year old, I'm told."

"I don't suppose you'd know if there were any hearings held when they acquired custody?"

"No."

"Have there been visits from supervising social workers over the years? Any contact with Family Court that you can remember?"

"No."

Ms. Stone frowned ferociously, and Harry twisted the covers between his hands nervously. She noticed his reaction. "Don't worry, Harry – may I call you Harry? You can call me Agatha if you want. I'm not angry at you. But your case seems to have fallen completely between the cracks. Ordinarily, where an infant is orphaned and raised by relatives, there's some supervision by the Court to make sure everything goes well and the infant's needs are provided for. Unfortunately, sometimes relatives will just take in a child without filing the necessary paperwork. In many cases it all works out in the end, but in other cases – such as yours – it just leads to a mess, through no fault of the child's. It's my Department's business to try to make sure such matters are resolved to the ultimate benefit of the child."

"Now, in this case, we have an infant child – yourself – being taken in by maternal relatives – the Dursleys – and being raised in what appear to be severely abusive conditions. Had we known of the matter, CPS would have removed you from that environment years ago. As it is, we have the authority to assume custody of you immediately and place you with a suitable foster home where you can be taken care of appropriately until you are of age. Given your current age – you have just turned sixteen, I believe – your wishes will be taken into account as much as possible. I understand you are going to a private school for most of the year – some sort of legacy scholarship – and we have no wish to disturb that arrangement. So we're really only talking about the rest of this summer, next summer, and June and July of the following year until your eighteenth birthday. Plus Christmas and Easter holidays. I believe we can work something out that will be satisfactory. It may take us a few days to find a family for you, though. If you're ready to be released from hospital before we've located someone, you can be placed in an orphans' home temporarily. Yes, Harry?"

"Well, ma'am, if you don't mind, Mr. Weasley ... he had invited me to stay with his family for the rest of the summer anyway – his son Ron is my best mate at school and I've stayed with them for holidays before – maybe I could stay there instead of the orphans' home?"

Agatha Stone's wide lips twitched. "I will speak to Mr. Weasley and see what can be arranged. I will admit, it's all much easier when other people do the work. We will, of course, have to inspect the Weasley home and interview the family to make sure the placement is appropriate. I'm sure you understand that we are not going to risk having you fall between the cracks again." What Harry understood was that there was going to be lots of Wizzywiggling going on. Ms. Stone questioned him about his relationship with the Weasleys and eventually seemed satisfied. "Very well, Harry, I'll go and see if Mr. Weasley is still here. If not, I'll contact him at his office. I'm also going to speak with your doctors before I leave. I understand you'll be kept at least one more night for observation in any event, but it will be good to have an idea of how much longer you'll need to stay here. I understand your injuries, while painful, are not life threatening, and while you may require some physical therapy for a time, you should make a full

recovery." She consulted her notes again. "I'll also need to have your belongings removed from your aunt and uncle's house. The police reports mentioned a school trunk, and some clothing in the wardrobe and a dresser. And a birdcage, unfortunately seriously damaged. Do you have a bird?"

"Mrs. Figg gave me some money once for the errands I do. I bought a pair of budgies. They died. But I kept the cage."

"I see." Harry could see her chalking the mysterious death of two unfortunate budgerigars up to the Dursleys' account. If they denied the existence of the birds, it would just confirm her opinion of the matter. Ms. Stone bundled her papers back into the file folder and left to see Mr. Weasley.

Harry had just laid back to rest a bit when he had more visitors, this time the police with a photographer. They had to wait for the nurses to contact the doctor to see if Harry's dressings could be removed long enough to take the required pictures, and during the interim Tonks, still disguised as a hospital aide, showed up with a pair of pyjama bottoms which would fit over Harry's bandages. With a proper pair of pants on, even if they were just hospital pyjama bottoms, Harry felt much more secure. The doctor came in and decided that Harry's dressings should be changed, so the police might as well take their pictures of the bruises while they were at it. As it turned out, Harry had to take his pants off anyway so the police could take pictures of all the parts of him which had been injured, but they chased all the nurses (and Tonks) out to spare him what embarrassment they could. Harry sat where they told him to sit and let them take pictures of him from whatever angles they wanted. The photographer, it turned out, had an extremely misplaced sense of humour, and asked Harry if he wanted prints of the pictures for his girlfriend. Harry thought of the picture Hermione had sent him, and said he didn't think she'd appreciate it. The police inspectors glared at the photographer until he shut up. Then the nurses had at him again, cleaning the crusted blood off his wounds, swabbing all his scrapes and scratches down with more of the brown-staining stuff, and rebandaging his knee and shoulder. By the time they were done, Ms. Stone was back with Mr. Weasley.

"Well, we have good news for you, Mr. Potter. The Weasley family has agreed to take you in, assuming of course that they pass our inspection process. I'm going to expedite an interview with them and go out personally to take a look at their home tomorrow, and I believe your doctor may release you the day after that. You'll be having some tests tomorrow to make sure there is no lasting brain injury or permanent damage to your shoulder or knee, and I should be back in time for evening visiting hours to let you know my decision. Now, there's still some of visiting hours left, so I'm going to let you have some more time with Mr. Weasley, since I so rudely interrupted your visit earlier, and I'll see you tomorrow evening. Good night, Harry." And she bustled out, giving Harry no chance to get a word in edgewise.

"How are you feeling, Harry?"

"Like I've just been through an eight hours' Quidditch practice."

"You look it. You've been through the wringer, no question of that."

"Mr. Weasley ... Ms. Stone said she'd be doing an inspection of The Burrow?"

"That she did. Which means I've got my work cut out for me if we're going to pass it. And that means I'm going to have to leave in a little while to Floo back home and make plans. I doubt any of us are going to get much sleep tonight."

"I'm sorry to be such trouble to you."

"Nonsense, Harry. We do love you and would have taken you in long ago if Dumbledore hadn't insisted on the virtues of the blood protection for you. I don't think he really believed – none of us believed – that things would go as far as they did, and I, for one, will be a long time trying to make up for my error. You are a young man now, but you were a child. We should have protected you, and we signally failed in that responsibility. I wouldn't blame you for turning your back on the lot of us, and the fact that you are willing to stay with us is humbling."

"I don't blame you. Dumbledore, maybe ... a little. Well, a lot. He knew ... or should have known, what it was like. But the rest of you weren't responsible for me."

"Harry ... when Fred and George have to pull bars off your bedroom window ... and we knew and didn't follow up on it ... when you need to be rescued *four years running* – and one of those years you rescued yourself with no help from us – when we know and do nothing, we all become responsible. We can make excuses for Dumbledore, and say that things were different when he was a child, and that he has no children of his own, but Molly and I have no excuse. We do have children, and though we really don't understand why some people treat their children as they do, we know that it can happen and that we have been, deliberately or not, blind to it. Ms. Stone has just given me a very, very long lecture on the subject, and left me feeling about the size of a garden gnome, especially since I had to pretend I *didn't* know – that I had no clue – because she would never allow you to come to us if she thought I knew and did nothing to protect you. Just because we're Wizards and live separate from the Muggle world, doesn't mean that we're exempt from doing what's right. In some ways, even with their endless laws and regulations, the Muggles are far in advance of us." He sighed heavily. "And now I'm going to have to leave you again. Somehow, we have to make the Burrow presentable as a Muggle household, and it's not going to be easy. But we'll manage. We have to. And you, young man, are going to rest and do everything your doctors and nurses say, and as soon as we get you out of here we'll get you to St. Mungo's and get you fixed up properly. Nothing wrong with you a good Healing Potion won't cure."

"Good night, Harry."

And Harry was left alone again, physically and mentally exhausted. Dinner was bland hospital food again, brought by somebody other than Tonks, and as soon as he was done, he lay back and fell instantly asleep.



## Harry Potter and the Junior Year Abroad Welcome Home, Harry!

Chapter Seven

### *Welcome Home, Harry!*

The next day was, as predicted, filled with medical procedures. Tonks (disguised as an orderly this time) wheeled him down to the X-Ray department, which seemed to include a number of devices other than X-Rays, because this time they put him into a very large machine which made mysterious whirrs and thunks. The first time wasn't bad, because they put him in feet first for a while, but then they turned him around and put him in a very narrow space head first to listen to more whirrs and thunks. Then they told him to relax and left him there for what seemed like ages. He was very, very glad that he didn't suffer from claustrophobia.

The afternoon was occupied with a visit to a place called Physical Therapy, which, Harry decided, was populated by torturers. They unstrapped his arm and moved it around, made him do exercises with it, and then did the same with his knee, making notes on their clipboards and muttering things about "range of motion." As he had by now stiffened up completely, the experience was rather painful. They tested his uninjured limbs as well, so they'd have some grounds for comparison. They did compliment Harry on the shape he'd kept himself in, and asked if he was an athlete. He allowed as yes, he played a little football at school, and they said that he'd be likely to make a full recovery, but he wouldn't be playing for the next few months, and even then he should wear a knee brace for at least the next year. They prescribed a whole series of exercises that he should do when the swelling started to go down, and told him to get an appointment with a PT consultant wherever he was going to be living, for continuing therapy. Then they gave him a nice long ice down before they sent him back to his room.

Then there was more hospital food, which was beginning to make even Aunt Petunia's cold tinned soup seem a fond memory. The only thing they hadn't been able to ruin was the lemon ice.

He waited anxiously for the promised visit from Ms. Stone, who finally arrived just before the end of visiting hours. She was glowing in her approval of the Weasley family home as his new foster home, much to Harry's relief – so much so that he wondered for a moment whose home they had actually shown her.

The next morning, he was released from the hospital. After going through much paperwork, Molly and Arthur Weasley picked him up in a Ministry car at the hospital, and they went, much to Harry's surprise, to Privet Drive. Here the police inspector and an officer were waiting, and they escorted him past a furiously silent Aunt Petunia. He showed them the cupboard where he had slept the first ten years, and the police measured it carefully and took notes and a few photographs, paying particular attention to the crayoned words he'd written on the wall when he was six: H. POTTER'S ROOM. He'd been heavily punished for that, but he still thought it worth it – it was one of his first acts of rebellion, and he'd realized later that he must have magicked those words to the wall, since neither cleaning nor covering with paint had obscured them. And now someone else knew of it. He just wished been able to spell better back then. After the police were done, Mrs. Weasley also looked into the cupboard and saw the crayoned words. Sniffing, she hugged Harry so hard that he winced, and Mr. Weasley reminded her that Harry was still sore.

With his knee bandaged and braced, Harry was unable to climb the stairs to his bedroom, and the police brought his trunk down for him. He pretended to wiggle the "sticky" lock, and opened his trunk to reveal, as Tonks had predicted, the typical effluvia of a teenager's life. Right down to the realistic odour of stinky socks. The police inspector smiled at Hermione's picture fastened to the inside lid of the trunk, and the uniformed officer smirked silently when they found the stash of girly magazines at the bottom, underneath the physics and history books. Aunt Petunia had stuffed the remainder of Harry's clothes in a cheap plastic laundry bag. Hedwig's broken cage was the only thing that was missing, and soon it was brought down and added to the pathetic pile of belongings that was the record of sixteen years. By the time they were done, there was a small crowd of neighbours gathered, attracted by the presence of the police car. The Dursleys had always been terrified of attracting just the kind of attention they were getting now; life on Privet Drive would be months returning to normal, if ever.

As Harry made his way back to the car, Mrs. Figg pushed her way through the crowd. "Harry! Harry, my dear boy!" She hugged him so ferociously that he winced. "I'm so sorry about what happened, Harry! Imagine that great lump of a boy going mad and attacking you like that! It must have been terrible!"

"It's going to be all right now, Mrs. Figg. I'm going to go live somewhere else for a while. But maybe I can come back and visit you?"

"That would make an old lady very happy. You've always been such a good boy. Here," she pressed a bag into his hands, "I packed you some snacks for your trip to your new home. And you, you people" – here she brandished her string bag at the Weasleys – "you take good care of my Harry and keep him safe."

Hiding their grins, the Weasleys assured her that they would take care of him, and bundled all his belongings into the boot of the car. "Nice bit of character repair, that," muttered Mr. Weasley as the car pulled away from the kerb. "She'll probably spend the next couple of months telling anybody who'll listen about what a good boy you are and what a rotter Dudley is. By the time she's finished, no one will even remember about St. Brutus' Secure Centre." The bag contained apple-oatmeal biscuits, which were very good – no substitute for lunch, but a vast improvement over hospital food.



The car slid through the traffic into London with preternatural speed, the driver finding gaps in the traffic that wouldn't have let a bicycle through. Harry wondered what Quidditch team he'd played for. Soon they were at the dilapidated department store that housed St. Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries. The car waited on a side street while Harry and the Weasleys went in. A little more than an hour later, they were back on the sidewalk, Harry moving much more easily now that he was free of his bandages. He was still a little sore, but that was to be expected. The healers had been moderately disgusted that he had only ordinary Muggle-type injuries to deal with, and most of the time within the hospital had been spent trying to figure out if the assault by Dudley should be considered an "Artefact Accident" or a "Creature-Induced Injury." Harry was holding out for Dudley being classified as a Creature, but it had eventually been decided that the type of injury he had was most similar to a broom crash, so off to the Accident ward he went, where a dose of Healing Potion, as Mr. Weasley had predicted, rapidly sorted him out.

After that it was a quick hop to the Leaky Cauldron, where they unloaded Harry's things from the boot and dragged everything through the common room of the pub into the back room. By now it was the middle of the afternoon, and Harry's stomach was grumbling at the thought of food, but they didn't stop for a bite. Instead, Mr. Weasley slung Harry's laundry bag over one shoulder, took a pinch of ash from the jug next to the fireplace, and threw it into the fire. "The Burrow!" he cried out. The flame roared up green, and Mr. Weasley stepped into it and vanished. Harry really didn't relish the thought of travelling by Floo; his stomach didn't handle it well and after his first experience with it he was always afraid of getting lost again, but it was the fastest way to get where they were going. He waited a few moments to give Mr. Weasley time to clear the fireplace at the Weasley home, then took a firm grip on his trunk. He flung some Floo Powder into the fireplace, shouted "The Burrow!" perhaps a little louder than was really necessary, and stepped into the roaring green flames. He managed to keep a firm grip on his trunk as they spun through the Floo Network, seeing other fireplaces flicker by at irregular intervals. He had no idea where the trunk would end up if he lost it; probably someplace interesting like Timbuktu. After a time that seemed longer than it probably was, the large open fireplace in the Weasley living room materialized around him. He gaped. The room was full of people: the entire Weasley family, with the exception of Mrs. Weasley, who was still behind him at the Leaky Cauldron, and Percy, who was still not speaking to the rest of the family; Hermione, Hermione's parents, Arabella Figg (somebody must have gone to pick her up after he left Privet Drive), Remus Lupin, Tonks, Hagrid, Professor McGonagall, and virtually every other member of the Order of the Phoenix, even the ones he didn't know well, except Albus Dumbledore and Severus Snape. Even Fleur Delacour was there, on Bill Weasley's arm. Floating above the crowd was a sign made of flaming letters. HAPPY BIRTHDAY HARRY! it read. And then it changed to read: WELCOME HOME! The room erupted in cheers and cries of "Happy Birthday!", "Welcome home," "How are you feeling?" and a random "Wotcher, Harry!" Stunned, Harry allowed himself to be pulled unresisting from the fireplace. A balloon floating overhead exploded, showering him with sweet-smelling yellow and white flower petals, and Mrs. Weasley stepped through the fireplace behind him, holding Hedwig's battered cage. Hedwig herself sat on the mantel, hooting with relief to see her Harry come home.

Harry was still holding onto the handle of his battered trunk as he was surrounded by well-wishers. Somebody tripped over it and pulled it from his hand, dragging it away. Somebody else ruffled Harry's hair, and the room was filled with so many people talking at once that nobody could hear anyone else. Everybody wanted to hug him, or shake his hand, or hug him and shake his hand, and so many kisses were exchanged that everyone soon forgot who had kissed whom, and at one point Harry discovered himself being kissed rather soundly by Fred. As the two of them made appropriate faces of disgust, Mrs. Weasley announced that food would be served out on the lawn shortly, so could everyone please start moving in that general direction please? The thought of food erased any lingering embarrassment, and with Ron on one side of him and Fred on the other as escorts, Harry started making his way to the door.

Just then, the fireplace roared green again. "Capital, he's made it early!" cried Mr. Weasley. Before Harry could ask who was early, the tall figure of Albus Dumbledore materialized in the flames, carrying a number of envelopes and packets in his hands. "Hello, Harry," he said softly. "I am very happy to see you up and about. I hope you will give me a chance to talk to you in private later; in the meantime, may an old man come to join in your celebration?" Harry hesitated a moment, weighing his still lingering anger toward Dumbledore against the responsibilities that the aged Headmaster was facing, and the concern of his friends, who obviously wanted to see the breach healed.

"Of course, Professor! Come and join us." If anyone noticed that Harry's tone was cooler than his words, they didn't say anything, and Dumbledore joined in the general migration out to the yard.

Here Harry stopped in surprise again. A grand party table was laid out under the trees, with many seats around it, and it was laden with a bounty of good things to eat. How Mrs. Weasley had achieved this while she was picking him up that morning he didn't know, but his stomach rumbled loudly in appreciation. At the head of the table was an armchair which had been dragged out from the living room and positioned like a throne, with another WELCOME HOME HARRY sign floating above it. To the side was a smaller table with a stack of gaily wrapped birthday presents on it. Harry was escorted to the armchair by his "honour guard" and installed with due ceremony; there was a round of "For He's a Jolly Good Fellow" followed by demands for a speech.

Self-consciously, Harry stood. "Ladies and gentlemen, in circumstances like these, the best speech is a short one. And I have been tutored by one of the greatest. Therefore, all I have to say is: Let's Eat!" There was applause and general laughter, followed by cries of appreciation as the covers were removed from the dishes and good smells wafted out. Dumbledore tossed his flowing white beard over his shoulder so that he could do justice to Fleur's bouillabaisse without endangering it, to general laughter.

The mystery of the food was soon solved: while the adult Weasleys were picking up Harry, Hermione, Ginny, Fleur, Fred and George were cooking up a storm at the Burrow, while Ron fetched and carried ingredients and taste tested whenever he could sneak a bit. Hermione and Ginny could not cook with magic, of course, but the other three could.

"Wait a minute," said Harry. "I didn't know you two could cook." He looked rather dubiously at the chicken pot pie they'd just presented, as if he expected the chicken to pop out and start doing a tap dance on the table.

"Who do you think makes up all the batches of the candies we sell?" said George. "They're all based on our own recipes, or ones we swiped from Mum's recipe box. You have to know how to do a recipe straight before you can tamper with it. Cooking's a lot easier than potion making, come to that, and we were always better at potions than our grades showed."

"We could probably get jobs in a Muggle restaurant if we wanted. A good one," Fred added. "We wouldn't dare mess with your homecoming meal

though, Harry, so you can eat without fear of anything happening."

George belched, and a series of multicoloured bubbles came out of his mouth and exploded with sharp pinging noises. "Well, almost anything," he said.

In addition to the five cooks at the Burrow, many of the guests (such as Mrs. Figg, Hagrid, and, surprisingly to Harry, Professor McGonagall) had brought covered dishes from home, so there was a wide variety of food, and Harry was determined, after two and a half days of hospital food, to try it all. Well, maybe all except Hagrid's cakes. He had experience with those. Ginny and Hermione were both particularly pleased if he praised something that they had made completely without magic.

Even with the vast amount of food there was, the many healthy appetites brought to the table did justice to it, and eventually everyone was reduced to groaning and patting their stomachs or, in the case of Ron, who seemed to be a bottomless pit, picking at the remains of the desserts. Fred and George seemed to have appointed themselves as Masters of Ceremonies, and leaped up to pile all of Harry's presents in his lap. There were general cries of "Open mine! Open mine!" and Harry started to open gifts. Halfway through tearing off the paper on the first parcel, when he suddenly stopped.

He looked up at all the expectant faces, down again at the package in his hands, and dashed off into the house to hide his sudden tears, scattering the presents as he went. Mrs. Weasley started up after him, but Mr. Weasley put his hand on her shoulder. "Let the boy be. This is likely the first real party he's ever had."

"No," said Remus. "He's had one other. But as I recall, he spent that one rubbing cake in his hair and enjoyed the boxes more than the presents. He'll be back out once he pulls himself together."

Harry returned a short time later and resumed the present-opening process. In a remarkably short time, he found himself possessed of a variety of useful (and not so useful) possessions. From Mrs. Weasley he received several pairs of jeans, obviously from a second-hand store, but also obviously much closer to a correct fit than anything he currently owned, and some new, brightly coloured T-shirts. Hermione and her parents had also opted for clothing – slacks, dress shirts, and a jacket - so his total wardrobe had approximately doubled. The twins had continued the clothing theme, but with a difference: they gave him a photographer's vest with several large pockets on the outside and about a dozen hidden pockets in the inside. The pockets were much larger inside than out, and the vest would allow him to carry a large number of small items without detection. "This one here, that's for your wand, Harry. See how you can just put it in like this, and nobody will ever know it's there, and you can just pull it out when you need it." The vest itself was not quite in Harry's usual style, but he could see that it would be very practical.

Bill and Charlie had teamed up to get him a watch which would automatically set itself for any time zone, and also had a little stopwatch in it. "Magic won't screw this one up like it does most Muggle watches," Bill explained. "There's a bunch of Swiss wizards who've been working on this for a long time now, and they've only just started releasing these in England. The importer's someone I know from my treasure-hunting days in Egypt."

From Mr. Weasley, much to his surprise, Harry received a shaving kit, complete with a razor that was guaranteed not to nick the skin, and cream that slowed the regrowth of the beard so you didn't need to shave as often. He looked up at Mr. Weasley in surprise and touched his own chin. "D'you think I really need ...?"

"Maybe not yet, but soon enough," Mr. Weasley replied. "It's kind of a tradition ... My father gave me a shaving kit on my sixteenth as his father did for him, and I've given one to each of my sons ... whether they needed it at the time or not. Ron got his last spring. This is just my way of saying ... welcome to the family, son."

This was cause for more tears, not just on Harry's part, and a Weasley family group hug with Harry squashed in the middle of it. Even Fred and George didn't offer more than token objections.

From his other friends, there was a wide variety of gifts. Mad-Eye Moody gave him a little wand which seemed to be made of ivory, but with a rainbow sheen. "Poison detector. Made from unicorn horn. Touch your food or drink with it, if there's anything there shouldn't be, it turns black. Keep it in one of those little pockets and use it, boy!" the Auror growled. Arabella Figg was back to the clothing theme, with a gift of socks she'd knitted herself, and Tonks gave him a little bottle of "Essence of Clover" potion, which came with instructions to put it on his glasses to help him see clearly. Fleur gave him a set of Never-Spill Potion Bottles in a travel case, and Mundungus Fletcher gave him a new cauldron which was guaranteed not to scorch potions brewed in it, and was undoubtedly counterfeit. The Hogwarts professors, perhaps predictably, gave him school supplies and study guides, although Hagrid gave him a book on unusual creatures of the Americas, which was curious. Fortunately, the book did not try to bite his fingers.

Possibly the most amazing gift, Harry thought, was from Remus Lupin. The rather largish package proved to contain a set of six leather-bound and extremely well-used books. "*The Complete Combat Compendium of Curses, Hexes and Jinxes*", edited by Clavius Carmarthen. You got me a set of *Carmarthen?!*" he exclaimed, slightly boggled. There were gasps all around. "How ... where ... my God! Even the school library only has four of these, and they're in the Restricted Section!"

"I must admit I didn't get them for you, Harry. They're more of a legacy. Check the bookplate."

Harry opened the first volume. "*These books are the property of the Marauders,*" he read. "*Beware! We solemnly swear that we are up to no good!*" And it's initialed, J.P., S.B., R.L., P.P."

"During the summer between our sixth and seventh years, I found them in a used book store in London – a *Muggle* book store. The owner had no idea what they were or how much they were worth. I've no idea how they wound up there, but I talked the proprietor into putting them on reserve for me and then got James, Sirius and Peter to put up the cash for them. Unfortunately, they were in Sirius' house when things went to hell fifteen years ago, and he had the place so well warded I couldn't get in to get them. Otherwise, I'd have taught you some of this material when I was teaching

your Dark Arts class. In retrospect, Sirius should probably have given these to you last year, and we'll never know now why he didn't. Perhaps he just forgot they were in his library. I reclaimed them when we cleared out Grimmauld Place, and now ... well, Harry, I really think that you're the person who is going to be able to make the best use of them. So as the last of the Marauders, I pass them on to the next generation. Use them well."

Almost reverently, Harry wrapped the books back up in their protective packaging, and then pounced on Remus, giving the werewolf a ferocious hug.

Finally, and most puzzling of all, Ron gave him a wizard camera which would take moving pictures, and Ginny gave him a photo album to the pages of which he could stick the pictures. He could instruct the album to open for other people, or only for himself, and it also had sections that could be kept sealed if he so chose.

It was now early evening, and Mrs. Weasley hung fairy lanterns from the trees for light since no one seemed inclined to go indoors. "There is one present left, Harry," said Dumbledore. "I brought it with me, and once you know what it is, you can accept it or not. First, though, I brought some things that you and others have been looking for." He pulled three envelopes out of his sleeve, and they leapt from his hand to Harry's, Ron's, and Hermione's. "The O.W.L. scores have been unusually late this year due to a debate among the Board of Governors as to whether certain exam scores should count – given the disruptions of last year. They have only been released today – that is why I was late this afternoon – and rather than send them by post owl, I decided to bring them along myself for you three." Hermione squealed and opened her letter immediately, the boys with somewhat less haste. "You will observe that the practical Astronomy grade is an A – due to the disturbance of the practical exam, virtually none of the examination papers was complete. Not even yours, Miss Granger. Accordingly, it was decided that everyone who took it would receive a grade of 'Acceptable', and anyone who wished to retake it for a higher grade will be allowed to do so."

"Secondly, we had never before had a case where a student was under actual attack during the course of an exam. Thus, for Harry's History of Magic exam, he has been given an A and has the option to retake it if he chooses."

Harry, who had been less than sure about his chances on the History of Magic exam even before Voldemort started in on him, smiled and shook his head. "Oh, no, I think I'll keep the A, thanks. I don't know how much better, if any, I would have done on my own, and I'd rather not have to study for it again, thank you very much." Hermione seemed to be mildly annoyed that he wouldn't take the option to have the test all over again, but Harry just smiled again. "Sorry, Hermione, but History of Magic isn't one of the ones I have to do spectacularly well on for my career track. So I'll just take the A and have done with it. Tell you what, you can take it if you're so keen ... No? I didn't think so."

Dumbledore waited a few moments while the three students perused their exam results, with family members leaning in to look. Hermione had received almost perfect results, with Os in everything except Astronomy, where she had already decided to retake the Astronomy practical, and Defence Against the Dark Arts, where she had apparently inexplicably received only an E on the written, but an O on the practical.

Ron was boggling over his own grades; they were considerably better than he'd expected, especially the Potions practical, in which he had somehow managed an O, though he hadn't done as well on the written. Fred and George were hanging over his shoulders. "Hey, Ickle Ronnikin's got a brain! Who knew?"

Finally, Harry was pleased to note that he'd achieved the grades he needed for Auror training, especially the Outstanding required for the Advanced Potions class. "I did it! I can take Advanced Potions! Oh no!" as the horror hit him. "That means another two years of Snape!" His Divination grade, as expected, was abysmal, but he'd received Es in both Charms and Transfiguration written and practicals, O in Care of Magical Creatures written and practical, and an O with an asterisk next to it in the Defence Against the Dark Arts practical. "What's this?" He looked at the bottom of the page and turned white. "Oh. My. God."

"What is it?" asked Hermione, peering over at his page. She gave a little squeak and removed the page from Harry's suddenly nerveless hand, stood and read the asterisked note out loud.

"\*\* If it were possible to give a grade higher than O, this student would have achieved it. The Board of Governors is recommending that a citation for excellence be added to his school record."

"I guess Professor Tofty liked my *Patronus*," said Harry weakly.

"I'd say he did! Congratulations, Harry!" There was another round of hand-shaking.

Once all the O.W.L. results had been discussed to everyone's satisfaction, Dumbledore cleared his throat gently, managing to quiet down the group much faster than Mrs. Weasley ever had. "I also brought the regular school letters for Miss Granger, Miss Weasley, and Mr. Weasley." The envelopes flew to their hands. Finally, he produced a much larger envelope. "This is for Harry. It is a special gift, and I hope he will accept it."

Harry, who had been perplexed that he had not gotten a school letter, took the parcel and opened it. There were a number of papers and brochures inside it, and a letter on creamy vellum on top.

Congratulations. You have been selected to participate in an experimental exchange student program between Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry and the United States Arcane Academics Council.

Eight representatives of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry have been selected for this program, one male and one female student from each House. Eight students from the schools under the United States Arcane Academics Council, one male and one female from each school, will be attending Hogwarts as exchange students. If you choose to participate, you will be spending the upcoming school year in a rotation between four of the best schools of magic in the United States of America: Nokomis Institute for Higher Learning, Kingsdale, Minnesota; Salem Academy (of Witchcraft), Bridgewater, Massachusetts; Marie Laveau Institute, New Orleans, Louisiana; Emperor Joshua Norton Technical School, San Francisco, California. Please consider the materials in this package carefully. If you choose to accept, return the acceptance form together with your requested class list by post owl as soon as possible.

Please note that in view of the arrangements required for this exchange program, participating students have been given a one-time release from the restrictions on the use of magic while underage. For participants in this program only, the school year is considered to have begun on August 1, and they may therefore use what magic is necessary to prepare for their journey.

Chaperones will accompany both groups of exchange students.

Note that travel arrangements will be by Muggle means, and therefore program participants must have access to Muggle documentation such as passports. Students who have experience with the Muggle world are encouraged to assist those who do not.

Harry stopped reading and looked up. "So that's why no Ministry owls descended on me after I Stupefied Dudley?"

"It was purely fortuitous, of course, that the incident happened after midnight on August 1 instead of before, on July 31," said Dumbledore. "It could have been quite troublesome had it happened earlier. I was trying to get an earlier date, but given the difficulties I had getting the Ministry to agree to the program at all, I think I was doing quite well to have gotten August 1. In any event, for the rest of the summer you will be free to do magic as necessary. Under the supervision of a qualified adult witch or wizard, of course, of whom I see quite a few right here."

"It says here I need a passport. I don't think I have one. Is there time for me to get one?"

"Thanks to Hermione's parents, who have gone through the process of getting one for her, we have obtained one for you. It took most of the spring to do it, but I assure you it is quite legal and quite valid. All the necessary documentation is in place."

Hermione's father handed over an official-looking envelope which contained the document in question. Harry flipped it open and saw a photograph, which had probably been taken around Christmas, together with the necessary vital statistics, neatly typed. "We got one of Colin Creevey's pictures of you and convinced it to hold still long enough to have Muggle copies made," explained Hermione. "There are also copies of your birth certificate and things in there, so you'd better keep that envelope in a safe place. You'll need them when it comes time to get a drivers' license."

Harry looked down at the bundle of papers. "May I ask ... why? Why this? Why now? Why me?"

"There are many reasons, Harry." Dumbledore rose to his feet. "If you will walk with me for a moment, I would like to talk with you privately. Some of your questions may be such that you might not wish to have the answers discussed in public. And some of them may be such that I might not wish to have them discussed in public."

Harry tucked everything back in the envelope and put it on the table. "If you will excuse us," he said to the group, rather formally. Then he walked off on the path that led down toward the river. Once they were sufficiently far enough from the rest of the group, Harry asked, quietly, "So everyone knew about this but me? Secrets again?"

Dumbledore sighed. "It's called a surprise, Harry. It must of necessity be secret from the person being surprised. Every single person who knew about this kept it secret because they wanted you to enjoy the surprise. And they have taken great pleasure in arranging this for you. Frankly, we also weren't sure we could get permission, right up until the end, given the difficulties we've had with the Ministry in the past. I did not wish to have to disappoint you if it fell through. Believe it or not, this was not originally my idea, although I did embellish it somewhat."

"Whose idea was it then?"

"Sirius Black's. When we started work on the concept, it was planned that he should be one of the chaperones. That way, the two of you could spend time in the United States safely and without attracting unwanted attention. Then when it was time for you to return, he could choose whether to return with you or to stay in the United States, losing himself in their wizarding community until such time as it was safe for him to return here. Originally he had intended for you to be the only one to go. However, that would have been too obvious, and with the Minister of Magic's irrational attitude toward you, we would never have obtained permission. So we had to expand the program into a full-fledged exchange between the American schools and ours. Then we slipped your name onto the list at the last minute. A necessary subterfuge."

"If I decide not to go?"

"Then you will attend Hogwarts as usual – I have your regular letter right here – and someone else from your House will go to the United States in your stead. I'm sure that Mr. Thomas or Mr. Finnegan would be more than happy to represent Gryffindor House to the Americans."

Harry snorted. "You fight dirty."

"On the contrary, I do not fight at all, if I can help it."

"Are there other reasons you want me to go? I mean, it would have been very easy for you to have let the whole project die after Sirius ... died. I would never have known."

"Of course. I thought it a good idea when Sirius came up with it, and I still do."

"May I know some of your reasons?"

"One reason is that I believe it necessary for you to expand your education beyond what is taught at Hogwarts. As you have probably realized yourself by now, if you go up against the Dark Lord with only your Hogwarts education, you are likely to lose. He will know everything you know, and has years of experience on top of it. As the Americans say, 'Age and treachery will always overcome youth and skill.'"

It chilled Harry to hear Dumbledore say outright, and so succinctly, what he had thought himself.

The headmaster continued, "However, in America, they do things differently. We have a proud thousand-year tradition. The American tradition is less than three hundred years old, but perhaps because they do not have the weight of history behind them, they look at things very differently and teach their students different aspects of magic. People from all over the world have brought their native magics with them, and they are encouraged to keep practicing them. They are willing to experiment in ways that we do not, simply because 'that's the way it's always been done here.' I do think that for those reasons, it is a good thing to open contacts with the Americans on a more regular basis in general. If this experimental program works out, assuming of course that we all survive the next few years, we may institute it on a regular basis to strengthen ties between the two communities. As for your specific circumstances, it is my hope that in America you may learn something that will enable you to fight against Voldemort successfully. Something he won't know how to counter."

"Such as what?"

"If I knew that, I would not need to send you, would I? No, I am acting on blind hope here. I do not know what you will find, and therefore I suggest that you keep your mind open and try as many new things as possible. As for you personally, I thought it good that you have a break – I know of your difficulties with Professor Snape, for example, and with Mister Malfoy – and while I believe you are more than capable of continuing to deal with them for a sixth year, there is no good reason why you should have to. In that regard, I think it possible that you may better be able to learn Occlumency from a teacher of your own choice in the Americas than from Professor Snape, or than from myself, given the breach of trust that now lies between us. And finally, there is the little matter of Mr. Weasley and Miss Granger."

"What about them?"

"Harry, ever since you came to school, the three of you have been a very tight-knit trio. Even when there have been differences between you, you have always come together again stronger than before. But you are always the dominant one of the three. Mr. Weasley and Miss Granger may distance themselves from you temporarily, but it is to you they return, and not the other way around. While I am your Headmaster, I am also the Headmaster for every child who comes to Hogwarts and must look out for them – and I believe that it would do Mr. Weasley and Miss Granger good to stand alone for a time. Particularly Mr. Weasley. He has stood in the shadow of others for a long time. First his brothers, all of whom are extremely dynamic personalities, and now you. He would not be human if he did not experience some degree of jealousy, and as you will recall, this has already caused one serious rift between you. He needs to know what he is capable of on his own. And so do you. Indeed, if you do not go, I should prefer to send him in your place, transferring his prefect duties to you. This is something, needless to say, that I would prefer to remain between us."

"What about the DA?"

"We must see if the DA can survive on its own as well. No group is viable if it cannot withstand the loss of a single critical member. You have taught your core group very well, indeed. And this year we shall not have the difficulties with the Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher that we had in the past, at the very least. During your second year, an attempt was made to institute a Duelling Club. While Professor Lockhart turned out to be less than the perfect person to supervise it, I believe the idea to be a sound one, and I would like to see the DA turned into an official club under the leadership of Mr. Weasley and Miss Granger, with a certain amount of faculty supervision."

"You've thought of everything, haven't you?"

"No, I have not. If I had thought of 'everything', we wouldn't be having this conversation. I believe your making this trip to be in the best interests of a number of individuals as well as in the interest of the school itself. Yet I can come up with just as many reasons for you not to go; you can come up with them yourself if you think about it. There were those who argued strongly against letting The-Boy-Who-Lived out of our sight for an instant. I will admit to having doubts myself, but after your little display at the end of last term, I saw the wisdom of it. We cannot keep you wrapped in cotton wool, and you are your own person, not a weapon or a hunting dog to be used as we wish. I am an old man, Harry, and far too used, perhaps, to getting my own way. Perhaps another good reason for you to go to America is to get you away from all of us who would try to control you, no matter how convinced we are that it is in a good cause." There was a moment of silence as Harry digested this. It was probably as close as he would ever receive to an apology, but he was not ready to acknowledge it. Finally, Dumbledore spoke again. "That is why the ultimate decision as to whether to go or not to go is yours. And for all the good logical and emotional arguments on either side, what it will probably come down to is this: would you really want to pass up the adventure?"

"Sleep on it, Harry. Send a post owl tomorrow to let us know what you decide."

By now it was fully dark, and Dumbledore conjured a ball of light to precede them up the trail back to the Weasley home. The dinner mess had been cleaned up, and Harry's presents had been brought inside and up to Percy's old room, which had been given to Harry. The older members of the party had moved inside for tea and Dumbledore went in to join them; the younger ones had stayed outside to sit on the lawn and talk while waiting for Harry to return.

Harry gave one of the fairy lanterns a poke to wake up the fairies and get some brighter light. He started passing around the brochures so everybody could take a look at them. "If I'm going to do this, I want everybody's opinions on what I should take."

"Wow, Harry, you're going to go in an AIRPLANE?" asked Ron, looking at the flight information. "I suppose you'd fall asleep and fall off trying to get a broom across the Atlantic, but do you think those things are really safe? How do they stay up?"

Hermione's attempt to give a lesson in elementary aerodynamics was soundly ignored.

Ginny was going over the class listings. "Hey, Harry, they're missing something. They don't have Defence Against the Dark Arts listed here."

"Really? Let me see that. Huh, you're right. 'Magical Theory and Practicum'? What the heck is that? And ... this can't be right. *Chemistry?*"

"Chemistry is just like Potions," said Hermione, who had the booklet with the full class descriptions. "You learn how things react together

and why. The Practicum description says it's about fixing spells to material objects. Like making brooms and things. That could be really useful ... 'including wand-making – students will be expected to craft and enchant their own wands during the course of the year.' Wow."

"Why not just go down to the wand shop?" asked Ron.

"Probably because in America, the nearest wand shop could be five hundred miles away. The place is kind of big."

"Maybe we should ask Dumbledore about the Dark Arts thing, though." Before Harry could stop them, Fred and George dashed off into the house to fetch out the Headmaster, who brought his tea with him, and Ginny showed him the class schedule.

"Oh, the schedule is quite correct. The Americans don't put the stress on Defence Against the Dark Arts that we do. They've never had to live with a home-grown Dark Lord, you see. Many of them joined in the fight against Grindelwald a generation or so back, but for them it was a foreign fight, not one that threatened their homeland directly. Accordingly, they treat Defence Against the Dark Arts as an optional subject, so that those who are interested can pursue it and those who are not interested never learn more than the most elementary counter-jinxes. Those who do focus upon it, however, tend to be very skilled."

"Where's the list of options, then?"

"Look under 'Extra Curricular Activities.' You see where it says 'Duelling Club'? That's it. It's similar to your D.A. group last year, only with a bit more structure. In order to keep your hand in, Harry, you should participate in the Duelling Club in each school you visit. You will find your new books to be particularly useful, too, I think, and I am very grateful to Professor Lupin for providing them to you. There are some other options you may find interesting, as well, some of them specific to particular schools. I understand, for example, that the Vision Quest program at Nokomis is quite well-regarded. It will be the first school on the itinerary."

The discussion continued until well past midnight; only then did Harry realize that at some point Dumbledore had slipped off to return to Hogwarts, and that everyone else assumed he was going and would be vastly disappointed if he didn't. And so, in fact, would he. In the morning he sent off Hedwig with his acceptance.

## Harry Potter and the Junior Year Abroad Things Are Seldom What They Seem

### Chapter Eight

#### *Things Are Seldom What They Seem*

The following weeks were hectic ones, since there was so much for Harry to do prior to his departure for America.

One of the primary things was for Harry to learn how to do the Wizzywig Charm from Mr. Weasley, who proved to be a master of it. It was one of the most important spells he used in covering up the effects of magic in Muggle environs. "It's especially easy to use on Muggles," Mr. Weasley said, "because they're so inclined to believe what makes sense in terms of their own experience. If you give them a few details to make a plausible explanation for something, their own minds will fill in the gaps. It works on Wizards, too, but generally best if the wizard has been primed. For example, when you opened your trunk in front of the police officers, you saw what they saw, Tonks' Wizzywig. But she had already told you what to expect. What do you think would have happened had she not told you about the spell?"

"Umm... I'd have seen my real books and things, maybe. Or maybe I'd have seen the illusion and the reality both?"

"Under the circumstances, what would probably have happened would be that you saw the Wizzywig version first, then realize it could not be right – because you *know* what's in the trunk, you see – and then the spell would have broken, for you, anyway, and you would have been able to see what was really in the trunk. This might have made it difficult for you to react properly around the police, so it's best that you saw what they saw at the time. If you know there's a Wizzywig in place, you can try to break it intentionally.

"The really crucial element of the Wizzywig is the skill of the wizard in choosing the right images, visualizing them clearly, and then impressing them into the spell. So the power of your imagination and your breadth of knowledge is important. Tonks is extremely good at this, most likely because she has had so much experience willing her own features to take what form she wants them to. She's also good at setting the spell on an item so it will go off later. Not everybody can set triggers like that. If she'd wanted, she could even have made it permanent on your trunk. But that wasn't necessary under the circumstances. Making a spell stick permanently is rather difficult. By the way, who put that locking charm on your trunk? That's a nice piece of work."

"Umm. I did."

"Really? I didn't think they'd taught permanence or repeatability yet."

"They didn't. I wanted to fix it so Dudley or Uncle Vernon couldn't get into the trunk, and I just cast the lock spell on it. I knew how I wanted it to be, and, um ... now I don't remember exactly how I did it. I didn't know it was supposed to be hard."

"And now I've jinxed you and you probably won't be able to do it again until you learn the 'right' way to do it. That's the way it happens with spontaneous magic use sometimes."

For a while, nothing was as it seemed around the Weasley home. Harry practiced on such practical things such as a bowl with a couple of raisins in it, until he could make it look like a bowl full of fruit. He knew he'd gotten it right when he put the bowl on the kitchen table and Ron grabbed for an apple. The look on his face when he got a raisin was priceless.

Now that the school letters had come, it was also time for a trip to Diagon Alley for school supplies. The first stop was Gringott's, where Mrs. Weasley withdrew the funds necessary for her family's shopping and Hermione changed her Muggle money for Galleons. Harry approached the main desk and had a talk with the goblin there. When they left the bank, he had refilled his money bag from the vault, and also had a little greeny-gold card with a picture of a dragon stamped on it, and his name in raised lettering.

Ron saw him inspecting it before tucking it into his money bag. "What's that, Harry? Some kind of dragon scale?"

"Looks kind of like it, doesn't it? No, it occurred to me I might need some money while I'm in America, and I'm pretty sure they don't use galleons and sickles over there. So I asked about changing some money. Instead, they suggested I get this. The Muggles have little machines all over the place where you can get money, and then it's withdrawn automatically from your bank account. They use cards like this so the machines know whose account to take the money from. Gringott's have started doing the same for wizards who have to travel among Muggles for a while. This way I'll be able to get American money if I need it."

"Wow. Don't tell Dad, he'll spend an hour getting you to tell him all the details."

Harry bought all the books in Flourish & Blott's that he would have done had he taken the regular course load. Hopefully he'd have time to go over them in between times while he was away. According to the course information, in America most of the books were owned by the schools and loaned to the students during the year, but if he found them useful, he could buy copies there.

He found himself wandering aimlessly in the stationery store while Ron, Ginny and Hermione were picking up rolls of parchment, bottles of ink and spare quills. Again, most of the supplies he'd be needing in America were different. They used paper, not parchment, there, and normal Muggle pens and notebooks would suffice. Then he spotted a display of familiar pink leather-covered books. They came in pairs bound by a ribbon, and sported "Messages to My Love" written in loopy handwriting on the covers. Struck by an inspiration, Harry picked up two sets and brought them to the Specialty Orders desk, and had a whispered conversation with the clerk there.

Afterwards it was a trip to Madam Malkin's for new robes; for once Ron got an entire new set, as he had now become taller than all the other males in his family except Charlie, and Charlie's old robes had long since been shortened and worn out by Percy, Fred and George. Ron needed new things, and with advice as to styles from Hermione and Ginny, he was rather pleased with the way he looked. "Very sharp," said Harry, who was outfitting himself with all new robes as well. Ron preened. Ginny needed new robes too; when she was younger, hand-me-downs of the boys' school robes had sufficed, but two years ago she had begun to need styles more obviously cut for girls. Last year they had been second-hand. This year she got all new ones, including a new formal.

Harry sprang for lunch at the Leaky Cauldron; he knew that with Fred and George out of school, the Weasley finances would stretch farther, but he still saw that pinched look around Mrs. Weasley's eyes at Madam Malkin's, and resolved to relieve what strain he could from the family that had been so good to him. Treating everybody to lunch would be a start.

While Mrs. Weasley took Ron, Ginny and Hermione off to the apothecary for potion supplies, Harry found himself free to do a little browsing of his own. He looked longingly into the window of Quality Quidditch Supplies, but he had too much to do to allow himself to go in there. The two weeks he had spent living in Diagon Alley a few years ago had given him a very thorough knowledge of the stores there. Even though he hadn't been interested in some of the shops then, he knew where they were, and he needed one of them now. Shortly he entered Rincewind's Luggage Emporium. He desperately needed a new trunk, since his old one was a Muggle trunk with non-expandable insides, and he would not have enough room in it for all his books now, much less his clothes.

Rincewind's was almost as crowded as some of the other stores in the Alley, much to his surprise. Most of the patrons seemed to be the parents of first-years, with their children in tow, picking out school trunks. Harry joined the group looking over the display. His Muggle clothes attracted some attention; his scar attracted more. He sighed; he didn't think he was ever going to get used to it. The trunks resembled the ones he had seen the fake Professor Moody use two years before. The very simplest had one keyhole, then there were more expensive ones with two, three, or five keyholes. Harry inspected the least expensive trunk more closely. It looked like an ordinary Muggle trunk, and had a display of books in it. It didn't seem to fit any more in it than Harry's own trunk. He pulled out some of the books. There was another row under them. And another row under that. He gave some of the books a shove, and they moved aside to reveal some boxes which contained clothing. *Very nice*, Harry thought. *The thing must be about four times bigger on the inside than the outside.* He stacked the books back inside the trunk.

"May I help you, sir?" A youngish clerk in sensible dark robes came up to him.

"Yes, I'm looking for a replacement school trunk. My old one is sort of ... small ... for my current needs."

"Well, the one you're looking at is our most popular model, a one compartment trunk with four times normal space. Cedar lining is standard, separate clothing boxes and bookracks optional. It's an excellent first trunk for school use. But perhaps you would be interested in something roomier?" The clerk, who had noticed his scar but was steadfastly refusing to look at it, showed him all the rest of the trunks. As Professor Moody's trunk had, each keyhole opened onto a separate trunk space. Apparently they could be ordered with bookshelves, chests of drawers, and wardrobes that would pop up from inside the trunk. The five-space model had an optional camp bed which would fold out in case an impromptu nap was desired. Unfortunately, the bed was sized for a child or medium-height adult, and was just a little too short for Harry. He was seriously considering the five-spacer, when the clerk made another suggestion. "The ones you've been looking at, sir, are school trunks. They are intended for children and infrequent travellers. We have a full line of adult trunks as well. They're only a little larger on the outside, stand up to the abuse of travel better, and have a variety of additional options. Would you like to see one of those?"

Soon Harry was the proud owner of a five-compartment dragon-leather trunk with enough bookshelves to hold all his books so far and then some, with a broom rack mounted to the side of the shelves, a full wardrobe with storage space for all his robes, toiletries, and linens if he wanted to bring his own sheets, blankets and pillows with him, a combination writing desk/potions table with lab cabinets and fold-down chair, and a full-size bed. The fifth space was left empty for general storage, and Harry rather thought he would use that one for showing the good folks at Customs. He would just fill it up with real textbooks, laundry and stinky socks. The best Wizzywigs, he had learned, were often the simplest. The trunk had a handle at one end and wheels at the other to make it easier to pull. He had discovered that, had he been willing to pay for it, he could have had a self-powered trunk with a bedroom suite including Jacuzzi, but it was expensive and he still hadn't gotten around to finding out exactly how much was in his vault at Gringott's. He didn't want to risk finding that he had blown a substantial portion of his inheritance on a trunk, even if one could live in it. The customizing would take a day or two, and the finished trunk would be delivered to The Burrow. While he was at it, Harry also invested in a leather belt and belt pouch in which he could keep wallet, wand, money pouch, passport, and sundry personal needs, and a leather book bag with interior pouches for supplies and a large main pouch for textbooks. Like the trunk, it was much larger on the inside than out.

Harry considered his personal list. Most of the things he needed now were going to be Muggle things; he should probably make a separate shopping trip for those with Hermione and maybe Ron, who might enjoy a trip into the Muggle side of London. He was thinking of getting some special gifts for the Weasleys, and Hermione of course, to say "thank you" before he left, but those would probably be better obtained on the separate trip, also. He made a quick dash into Quality Quidditch Supplies for refills for his broom maintenance kit, and then back to the stationers' to pick up his special order. Hedwig needed a new cage to replace the one Dudley had mangled; he couldn't take her with him, so he was going to be loaning her to Hermione this year. He thought she understood, and just hoped she wouldn't miss him too much. He stocked up on owl treats to assuage his guilty feelings about it. Then it was back to the apothecary, to find with relief that the Weasleys had only been waiting for him a few minutes.

Harry's second shopping trip was a few days later, with Ron and Hermione to help. By this time, he'd gone through his entire wardrobe and thrown away most of the things he'd worn while with the Dursleys. Most of them were Dudley's castoffs anyway. That left him with the new things Mrs. Weasley and the Grangers had gotten him, and that wouldn't be enough to see him through a year in the United States.



The documents sent to him about the trip said that he and the other students would be expected to wear their regular Hogwarts school robes during class periods and for any official school functions, since they were representing their school, but that they were permitted to wear the clothes of their choice during free times and on weekends – Muggle clothing was recommended. Harry had always preferred to wear Muggle clothing under his robes anyway, since he, like many of the Muggle-born children, did not regard robes as proper clothing, the way wizard-born children did. He'd seen Ron put his robes on directly over his underwear in the mornings and be perfectly comfortable, but Harry didn't feel fully dressed if he did that. Accordingly, his robes were sized a little larger to go over shirts and trousers.

The problem was that since Harry had never been allowed to choose his own clothing before, he had no idea what he should wear. Mrs. Weasley and Hermione spent a while counting his socks and underwear (which he found extremely embarrassing) and making a list, and then Ron, Hermione and Harry headed into the City for some shopping. By the time they returned, weary and laden down with packages, Harry had had a haircut (though he knew from experience that it would look good for about one day and then be back to normal) and been transformed into a rather preppy looking young man indeed, for during the week, with multiple pairs of nice slacks, button-up shirts, jackets and conservative ties, and he also had several pairs of new jeans, t-shirts, sweatshirts, and some new trainers for the weekends. Combined with what he already had, that would get him through, though he would have to buy a heavier coat once he was in the United States. He was going to be in Minnesota until Halloween, in Massachusetts until Christmas, and in New York City for the Christmas break, and would need something warm for then. Afterwards it was south to New Orleans for the late winter and on to San Francisco in the spring, and he wouldn't need warm things in either of those places.

He picked up a generous supply of writing supplies, notebooks, pens, pencils and the like, at a stationers', and the used books and things he would need to disguise his trunk. He added some fiction that he'd been thinking about reading: a few classics, a few J.T. Edson westerns, even a science-fiction book called *Stranger in a Strange Land*, just because he identified with the title. For his copious spare time. *Yeah, right.*

With Ron and Hermione's help, he had also picked out gifts for the Weasleys, and had actually managed to get gifts for them right under their noses. And when they got home to the Burrow, he found his new trunk had been delivered. All in all, it had been an extremely satisfying day.

It was only when he and Ron started transferring his things from his old trunk to the new one, making piles of books and clothing to go in the different compartments, that he suddenly realized that the pictures and things he had hidden were still there, and when he checked he found that they had been disturbed during the clothes-counting. This meant that either Mrs. Weasley or Hermione (or, horror of horrors, both of them) might have seen them. He slammed his trunk shut and sat on it.

"I am dead. I am so dead. Either your mother's going to kill me, or Hermione is. Maybe both of them."

"What did you do?" asked Ron as he haphazardly stuffed Harry's new t-shirts into a drawer.

"I forgot I had some stuff at the bottom of my trunk that ... that I didn't particularly want anyone else to see. Particularly not girls."

"Really? Anything interesting? 'Cos I've got some cool magazines I got from Fred and George, if you want to swap."

"This isn't that kind of stuff. Well, maybe some of it is," he admitted, thinking of the broomstick picture. He told Ron about the mail he'd been receiving.

"You've been getting fan mail? Bloody hell, all I got was a letter from a girl who saw me in the background of one of your *Daily Prophet* pictures and wrote to recommend a freckle remover."

"At least she noticed you and thought about you as a human being. That's ten times more flattering than what I'm getting. The ones that write to me aren't interested in Harry Potter, just The-Boy-Who-Lived. It's like I'm a movie star or something. They don't know me at all, they just know the image."

Ron considered it. "Okay, I can see that. Although I wouldn't mind getting a little fan mail of my own. Just a little, to see what it's like. Can you show me some of what you've got, anyway?"

"Well, in for a penny, in for a pound, I guess. I may ask your dad what to do about this before I go. But you are not, repeat NOT to tell Fred and George about this." Harry flipped his trunk open again and pulled out his bundle of pictures.

"My lips are sealed." Ron flipped through the collection. "Hey, these are some nice looking girls! Any of 'em live around here? Maybe we could get dates ... wow!" He'd reached the Genevieve picture.

"Yeah, wow. She sent it with these," said Harry, spreading out the nightie on the bed and tossing the book onto it. "She wants me to be her boyfriend or something."

"Or something," said Ron, looking pointedly at the nightie.

"I'm flattered as all hell, but what do I *do* ? I don't want to be her boyfriend. I don't even *know* her. But I don't want to hurt her and I don't want to encourage her either."

"That's a Dad question, all right. What's this last? Holy ..." Ron whistled at the broomstick picture, and Harry flushed. "Okay, I can see where that one is seriously embarrassing. I'm glad it's in your luggage and not mine; I'd never hear the end of it." But Harry could tell from the tone of his voice that he sort of wished it *were* in his luggage. He snatched it back while Ron was still trying to memorize it.

"Harry, you must be the only sixteen year old in all of Britain, Wizard or Muggle, who wouldn't want that kind of attention."

"Well, I don't. It's not like it's because of anything I did to earn it, because I could do anything really well or anything. It's because of *this*," he said,

poking himself in the scar with two fingers. "It's all because of *this*. I have to stay with the Dursleys and get starved to death, my godfather is dead, I get beaten to a pulp, I keep almost getting killed on a regular basis and my friends do, too, oh yeah, and I get to try to be a murderer in the next few years, all because of *this*." By now, Harry was angrily pacing the small room. "Don't envy me, Ron. Don't ever envy me."

Ron's eyes were huge. "You get to what?"

"Sorry, forgot you didn't know that last. That's what that stupid Prophecy was all about last June. Either I kill Voldemort or he kills me. Murderer or victim, one hell of a choice. He's fifty years older than me and more powerful to boot. What do you think the outcome is likely to be?" He sat down wearily on his old trunk and put his face in his hands. "I don't know when it will be or if there's any time limit on it. It could be this year, it could be when I'm forty. But if I was him, I'd want to take me on as soon as possible, before I knew enough to stop him. I never know when I wake up if I'm going to be alive to go to sleep that night."

"He can't kill you. We won't let him."

"That's a nice thought. But I see it every night in my dreams, the killing field and the bodies sprawled across it ... the blood pooled black in the moonlight ... and the voice whispering, telling me it's all my fault, that I didn't know enough to stop it ... and then the green light coming out of the dark and I stand and take it because everybody I love is already dead ..."

Ron sat next to him and put an arm around him. "Do my parents know about this?" he asked.

"About the dreams, no, and I don't want them to," he said fiercely, remembering what Mrs. Weasley had said the previous summer after the boggart incident at Grimmauld Place. "Promise me you won't tell them about that. There's nothing they can do about it and it would only worry them. Promise!"

Stammering before Harry's intensity, Ron promised.

"About the other, they may know. Dumbledore would have told them before they took me in ... or ... wait, he doesn't have such a good track record on telling people things, does he? Your Dad said they knew the odds, but ..." The boys stared at each other, then charged down the stairs, jostling each other madly.

Mr. Weasley was working on papers on the kitchen table, but took the time to listen seriously to what Harry and Ron had to say. "So that's what the Prophecy was, eh? No, Dumbledore never told us what it was; said it was up to you since it was about you, and you'd come to us when you were ready. We've always known you were target number one though, just not why. Damned cryptic things, Prophecies."

"I thought it was clear enough," said Harry.

"On the surface, yes, but think it through. Here," he put his finger on the scroll where he'd written down the Prophecy as Harry recited it. "'For neither can live while the other survives.'" It would seem to be fairly direct, but it's also obvious that both of you are, in fact, living and surviving at this very moment. Therefore it cannot be true on the face of it, and we must find another way to interpret it. Also, the first line ... 'The One with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord...' It doesn't say 'kill.' Not there, anyway. So the possibility is there that you might overcome him, defeat him in some way, and that the both of you live on for years until a final confrontation."

"Or not."

"Or not, and that's why we don't rely on Prophecy to tell us what to do. Prophecy is notorious for being totally unclear except in retrospect. Do you know the famous Prophecy about the Persian Empire? No?" Mr. Weasley went out into the living room and returned with a dusty book, thumbing through its pages and muttering to himself. "... don't know what's being taught in Divination these days ... Ah. Here we are. Way back when, Muggles believed in Prophecy fully as much as Wizards now do. Maybe more so. Many examples of them are recorded in Muggle history books. There used to be a temple of the god Apollo at a place called Delphi, and the priestesses there were often consulted for Oracles. As you can imagine, they were probably right about as often as Sybil Trelawney is. But when you add up those occurrences over the centuries, a reputation develops. Anyway, the Lydian King, Croesus – yes, as in 'richer than' – that Croesus – was making a great alliance to go to war against the Persians, and he consulted with the Oracle to try to find out in advance whether he would be successful. The Oracle said, 'You shall destroy a powerful empire.' Croesus understood that to mean he would be successful in destroying the Persian Empire, so off he went to war. And Cyrus the Great of Persia led his armies out and soundly defeated the Lydians, and it was Croesus' own empire which was destroyed." Mr. Weasley paged through the book to a later point. "Then there were the several Prophecies Shakespeare recorded in *MacBeth*. Oh, yes, that was true. Nowadays we think of the Scottish Play as just a piece of theatre, but back then it was political propaganda, and although Shakespeare was a Muggle, he obviously knew of a set of much older Prophecies which were actually made by Scots Seeresses. The Secrecy statutes were enforced less stringently back then, you know. Shakespeare's patron, King James I, traced his ancestry back to Banquo, who was the predicted father of kings. The actual slayer of MacBeth met some very specific Prophecied requirements as well. The play established the divine right of the Jacobite kings to rule, for both Muggles and Wizards. There are many further examples. I'm not even going to get into the Prophecies which have made their way into Muggle religions over the centuries."

Mr. Weasley closed the book and picked up the copy of the Prophecy again. "Part of the problem here is that this Prophecy has been locked away and was never properly analyzed. It seems straightforward, but it isn't really. We don't even know, for sure, if it even relates to this conflict – we assume that because it was spoken in the reign of a Dark Lord, that Dark Lord must be the one spoken of – but maybe it isn't. That's a common logical fallacy. Maybe it refers some other Dark Lord a century from now. Neither your name, Harry, nor You-Know-Who's, are mentioned specifically. Your birthdate is mentioned, but that's not a direct connection to you, and he's totally unconnected. Every Evil Magician since Mordred has fancied himself a Dark Lord – the title is practically generic now. I admit, that's a long shot – everything that's been happening indicates that it does mean this conflict, but it's still a possible consideration."

"So the Prophecy doesn't mean I have to kill him or else he'll kill me?"

"Maybe, maybe not. I think a lot of it depends on how *he* would interpret it if he knew what it said. He certainly went to great lengths to get it last year, and failed, so he's still in the dark. Unfortunately, he would probably interpret it in the simplest way, as you did: the kill or be killed scenario, which does mean he would be even more intent on coming after you than he is now. So it's best that he not know what exactly the Prophecy says. But, you know, since the Prophecy also implies that the only way either of you can die is at the hand of the other – if he really wants to be immortal, all he has to do is keep you far away from himself and not provoke you. And conversely, there's nothing else that can kill you except him. Until the Prophecy is fulfilled, anyway. We don't know what happens beyond that point. Theoretically, if you do kill him, you might be immortal. Although I certainly hope not."

"Why wouldn't being immortal be a good thing?" asked Ron.

"Think about it, Ron. Would you want to live on forever after your family and friends died of old age? Possibly outlive the human race?" asked Harry.

"Oh. I guess not."

"And that shows that you're smarter right now than You-Know-Who is. Not only does he want to rule over the Wizards of Britain, he also is seeking immortality. And if he thinks he can get it by killing Harry ..." Mr. Weasley shook his head sadly.

Harry took his glasses off and rubbed his forehead. "This is making my head hurt."

"But you see why the Prophecy is not dependable. A full semantic and logical analysis would take months, should have been done years ago, and probably wouldn't leave us much better off than we are right now, unfortunately. Given that it should remain known to as few people as possible, I don't dare run it past the very people who would be most qualified to analyze it. Molly and I can go over it, of course. Ron knows about it now and I think you should probably also tell Hermione. But it shouldn't go beyond that. The more ways a secret is shared, the more ways there are for it to be exposed."

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Harry did not sleep well that night. It was almost as if mentioning the dreams to Ron gave them free rein in his head.

Helplessly, he rocketed from scenario to scenario, seeing his friends dead or tortured, seeing the survivors turn away from him in disgust because he had failed. Some of the dreams were just flickers of images, like one of Luna fallen, with ravens pecking at her eyes. Others lasted longer, as he ran helplessly through a dark forest pursued by Death Eaters. Finally, he found himself standing at the peak of a hill beneath the sliver of a New Moon. Ron lay still and lifeless to Harry's right, eyes turned sightlessly up to sky, and Hermione sprawled face down just beyond him. Ginny Weasley and part of one of the twins lay motionless to his left. The stars gleamed cold above him, and a fire burned before him. On the other side of the fire stood Voldemort, the red flame illuminating the pale face but not touching the black pits of his eyes. One skeletal hand lifted up, and Harry saw that it held a huge serpent skin – the shed skin of Nagini, Voldemort's familiar. "The Serpent always renews itself," his voice hissed. "You thought you could defeat me? The Serpent is immortal!" Voldemort flung the dry skin down into the fire, and the flames turned black and roared up. The Dark Lord leapt into the fire and was consumed, but his laughter still rang out across the hill, and after a moment a huge serpent shot up out of the flames, arching across the midnight sky like an evil rainbow. The laughter rang ever louder, and Harry spun. The serpent was heading right for him, its mouth open, huge fangs gleaming white and dripping venom, and he cowered before it. It swept down on him, wrapped its coils around him, and the fangs pierced him with unearthly cold, and he screamed ...

He was on the floor beside his bed, tangled in a twist of constricting sheets. Ginny Weasley and Hermione both stood at his door, their eyes wide, Mr. and Mrs. Weasley just behind them. He could hear multiple pairs of feet on the stairs as Ron and possibly the twins pounded down. His heart thudded so loud it threatened to drown everything else out, and he swore he could still feel the cold tearing through his chest. Finally the tableau broke as Mr. and Mrs. Weasley pushed past the girls and pulled him up off the wooden floor, untwisting the sheets so he could move again. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry," Harry whispered, his eyes still unfocused, still seeing the bodies on the hilltop as well as the real world. "Ginny, Ron ... I didn't mean to let him kill you ..." The older Weasleys helped him into the bed as Ron pushed into the room.

"Is it usually this bad, son?" Mr. Weasley asked Ron quietly while Mrs. Weasley tucked Harry back in.

"No. He gets these a couple of times a week when we're at school, but this is the worst I've seen. He usually snaps right out of them." Ron grasped Harry's hands. "He's ice cold!"

Mrs. Weasley patted Harry's cheeks lightly until he started to come out of it. "Ginny, Hermione ... go down to the kitchen and put up a pot of chamomile tea. Put a little lemon verbena in it, and some honey. He needs warmth. Go. Fred, go with them, you can magic the pot warm faster than the stove can do it."

Harry was now shivering, his teeth chattering as if it was January instead of August. Ron looked up at his mother, then slid into bed with Harry, holding him in his arms to share warmth. Mr. Weasley padded out to the linen closet and got an extra comforter, tucking it around both boys.

By the time Hermione and Ginny were back up with the tea, Harry was sitting up, rather shamefaced about rousing the whole household. "It was just a dream, really. I'm sorry I woke everybody up. Just a stupid dream."

"Sometimes it's just a dream, and sometimes it isn't. Can you remember what it was?"

"N-no. Something about a fire, and a snake. A snake skin. And him, him laughing. I can always hear that, ever since Cedric. He laughs at me all the time."

"Drink your tea, Harry," said Hermione, pouring him a cup. "It'll help keep the nightmares away."

"I'll be okay, really. No need to ..."

"Drink. Your. Tea. Or I will be forced to read to you from *Hogwarts: A History* until you go to sleep."

"And if that doesn't work, I can always wallop you with a Quidditch bat," put in Ginny helpfully.

" 'The female of the species is more deadly than the male,' " Harry quoted. "Tea it is. Ron, pass me that cup."

Soon the soothing tea had Harry nodding again, and Mrs. Weasley removed the extra comforter and made him lie down again. Ron climbed out of the bed and ensconced himself in a chair in the corner. "You go ahead to sleep. I'll watch for a while and wake you if you start to thrash again." The members of the Weasley family and Hermione drifted off to bed again. Ron sat in his chair and watched Harry sleep, and didn't sleep himself until the moon had long since set.

## Harry Potter and the Junior Year Abroad An Oak Among The Aubergines

Chapter Nine

### *An Oak Among The Aubergines*

No one mentioned the dreams to Harry the next morning, and he didn't bring the subject up himself. Ron was sprawled in the chair in a position guaranteed to give him a stiff neck, and Harry roused him and sent him off to his own room to get himself together. In the bright light of an August morning, the images of the dark hilltop began to fade away, and the sight of Hermione in shorts drove them out of his mind entirely. Wisely, Mrs. Weasley was alternating days with "things to do" with days in which the young people could do whatever they chose. The boys and Ginny spent the morning playing a fast and frantic pick-up game of Quidditch over the meadow. They were playing without a Snitch, with two of them acting as Chasers to one Keeper, and switching off places from time to time. Harry thought being a Chaser was fun, but rather harder work than being Seeker. Ginny was a natural as Chaser. Flying was the one thing that always made Harry feel all was right with the world. He always had the feeling nothing could touch him when he was in the air. Given how many times he'd been clobbered by stray Bludgers over the years, he knew perfectly well this was a fallacy, but it didn't change how he felt. The air was his element. They stopped playing when their growling stomachs insisted on lunch, which was served on the long table under the trees. Mrs. Weasley had long years of practice feeding growing boys, and it showed. The food wasn't fancy, but it was good, and there was a lot of it.

After lunch, Ron decided to take a nap since he'd been shorted on sleep the night before, and he sprawled out on a ramshackle chaise in the garden, a hat pulled down over his eyes to keep the sun off. Hermione and Mrs. Weasley went off to do a little work in the vegetable garden, and Harry decided to join them. Hoeing out the weeds in the sun was hot work, and he stripped off his T-shirt. Mrs. Weasley soon realized that she wasn't going to get much more gardening out of Hermione. Ginny came out to help and soon became less than helpful, as well. Mrs. Weasley gave the girls things to do that they could do while ogling Harry, shook her head smiling, and went back to transplanting some bush beans to replace the ripe ones she'd harvested.

Harry stopped hoeing and leaned down to look at something. "Mrs. Weasley, you've got an oak seedling growing in here among the aubergines. Brave little thing, actually. Should I pull it, or do you want to try to transplant it?"

"Let's save it," she said, coming over to look at it. "If we can find a good place for it, it will be your tree. A sign that you're part of the family. If you want to be, that is."

"What?"

"Look around, Harry. Arthur's family has owned this land for generations. With the birth of each child, with each milestone, a tree is planted. All these trees – some fruit trees, some shade trees, each one of them guarding and protecting the family and the homestead with their strength. The big walnut down by the river is Arthur's tree, and the hazel by the garage was planted when we got married. That one over there is Ginny's," she said, nodding at a young apple tree on the edge of a small orchard of older trees. "And that one's Ron's," she added, pointing at a fir tree that formed part of a windbreak and also shielded the house from the road that ran to the north. "We can put this near his, but not so near it'll shade it out ... at the end of the meadow there. How about it, Harry? Would you like to be part of our family?"

"I think that would be ... just wonderful, Mrs. Weasley."

"Then you'll have to call me Mum, like the rest of the children. Ginny!" she called. Her daughter put down the bowl of beans she'd been shelling and came over, Hermione in her wake. "Harry's found a little tree growing here, and we're going to move it to a more appropriate place. It will be his tree, and we're going to bring him into the family. Run over to the shed and get a shovel and a couple of buckets, dear, and the little knife and my hazel rod, that will be a big help." Ginny ran off, leaping over rows of spinach, and Mrs. Weasley knelt and stroked the leaves of the tiny tree, murmuring words of reassurance to it.

Harry explained to Hermione about the significance of the tree, and she started to snuffle. "That's so sweet! You'll really be part of a family. And an oak! That's a strong power tree, you know. Maybe it will have mistletoe someday."

"Oh, I'm pretty sure it will," said Mrs. Weasley, glancing at Harry's scar, "but not for a good number of years."

*Hopefully without nargles*, thought Harry with a grin.

In a moment, Ginny was back with the requested equipment. Mrs. Weasley took the knife and drew a circle in the earth around the seedling. "That should make a large enough root ball, I think. We're going to lose a couple of aubergines, though. Ah well, we'll just have the little ones for dinner tonight." She cut the purple fruit from the plants and asked Hermione to take them over to the back steps, and also to fill the smaller bucket with water while she was there. "We'll need to water in the tree once it's moved. Harry, would you dig up your tree and put it in the other bucket?" Harry complied, easily removing the little plant and a large chunk of soft garden soil. "Ginny, go wake up your brother. He'll need to be part of this. Arthur and the other boys can do their bit when they come home."

It was an odd procession that moved out to the meadow: Mrs. Weasley with the bucket that held the tree, Hermione with her water bucket, Harry with the shovel over his shoulder, Ginny dancing about excitedly waving the forked stick that was apparently her mother's "hazel rod", and Ron rubbing at his face sleepily as he brought up the rear. Once at the meadow, there was a delay while Mrs. Weasley took the forked stick and walked slowly about holding the two ends of the fork. At various places, the free end would dip down as if under its own power.

Hermione and Harry watched curiously. "I didn't know your Mum was a diviner," said Hermione. "It's not something you see much of these days."

"Oh, Mum's an old time Earth Witch," said Ron. "She'd be able to do magic with a stick and some plants even if her wand was broken. Even if she'd never gone to Hogwarts. It's a gift that shows up from time to time; I'm told even some Muggles are pretty good at it. Bill's really good at the divining part, it's one reason he did so well for Gringott's when he was in Egypt. He's more than a curse-breaker, he finds the treasure in the first place. Wouldn't be surprised if he got rich that way some day. Look, I think Mum's found the right place!" Twice now, the tip of Mrs. Weasley's rod had dipped at exactly the same spot.

Under Mrs. Weasley's direction, the four teenagers enthusiastically ripped up the meadow grasses and weeds growing in the chosen place. She cut a circle in the sod with the knife, and Ron used the shovel blade to lift the sod. In order to protect Harry's shoulder, she had Ron dig the hole for the tree as well.

"I can do it, Mrs. ... Mum," said Harry, somewhat awkwardly. "My shoulder wasn't giving me any trouble earlier."

"Established sod and meadow earth are different from soft garden soil, Harry. You can put the soil back in the hole later if you want."

"Besides," added Ron, "this is a group project – all family members present have to do something, to make us all part of the magic. Mum found the place, I dig the hole, you put the dirt back, Ginny will do the watering. If Dad or Fred and George were here, they'd all do part of the work, too. For occasions where the entire family gets together, everybody would dig one shovel-full. A family our size, that makes a pretty big hole."

While Ron dug, Harry sat on the grass, idly crushing clumps of soil as they fell from the shovel. One of them resisted crushing, but instead of a rock in the centre, he found what felt like a disc of some kind. He cleared as much soil off as he could with his fingers, and then dipped it in the water bucket to finish cleaning it off. "Hey, look at this! It was in the dirt that Ron turned up." Hermione leaned over his shoulder.

"That looks like an old coin of some kind. Or maybe a saint's medal. Can you get it any cleaner?"

"I dunno, it's pretty badly tarnished. Feels like real silver. Maybe some silver polish when we get back to the house?"

"Why wait?" Mrs. Weasley produced her wand – *from where?* Harry wondered. He still hadn't gotten the hang of keeping the thing someplace invisible where you could grab it any time you needed it. Hence Professor Moody's annoyance with him keeping it sticking out of his back pocket. She tapped the coin with the tip of the wand, and the tarnish vanished. The silver coin shone in his hand. Harry held the coin up close to his face so he could see the detail.

"Hm. Looks like somebody's face on this side. Wearing a wreath on his head. And the other ... whoa. A snake twined around a wand."

"Harry, that's the symbol of Aesculapius, the god of healing! That's probably the god himself on the front. May I?" Harry surrendered the coin to Hermione. "There's letters here, looks like Greek, not Latin – I don't know Greek, I'll have to look it up. What's this, a little pit of some kind?" She picked up a dried grass stem and poked at it. "No, it's a hole. This was pierced so someone could wear it as a medallion. Some ancient physician maybe? Or someone who had been healed by the god? This is so exciting!" She babbled on about how Aesculapius had been the son of Apollo and a mortal woman, how he had been taught medicine by the centaur Chiron, and ...

Ron cut into her discussion, his voice flat and his eyes far away. "His skill in curing disease and restoring the dead to life aroused the anger of Zeus, who, being afraid that he might render all men immortal, slew him with a thunderbolt. Homer mentions him as a skilful physician, whose sons, Machaon and Podalirius, were the physicians in the Greek camp before Troy. Temples were erected to Aesculapius in many parts of Greece, near healing springs or on high mountains. The practice of incubation, sleeping in these sanctuaries, was very common, it being supposed that the god effected cures or prescribed remedies to the sick in dreams. All who were healed offered sacrifice, especially a cock, and hung up votive tablets, on which were recorded their names, their diseases and the manner in which they had been cured. Many of these votive tablets have been discovered in the course of excavations at Epidaurus, the god's most famous shrine, where games were celebrated in his honour every five years, accompanied by solemn processions. His worship was introduced into Rome by order of the Sibylline books in 293 B.C., to avert a pestilence. The god was fetched from Epidaurus in the form of a snake and a temple was assigned him on an island in the Tiber." During Ron's discourse, Ginny looked at her mother, who nodded. She scooped up a handful of water from the bucket and splashed it in Ron's face. "What?" he spluttered, shaking the water out of his face. "What was that for?"

"Ron, you were doing it again."

"Oh. Sorry." Somewhat shamefacedly, he returned to digging the hole, while Harry and Hermione both gaped at him. Hearing about his spontaneous recall problem was far different from seeing it in action.

"You know, that could be really useful in school if you can get it under control," said Hermione.

"Right. Maybe I could charge people to do their research for them. But more likely I'd wind up like Professor Binns, reciting hours-long lectures by rote with no way to turn it off. If Ginny hadn't stopped me, I'd have gone into the Egyptian origins of Asklepios as Imhotep, and then all the connections between snakes and healing in pagan days. I saw all the information lined up, just waiting for an opportunity to get out." He thrust the shovel particularly viciously into the soil. "It's been two months. I just wish it would stop already."

"Maybe you should sleep on it, and the god will show you a way to cure it," Hermione said impishly.

"Nah, all my dreams are about Quidditch. Harry's the one who dreams about snakes. D'you think this is deep enough now?"

"A little too deep. Here, let's put the sod back in, and a little soil ... that's just fine now," said Mrs. Weasley. She drew her sharp knife again. "*Scourgify*," she muttered, and the knife blade gleamed clean. She held the blade against her own finger. "*Weasley blood and Weasley line, I nowclaim Harry as a child of mine*." She pricked her finger with the knife as Harry and Hermione gasped, and squeezed several drops of blood into the hole, where it was absorbed instantly into the black earth.

Ron solemnly held out his hand and she pricked his finger as well. "*Weasley blood and Weasley line, I nowclaim Harry as brother mine*." The drops fell silently into the hole and Ron stepped back, sucking on the wound, as Ginny held out her hand in turn, was pricked and recited the spell.

Mrs. Weasley then turned to Harry. "Normally this is done when the child is a few months old, so there are no lines for you. But we will need a few drops of your blood and a bit of your hair for surety." His hand shaking, Harry allowed her to prick him, squeeze the drops of blood into the hole, and cut a little of his hair with the knife. The black strands shone against the dark earth. Mrs. Weasley then held the tree in the correct position while Harry shovelled the loose soil in around it and packed it in. When the hole was full, there was still quite a lot of soil left. Ginny poured half of her bucket of water around the newly-planted tree, and the soil settled so that Harry was able to add more. Then Ginny finished watering it in. Mrs. Weasley mulched around the base of the tree with the green grasses that had been cut. "*Weasley child, Weasley tree, protected nowboth shall be*," she recited, then stood, brushing her hands briskly. "There, it's done. Harry, you're a Weasley now. I don't know if our blood magic is as strong as your mother's, but we'll make up in numbers what hers had in strength. I'll get Arthur and the boys to come out here this evening, and I'll get messages out to the rest of the family so they can do their bit when they can. We should have done this when Bill and Charlie were still here, but the time wasn't right, there were so many other people here."

"Plus we hadn't found the tree yet."

"True. An oak among the aubergines, that's a sign if there ever was one."

"I wish my family had traditions like that," said Hermione, quietly.

"Muggle families have their own traditions. Ask your parents if anything comes down in their lines. You might be surprised. You may marry into a family with traditions someday. Also, remember that every tradition starts somewhere. Some Weasley ancestor created that spell and spoke those words for the first time generations ago. The tree planted then probably isn't even standing any more. But what we did here is a continuation of that first casting. Perhaps you can be the first caster for your own family tradition, pass it on to sons and daughters."

They stood in silence for a moment, looking down at the little tree. In the quiet, Harry was the first one to hear the approaching automobile. "Incoming Muggle," he muttered. Ginny ran across to the edge of the road.

"It looks like the car that Stone lady drove the time she came out here with Dad," she called back. The rest of the group collected their equipment and walked over to the road, by which time Ginny had flagged down the car.

"Good afternoon, Ms. Stone," said Mrs. Weasley as Agatha Stone rolled down her car window, letting the air-conditioning out. "What brings you all the way out here?"

"This is by way of a surprise inspection visit. We Child Protective Services people are nasty, we like to sneak up on people like this, just to make sure things are going well. Additionally, I have some things to tell Harry about. May I just drive on to the house and wait for you in the garden?"

"Of course. We'll be along directly."

The car window was rolled back up and Agatha drove sedately off along the curved lane leading to the Weasley home. "We'd best hope Arthur's Wizzywig holds," said Mrs. Weasley, quietly. "I don't know how to *Obliviate* someone."

"What does that Wizzywig show?"

"Hm? Oh, old country house, maybe a little run-down but that's to be expected with so many children – modernized sometime in the last thirty years. The usual. I think he allowed for things like the chickens, that's to be expected out here in the country too."

"Pass me your wand for a second? I didn't bring mine out here." Mrs. Weasley passed her wand to Harry, who fired off a quick spell toward the tail of the car as it made the turn into the Weasley drive. "That should do it. I just reinforced, didn't add any details of my own – didn't want to have anything that conflicted. It was easier than I expected, too – I think that tree thing worked. It's like the place itself knew what I wanted and wasn't fighting me any more."

He gave the wand back to Mrs. Weasley, and soon they arrived in the front garden themselves. The Burrow didn't look any different to Harry, but he unfocused his eyes slightly and thought he could see it, the Wizzywigged illusion that Mr. Weasley had cast. And then suddenly he could see it completely, in all its glory and detail. It was a beautiful piece of work, and so realistic that he knew why Ms. Stone had no doubts about it. There was just enough truth in it to anchor it.

The social worker's car was parked in the drive near the Weasley Wedding Tree, as Harry was already beginning to think of it. Ms. Stone was seated on a garden bench under the tree, steadfastly not seeing the pair of gnomes that were hiding under the bench, or the fairy that was curiously investigating her hair ornaments. She rose to meet the approaching group. "Harry, you're looking well. Surprisingly well." Harry suddenly realized that he still didn't have his shirt on, and she was giving him a very thorough once-over. He was suddenly self-conscious.

"Erm. I'll be right back. I left my shirt in the vegetable patch."

"Wait just a moment. If you don't mind?" Agatha reached out and touched him lightly on the shoulder, then grasped his arm and led it gently through

a swing and checked his range of motion. She also touched some of the places where Harry had had abrasions on his side and back, and finally turned his face so she could see clearly where he had been black and blue before. Harry was chilled inside. He'd forgotten to Wizzywig himself! As badly beaten as he had been, he should still have some traces of it, some bruising, some scabs and scars over the scrapes.

"Very impressive. You heal well, Harry?"

"Always have. It takes a lot to put a mark on me. See this?" Harry said, thinking fast and pointing at the thin scar that marked the basilisk bite. "I fell out of a tree I shouldn't have been climbing at school and almost put a branch through my arm. Now it's almost like it didn't happen. I've been doing the exercises and things the PT guys at the hospital showed me for my shoulder and knee, and they almost don't hurt at all any more."

"Have you taken him to see a local physician?" Ms. Stone asked Mrs. Weasley.

"Yes, we've gotten him appropriate medical attention. Plus I do a little herbal healing myself, so I've been using ointments on those scrapes, too. They do heal surprisingly fast with a little arnica and comfrey. With seven children, I've learned how to deal with minor emergencies over the years."

"I'm sure you have. Oh, sorry, Harry, go get your shirt by all means." Harry gratefully escaped around the corner of the house while Ms. Stone started to ask Mrs. Weasley more questions about how he was adjusting. He missed the looks of disappointment on Ginny's and Hermione's faces, but Ms. Stone didn't.

Once again decently clad and feeling much more secure, Harry rejoined the group in the house. Mrs. Weasley was in the kitchen putting up a pitcher of lemonade, while Ron, Hermione and Ginny were keeping Ms. Stone occupied in the living room. "May I ask what you all were doing out in the meadow when I drove up? It looked like you had quite a little project going on."

"Oh, we just planted a tree for Harry," said Ginny. "We were all out in the back garden and he found this little oak tree growing in the veggie patch, and he didn't want to just weed it out, so we saved it and planted it over there at the end of the meadow. We all have trees, Mum and Dad planted one for each of us when we were born, and now Harry has a tree, too."

"I think that's very nice," said Ms. Stone, clearly impressed. "So you think it's a good thing Harry is here?"

"Oh, yes. He was always so sad at the end of the year when we had to come home for summer, and happy to go back to school. And that's just wrong."

Harry sank into one of the overstuffed and slightly threadbare armchairs. "The only happy times I had during the summers were when I was allowed to come here a few times, and leave for school from here."

"And do you come here for the Christmas holidays as well?"

"Usually I've stayed at the school. There are always a few who stay, and some of the teachers stay, so it's not as bad as it sounds. A few times Ron has stayed with me. And Hermione here stayed one year."

"Harry, what would you do if you could stay anywhere you wanted? If you had control of some funds, for example, and could live wherever you wanted to?"

"Well, I hope I'd still be welcome here. This is as close to a real home as I've ever had, and just in the past week I've learned what I missed all those years."

Ms. Stone nodded, and shuffled some of her papers on the coffee table. "As you know, the police were doing some investigation into the matter of possible assets that might have been left by your parents. They were concerned that such assets might have been siphoned off by the Dursleys over the years; such things are not unheard of. What they found was that your parents apparently had several investment trusts at the Bank of England, which have remained untouched since their deaths. Apparently your aunt and uncle did not know of these accounts and never had access to them. Generally, if such a trust remains inactive for a certain period of time, it reverts to the Crown as unclaimed funds, but if an heir is found, it can be turned over. Under the circumstances, your parents' trusts can be turned over to you. Don't get me wrong, it's not enough to make you wealthy, by any means, but it will make you independent and able to live comfortably at least until you're done with University, if managed properly. And under the common law, at your age, you can certainly take control of these funds for yourself and live wherever you want, without further adult or Court supervision. Child Protective Services only needs to be involved where a minor is either too young to handle their own finances, or does not have independent means of support."

"Are you saying I don't need to be in a foster home or have the Court keep tabs on me?"

"Not once these funds are turned over to you. You will probably require the services of a solicitor to get it straightened out with the least delay."

"Does this mean I'd be considered adult?"

"Not quite. The term is 'emancipated minor'. You can do most of the things an adult can do already; the rest will come in the next few years. You can control your own chattel property, join the Armed Forces, get married if you want. You can leave school and get a job or go on to university of your choice. You can make your own Will, which I'd advise that you do at this point, as if something happened to you now, these funds would, in fact, revert to the Dursleys as your nearest blood relatives, and I'm pretty sure you wouldn't want that. I know at this age, you teenagers think you're immortal, but someone in your position needs to take precautions." Harry glanced at Ron over the top of Ms. Stone's head, and saw the other boy was as amused by the comment, under the circumstances, as he was. "You can control your own medical care, including choosing physicians and deciding on elective procedures. You can sign a power of attorney so an adult can sign contracts for you. At seventeen, you'll be able to get your drivers' license, and at eighteen, you can drink, gamble, vote, and sign binding contracts on your own. Generally get on with your life." She frowned in concentration. "You don't have much experience with money, I believe you said, so it would be advisable for you to get competent financial



advice as to how to maintain your investments, budget, and that sort of thing. A good solicitor should be able to recommend someone, although you wouldn't be bound to take that advice, of course."

Harry was floored. The idea of being completely in control of his own life was so unexpected that he couldn't quite take it all in.

"Does ... does this mean I'd have to leave here?"

Before Ms. Stone could respond, Mrs. Weasley answered with some asperity, "Of course not, Harry, you're family now. You stay as long as you want, just like Fred and George. Entrepreneurs they may be, they still come home for dinner. I just wonder how fast this can all be done. You'll be getting on that plane at the end of the month and be out of touch for a long time, remember."

"Wait ... plane?" asked Ms. Stone.

"We got the good news a few days ago that Harry was selected for an exchange program through school," said Mrs. Weasley. "He'll be going to school in America this year. Oh, dear, didn't my husband call your office about it this morning? I thought that's what you were here to talk about, actually."

"No, I must have left before he called. Well, this changes things. I think we can get this done within the time limit if I push it. We can work through a Court-appointed solicitor for the sake of expediency, and then Harry can change his solicitor later if he wants. This makes it even more imperative that Harry have a Will, of course. He can work on that with the Court solicitor or his own as he chooses, and he doesn't have to wait until the trust funds are turned over to him for that. But I certainly have my work cut out for me." She paused and took a sip of lemonade. "This is, of course, assuming you want it, Harry. You do not *have* to take the emancipated minor route if you don't want to. If you prefer, you can stay a ward of the Crown and a foster child of the Weasleys, and your trust funds will be administered by Family Court and turned over to you at age eighteen. There are boys whose cases I oversee for whom I would not even suggest the emancipated minor route, and who are not capable of caring for themselves even at eighteen. But I think you are quite competent to make these choices for yourself, and the first and perhaps most important choice is whether you want to do it at all."

"May I ... may I think about it a little bit? Just a few moments?"

"Of course. Take all the time you need. You may want to look over the current statements for the trusts to help you decide," she said, handing them to him. "While you're thinking, I'd like to speak to Mrs. Weasley privately for a bit, if you don't mind."

"Why don't we just step into my sewing room, then?" asked Mrs. Weasley. They took their lemonade with them and closed the door of the sewing room.

"Mrs. Weasley, from what you and the children and Harry have said, he's happy here, and I don't think he's going to leave even if he does take the emancipation option, am I correct?"

"We wouldn't ask him to leave. We took him in because we love him, and would have done so even if CPS was not involved. I won't pretend the support stipend wouldn't have been nice – my husband's Ministry salary is generous but doesn't stretch far with seven children, and there were some rough patches when we had five of them in school at the same time. I realize we won't get that if he becomes emancipated. But we won't toss Harry out on the street if we don't receive it. I don't think he would want to leave right now, either. The boy desperately needs some constancy in his life, and I don't think he'd voluntarily leave the only shelter he has. Emancipation or no, he needs some time to learn to stand on his own and become the man I know he will eventually be."

"That's what I thought. I know we discussed the impact on your family before, but then I hadn't seen the way your daughter Ginny looked at Harry. Or that other girl, Hermione, I think her name is? What's her relationship to this family, anyway?"

"She's a schoolmate – a classmate of Ron's and Harry's, and a friend of Ginny's, for all they're almost two years apart in age. They're good friends."

"From the looks of Ginny and Hermione, they're both thinking of being more than Harry's ... friend. He's a very good-looking boy. Especially with his shirt off."

Mrs. Weasley pursed her lips in thought before answering. "Ginny has had a crush on Harry since the day the boys met, when they were eleven and she was ten. Now she's fifteen and beginning to realize what the real situation is between boys and girls. Hermione, I think, is more interested in my son Ron than in Harry, but it is entirely possible that she hasn't made a decision as to which one she's really interested in yet. I think she only today noticed how Harry's filled out. He really was quite atrociously thin before. Ron noticed Hermione some time ago but hasn't made a move because he doesn't want to risk cutting Harry out. And Harry, bless him, has been so wrapped up in his own problems that he hasn't even realized that the girls might find him attractive. I think he only started to notice them recently, and he doesn't have much self-confidence yet."

"This could be a very volatile situation, you realize."

"Ms. Stone, I have guided five sons through adolescence now and haven't lost one of them. Girls aren't all that different. Harry will be in America for the next year and away from all of the others. Until then, I'm keeping a weather eye out for situations developing. But so far there hasn't even been as much as stolen kisses behind the garage. And believe me, I'd know. I don't think anybody will be shagging anybody else in the bushes this summer, anyway. These are all good, sensible – and yes, innocent – children here. I made sure my own know the facts of life, as I'm sure Hermione's parents have told her. None of them is rushing to try it out, though. Next year they'll all be of the age of consent and things will work out as they work out. I'm not going to try to keep them apart if that's what they want, just make sure there are no untoward consequences. I'm sure you know as well as I do that trying to force young people apart is often the way to push them together."

"So you wouldn't object to Harry seeing your daughter?"

"Not once they're both of age, no. They're at the same school for ten months a year, so there's nothing I could do to prevent it in any event. Come to that, I wouldn't mind having him as a son-in-law. He's a good boy, and there are far worse ones out there for Ginny to choose. Or maybe Harry will meet someone on this American trip. Or maybe they'll both find someone else in University. For that matter, he could even turn out to be more interested in Ron than in the girls. I don't think that's likely, but you never know, do you?"

"No, Mrs. Weasley, you never do. You never do." Ms. Stone sighed and finished her lemonade. "I think on that note, I should go see what Harry's decided."

She found Harry in the living room. The girls had gone upstairs, and Ron sat in a chair in the corner, being quietly supportive but not disturbing him. Harry was going through the trust statements, obviously trying to figure them out, not just checking bottom lines. "Do you have any questions, Harry?"

"No, I think I understand it all, it's just all so sudden ... and it looks like there's rather a lot here."

"That's the wonder of fifteen years of compounded interest. You won't continue to get those earnings once you start drawing on the trust funds for your support, you realize."

"I know that. If there's one thing I learned with the Dursleys, though, it's how to make do on the minimum necessary, so I think I can stretch this for quite a while." He put the statements in a neat pile on the table. "I think I'd like to take the emancipation option. I know I have two years of school to go and all, but there are some things I'd like to do, and it'll be easier if I have access to some money of my own. Just to have some spending money on this American trip, if nothing else." He looked up at her with a wry smile. "I promise I won't spend it all on wine, women and song. I don't drink, I wouldn't know what to do with a woman if one were dropped in my lap, and I can't carry a tune in a bucket."

Ms. Stone laughed. "Maybe you can afford a few voice lessons. I'll get started on the paperwork first thing tomorrow, since it'll take me the rest of the day just to get back to town. You'll have to come in to see the solicitor in a few days. I assume you can just come in to town with Mr. Weasley when he comes to work?"

"Yes, I did that once before. Just let him know when I need to be there, I guess."

"Good. I'll contact him when I've got things set up." She bundled most of the papers into her briefcase, but left a set of copies of the statements for Harry to continue reviewing. Before she left, she shook Harry's hand formally. "I'd just like you to know that I think you're doing the right thing, and that I think you will be a credit to your new family. If you want to stay in contact after everything is turned over to you, if you need some help organizing things, I'd be glad to help out. Given how many of my cases go, it's a pleasure and a relief when things work out as well as this for one of my clients."

"I ... think I'd like that. Thank you."

He watched through the front window as her car disappeared down the drive. When she was safely gone, he and Ron turned to each other, grinning. "This is going to be so *cool*!" he shouted. "No Dursleys, no Court supervision ... Yes! I am free of the Muggles!"

## Harry Potter and the Junior Year Abroad Wizard's Oath

Chapter Ten

Wizards' Oath

Harry and Ron did a little dance of liberation around the living room, ending when Harry tripped over a hassock which didn't manage to move out of the way in time, and wound up falling into the sofa. Hermione and Ginny came down the stairs just in time to see his graceful plunge into the upholstery, and laughed. Harry looked at Hermione upside down. "We're celebrating! No more Muggles! Hey! You're upside down!"

"Harry, honestly!" Harry realized that Hermione was not wearing the same clothes she had been earlier. Instead of jeans and a t-shirt, she was now wearing a striped beach robe that came to just above her knees, and thong sandals to match. She carried a beach bag. Ginny had also changed, and now had a pair of shorts and what looked like one of Ron's shirts on. "Ginny and I are going to go down to the pond and catch what's left of the afternoon sun. You and Ron might want to join us ... you're both a little bit whiff right now, you know? All that digging ... See you soon!" And she and Ginny bounced out the door.

"Are we really?" asked Ron, sniffing at his shirt.

"You are," said his mother, from the kitchen. "Pond or shower, take your pick."

"Pond it is, then!" said Harry. "Much better scenery!" Mrs. Weasley smiled knowingly as the two boys galloped up the stairs to get changed.

Five minutes later, Harry and Ron were back downstairs, Harry in swim trunks and Ron in an old pair of shorts, both bare-chested with towels and t-shirts thrown over their shoulders. Whooping with glee, they ran bare-footed down the path to the pond.

The girls had gotten enough of a head start that they had their ambush set up by the time Harry and Ron got there. They had spread out their blankets on the grass by the edge of the pond, and Hermione was just slipping out of her robe as the boys pelted down the path. "There you are! We were wondering what was taking you so long!"

"Took a sec to *impervius* my gl... oh my God it's that bathing suit!"

Hermione looked down at herself. "What, you don't like it?"

"No, no, it's just that I, um, was not expecting, um ..."

"I loaned my other one to Ginny. It fits her just right, too, see?" Ginny pulled off Ron's shirt to reveal the top of an extremely skimpy pink bikini. And rather a lot of herself.

Harry felt his body respond, and his trunks would hide nothing; he dropped his towel and ran for his life, straight into the pond.

"Ron, would you mind putting some tanning lotion on my back?" asked Hermione.

Ron broke for the pond as well, and launched himself in a flat dive.

"I take it that's a no," said Ginny.

The pond was large enough to be able to do a fairly decent lap, but shallow, so that it was only chest-deep on Harry at the centre, where he had taken refuge. Harry looked back, in time to see Ginny slip out of the shorts. The bottom of the bikini matched the top in skiminess. He groaned. Ron surfaced next to him, having swum underwater for as long as he could.

"Is she trying to kill me?" asked Ron in an aggrieved tone.

"Which one?"

Ron gave him a look.

"Sorry. I think so. She got me as a side casualty. It may be days before I can get out of the water without embarrassing myself."

"Maybe she intended to get you and I'm the side casualty."

"I doubt it. It's not me she's interested in."

"Hey, I saw the picture she sent you ... the one you stuck in your trunk lid. Same bathing suit. Incredible smile. Not much else."

"That was because I wrote her that I hoped she was healing up well. So she showed me exactly how well."

Ron looked at him. "You cannot possibly be that thick."

"Well, neither can you! Remember the picture she sent you? On that miniscooter in Rome, the miniskirt, all that leg?" This picture was in the lid of Ron's trunk, and he had showed Harry after Harry showed him the bathing suit picture. "And then there's all that snarking in the Common Room. She's just trying to get your attention."

"She's got my attention now, all right." He looked back toward the shore. "That bathing suit is indecent, it is." Harry was reminded of the more conservative styles worn by most witches and wizards, and realized that Ron was probably not used to seeing so much female skin. He certainly wasn't going to miss the opportunity, judging from the rapt expression on his face. "Now she's got Ginny doing the lotion thing... Oh boy." There was a battered old floating platform in the center of the pond, and Ron swam over to it and hoisted himself up on it. Harry joined him, holding onto the edge of the platform and letting his body float. "I just realized I have another problem."

"Oh?"

"Ginny. Take a look at her."

"I've been ..."

"I just realized how curvy she is now. It doesn't show under school robes. No wonder Corner was interested last year. And Dean. I'm going to have to start following her around with a Quidditch bat to keep the guys off her."

"You may as well start with me, then."

"What?"

"If you're going to be bashing people for noticing your sister's a girl, you should start with me. I'll even give you one free shot. Make it a good one. You wouldn't believe the things that have been going through my head since she took that shirt off."

"Oh. Well, it's okay if *you're* interested. It's just other guys I'm concerned about."

"I don't know if I should be flattered or insulted."

"Well, I trust you."

"Definitely insulted."

"No, I'm serious. If I walked in on the two of you, umm, you know, I'd know at least she wasn't being forced ... you care about her."

"Anyone that tries to force your sister is asking to be hurt."

"True. She'd hex them into the middle of next month, at least."

Harry hoisted himself out of the water onto the platform, still looking at the sunbathing girls. Hermione was face up, one knee drawn up gracefully, and her white bathing suit was set off nicely by her summer tan. Ginny was getting the sun on her back. Harry wasn't sure which vision was more appealing. "But seeing, and ... and wanting ... that's a lot different than what she deserves. What either of them deserves. What I want ... I don't even know what it is that I want. I don't know who it is that I want. I don't know if my ... wanting ... would be returned. And even if I did know ... I couldn't do anything about it. Not now."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, just in the short run, I'll be leaving in a few weeks. I'll be gone a long time. Lots of things can change in that long. I don't want to start something when I'll be gone so long. And in the long run ... you know what I told you yesterday. About the Prophecy. I don't dare start anything that might hurt somebody when ... if ..."

"Will you stop that? You don't know for sure it's going to end that way."

"Don't I? How can it end any other way? And is it right for me to even think about getting involved with someone even if it only *might* end that way? It's not fair to whoever it is."

"Ginny knows how it is already."

"And so does Hermione, and so do you, but it still wouldn't be right for me to start something with anybody, even if they do know. On the one hand, I don't want to hurt someone if I don't make it through. I don't want to risk causing somebody else the kind of pain I've felt. On the other, I already feel bad enough that you're all in danger because of me – imagine how bad I'd feel if someone was a target and got hurt just because we were in a relationship? And what if I did love someone, and lost them? I've already lost so much. No, even if somebody was willing to take the risk, I'm not. It just doesn't make sense to go opening myself up to losing someone else. Not for me, not for now. It'll have to wait for later. If there is a later."

"So what are you going to do for now?"

"For now, I'm going to enjoy the scenery and have what fun I can – like pushing you into the pond!" He suited action to words, and much splashing and laughter ensued.

The girls watched the horseplay from the safety of the shore. The boys had not been keeping their voices down, and sound carries very well over water, so they had heard enough of the conversation to be worried. Very worried.

"That," Hermione said, "is not good."

"Not good at all," agreed Ginny.

"Let's see if we can talk to Ron privately later. In the meantime, I think it's time to, um, discommode them a little more."

"With or without our tops?"

"Oh, with. We're only trying to tease them right now. We really don't want to start something we're not ready to finish."

Both girls waded out into the water and slipped beneath the surface with the grace of mermaids, unseen by the splashing boys. They both came shooting up like porpoises in the middle of the 'Tidal Wave' game that was going on, and joined in the watery mayhem.

Some time later, Harry became aware that Hedwig was sitting on the pond float, attempting to stay as far away from the splashing water as possible. A few drops shone like diamonds on her white feathers, and she looked reproachfully at him, almost as if to say, *What am I? A duck?* She had a note in her beak, and delivered it carefully into his wet hand before winging back to the safety of the shore.

"Whassat?"

"Hm? Oh, your dad and the twins just got home. Your mum thinks I should go back up to the house and take them out to my tree. She wants the rest of you up some time before dinner." He splashed his way to the shore, towelled off, and followed Hedwig up the path.

Now it was the girls' turn to be transfixed. "Ooooo," said Ginny. "I wonder if he knows how good he looks when his trunks are all wet and clingy like that ..."

Ron placed a hand on top of her head and ducked her. "Behave yourself, girl! You're still only fifteen!" he chided, laughingly, as she surfaced.

"So? You looked when you were fifteen!"

"That's different! I'm a guy! Guys are supposed to look."

"I don't see that that makes any difference." Harry made the last turn out of sight, and she sighed with disappointment.

Ron was looking, too, until Harry was gone. Then he heaved himself back up onto the float. "How much of that conversation did you girls hear?"

"Enough to be seriously worried," said Hermione. "He's developing almost a Superman thing ... 'I love Lois but I can't tell her because my enemies could strike at me through her...'"

Ron and Ginny were puzzled. "Who's Superman?" asked Ron.

"Who's Lois?" said Ginny.

Hermione gaped at both of them. As friendly as she was with the Weasleys, times like this made it clear just how much of a disconnect there was between the Muggle and Wizarding worlds. "You know ... Superman? Up up and away, faster than a speeding bullet, all that? Comic books?"

"Never heard of that one. I've got a full collection of *Martin Miggs, The Mad Muggle*, though. Think I'd like this Superman thing?"

"You might. But I do not want to talk about Superman right now. I want to talk about Harry."

"He's depressed."

"He has a right to be. The question is, what do we do about it?"

"Can we do anything about it? There isn't much time before he goes away. And I think he was right there, starting something when there's only a few weeks would be pretty useless."

"How about some non-committed snogging? Just fun, you know? No promises made, none taken?"

"And just who would be the designated snogee?"

"I volunteer."

"I sort of thought you would, Gin. Mum is going to kill me. I just know it'd be all my fault, somehow."

"But what if he doesn't want me?"

"A, I doubt that, given the way he reacted when you took your shirt off," said Hermione. "B, there's two of us."

"But I thought ... you and Ron ..."

Ron turned scarlet.

"I wouldn't know," said Hermione. "Because your annoying git of a brother hasn't *said* anything yet!"

"Well of *course* I haven't said anything!" blurted out Ron. "I thought you fancied Harry! I never thought I had a chance with you!"

Ginny groaned. "You two should consider writing soap operas when you get out of school. Ron, you write all the male lines and Hermione, you write all the female ones."

"So does this mean I should take myself off the designated snogee list?" asked Hermione. "I remember how bent out of shape you were about Viktor. Are you likely to get the same way again?"

Ron considered it very carefully. "No. Viktor was different. And this is not about us anyway, this is about Harry. Hell, I'd put myself *on* the designated snogee list if I thought it would help." He caught the sideways glances both girls were giving him. "What? Look, I'm not ... stop looking at me like that! I'm just saying there's very little I wouldn't do if he asked, okay? Not because I fancy him or anything, but because he's *Harry*."

"You love him too, don't you?" Hermione's voice was quiet.

"Of course I do," Ron replied miserably. "Not *that* way, but ... well, if there ever was a guy I *might* feel that way about, it would be him. I've got no idea how he feels about it, of course. It's not the sort of thing one bloke can ask another."

"Mm. I can see that. Funny, I sort of thought it would be different in the Wizarding world than among the Muggles. But I guess people are the same in both worlds, aren't they?" mused Hermione.

"Okay," said Ginny breezily, totally ruining the introspective mood. "So we make a pact between the three of us. We do whatever it takes – *whatever* it takes – to make Harry feel better. Maybe all he really needs is to talk about things – he's had a really rough couple of months – but if it's more than that, that's OK, too. And hang the consequences! Done?"

"Done," said Hermione, grabbing Ginny's outstretched hand.

"And done," said Ron, putting his hand over both of theirs. A weird tingle shot from the clenched hands up all three of their forearms, and Hermione squealed and tried to pull her hand away.

"What was *that*?"

"Now we're in it for real. Wizard's Oath. I wasn't expecting that, but I guess we all felt intensely enough about it," said Ron.

The discussion moved from the float to the side of the pond to dry off, and Ginny towelled herself off in record time and trotted up the path to allow Ron and Hermione a little snog time – for practice, they said. But when she got up to the house, she ran into the kitchen and came up against that most feared opponent of the average teenager – an angry mother. "*Ginevra Weasley!* What were you three getting into down by the pond?! I could tell from *here* there was magic going off, and if I start getting Ministry owls about you three, I'm going to ..."

"Mum, Mum! We weren't doing magic! None of us even had our wands with us."

"Well, *something* was going on! What were you doing?"

"We made a pact and it turned into a Wizard's Oath. We didn't mean to, but it happened, and that's how it is!"

"What sort of pact?" Mrs. Weasley felt concern overriding her suspicions.

"To help make Harry feel better. He's obviously happier now that he's living here, but there's still so much sadness ... and he has those dreams ... and he doesn't talk about stuff. So we agreed that we would try to make him happy. Whatever it took."

"Oh, Ginny. Haven't we told you about making sure these things are properly phrased? That's so broad, you have no idea how much trouble you could get into with it!"

"I have a pretty good idea," said Ginny, in a small voice.

"Did you at least put a time limit on it?"

"No."

"Oh good heavens. You've gotten yourselves ... all three of you ... in a *permanent* pact?" Mrs. Weasley sat down suddenly. Ginny nodded, looking at the floor. "Well, I suppose it could be worse. It's for a positive purpose. And I don't think he'll take advantage of it, but still ... Ginny, promise me ... unless it is absolutely necessary, don't tell Harry about this. I don't know how he'll take it, but my guess is it will make him extremely uncomfortable."

"We weren't going to tell him. We're not *stupid*, Mum."

"Some days it's hard to tell, Ginny. Now where are your brother and Hermione?"

"Having a little snog down by the pond, I think. Hermione finally got Ron to admit he liked her."

"But what if ... with Harry ... no, best just to let things sort themselves out. All right, you get changed, and then go outside and get the table set for thirteen, and when those two show up, I'll send them out to help you. If they're not back in five minutes, I'll send Pig down for them."

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Harry had been vastly surprised when he returned to the house and found not only Mr. Weasley and the twins, as he expected, but also Bill and Charlie, and a Weasley uncle, aunt and cousin he'd never met before – Mr. Weasley's older brother, Marcus, and his family. Marcus had the bright red hair typical of the Weasley family, while his wife had the platinum hair and classic good looks Harry had come to associate with Malfoys. Her attitude was a lot better, though, and she greeted him warmly. The cousin was a strawberry-blonde boy who would probably be starting at Hogwarts next year, Harry guessed. Harry apologized for dripping all over the floor and made a dash for the stairs, coming down to greet them properly when he was fully dressed.

It was quite a parade that headed out to the meadow, and soon they were all standing around the little tree. Marcus put his hands on either side of the seedling for a moment, not quite touching it, and held them there for a moment. "Molly did a good job of setting the spell, Arthur. Especially considering she wasn't born a Weasley. Now let's get it locked in."

As before, one by one, each person present made a blood offering, even the young boy, who very solemnly allowed himself to be pricked and added his blood, pronouncing the spell extremely carefully. "It's his first time being allowed to do something like this," whispered Marcus to his brother. "He's being very grown-up about it, don't you think?" Harry noted that the Weasley men all carried their own knives, and wondered sort of vaguely if that was a Weasley clan thing or a general Wizarding thing that he hadn't noticed before now.

After the blooding, each person added something to the planting of the tree. The Weasley sons and their cousin Gerry hunted for stones and placed them in a little ring around the tree. Mr. Weasley had a bag of black soil he had brought with him. He moved the mulch aside, sprinkled the soil gently around the tree, and then replaced the mulch. Marcus and his wife had brought bottles of water with them which they said was from a magical spring near their home in Ireland, and watered the tree. Then there were hugs and kisses and slaps on the back all around, and they returned to the house, Harry feeling slightly flustered by the obvious affection he was held in.

He walked next to Mr. Weasley and asked him, quietly, "What was in that bag? It looked like regular dirt, but you were handling it like it was something special."

"It was, Harry. When Molly told me about the tree, I left the office early and went out ... I went to where your parents are buried, and took some earth from their grave. That way they're still connected to you, and to your tree, and to our family."

"You went all the way to St. Mary's? And what did they say about your taking the earth?" Harry didn't think the very proper rector at St. Mary's, the church the Dursleys attended, would care for someone as improper as Arthur Weasley digging up soil from the graves.

"St. Mary's? Harry, your parents were buried in the Memorial Garden at Avalon, not in any Muggle churchyard."

"But ... Aunt Petunia took me there at Easter to put flowers on the graves. She said it was a family duty."

"Well, she may have felt the need to make a show of it for the other Muggles. And someplace to take you if you asked questions. But if there's anything buried there at all, it's a pair of empty boxes. The Dursleys never had control of your parents' bodies, and you can be sure they were treated properly and with respect, according to Wizard custom, Harry." Mr. Weasley placed a hand comfortingly on Harry's shoulder. "I had no idea they'd done something like that."

After a few moments, Harry spoke again, quietly. "Mr. Weasley ..."

"Dad, please."

"Dad, then. Would it be possible for you to take me there sometime? I'd like to visit if it's allowed."

"Of course it's allowed. We'll make the time for it before you leave, all right?"

"All right. Thank you." The rest of the walk passed in silence.

By the time they made it back to the house, the table had been set, and Ginny was looking daggers at Ron and Hermione because they hadn't gotten back until after she'd finished all the place settings, although the latter two were completely oblivious of it. It was obvious that something had happened after he left the pond, because Ron and Hermione were looking at each other and then looking away, stumbling through half-completed sentences, and generally acting like gits, the both of them. Fred and George rapidly twigged to the new situation, and spent dinner razzing Ron unmercifully. Harry found himself quite happy that this made Ron the centre of attention for a while, because he was thoroughly unnerved by the events of the day. The business with the tree had been quite unexpected, and he had just gone with the flow, the implications not hitting him until later. Then the interview with Agatha Stone, which had suddenly relieved the pressure of being under supervision by Muggles. Then the delightful ambush by two teenage girls in very skimpy bikinis, and the sudden realization that there was absolutely *nothing* he could do about it. The revelation about his parents' graves. And the arrival of Weasley kin who were unknown to him, who were nonetheless willing to welcome him into the family. He wondered if they had been warned of the possible consequences of being related to the Boy-Who-Got-People-Around-Him-Killed. Did they know the risks they were submitting Gerry to? He had a sick feeling that the young boy would be showing up in his nightmares now. From the chatter of the Weasley family around him, he understood that more and more Weasley relatives would be arriving over the next few weeks, even after he had left for school, to assist in the tree spell. He didn't know there were so damn many Weasleys; they would be coming from all over the world. He didn't want this! He hadn't agreed to this! His stomach rebelled, and he flung himself away from the table with a muttered excuse and apology. He wasn't sure where he was going, just that he had to go somewhere. There were trees around him, and a path sloping downwards, and

he thought he would wind up at the pond again, but the path was too long, and after a while he found himself down by the shores of the River Otter. The lights of the town of Ottery St. Catchpole across the river sparkled on the water, and thin clouds veiled the moon and stars. The path turned left to skirt the river, and Harry knew it ended at a sandy beach where the Weasleys kept a dilapidated rowboat tied up for the occasional fishing trip, but tonight he sat down on the bank where his legs could dangle above the lapping water. His fingers clawed into the soft earth of the bank and pried a stone loose. He flung it as far out into the river as he could. Then another. And another. He wanted to scream, but didn't dare; the sound would probably bring somebody to him, and company was the last thing he wanted.

But it seemed company would seek him out regardless. After some time in which he heard only the sounds of frogs and crickets, he heard the crunch of footsteps coming hesitantly down the path. "Harry? Harry, are you down here?" It was Hermione.

He sighed resignedly and replied. "Yeah, I'm here."

"Okay. I'll leave you alone, then." He heard the footsteps start back up the path.

"What, you're not here to get me to come back? To cajole me out of my bad mood?"

"No, actually, I just had a few too many Weasleys for comfort. Thought I'd find someplace to be alone for a bit until some of them go away. But since you got here first, I'll go somewhere else."

"No, it's okay. Come sit." She came down to the bank and sat down next to him. Her white t-shirt was a pale blur in the darkness; he could see no other details of her, and it was easy to pretend he was still alone. He had exhausted the supply of decent throwing rocks within arm's reach, and had now been reduced to throwing pebbles. After a moment, she felt around in the earth on the far side of her, and passed him a few rocks without comment.

Plish. Plish. Plop. Plish\*ribbit!\*splash. "Sorry about that, frog." Plish. "Too many Weasleys, huh?"

"Mm hm," Hermione answered. "I'm from a small family. Only child. I have a couple of cousins on either side, but we don't all get together often. We could never do thirteen for dinner. And they're all such a ... boisterous ... bunch."

"Boisterous, yeah. They're so ... different ... from the only family I ever knew. I don't know how to take it, sometimes."

"From what you've told us, your family wasn't exactly normal."

"Maybe not, but at least I always knew where I stood with them. I knew what to do, how to react. It wasn't nice, but at least it was consistent. Up until the last few weeks. Now I feel ... I don't know what I feel. There are too many changes, all at once. Just today ... I suppose it's all good things, right? So why do I just want to run away? Find myself a nice hole to crawl into, and then pull the hole in after me?"

"You just said it. It's all at once. You're not having enough time to adjust to one thing before the next one comes along."

"And that's not going to stop any time soon. With this stupid American thing I signed on for, I'm going to have an entire *year* of changes. All new classes, all new people, a whole new society ... but how could I turn it down? It was Sirius' last gift to me."

"Do you really not want to go?"

"No, I suppose I do ... but it's scary, you know? It'll be the first time I'll really be on my own. What if I screw it up? What if I can't learn something that's this secret weapon Dumbledore wants me to look for? What if ... what if nobody likes me?" The last was said so quietly that Hermione could barely hear it.

She put her arm around his shoulder. "Harry, you'll be travelling with a bunch of Hogwarts kids and one of the teachers for chaperone. You won't be alone. And I'm sure the Americans will be nice. They probably picked the ones that will be travelling with you to make sure everyone will be comfortable."

"Listen to me, the big brave Gryffindor," muttered Harry. "Scared to leave home, just like a firstie."

"Do you think it will be easy for Ron and me to leave Hogwarts when we're done with seventh year? For Ron to leave the Burrow? For me to leave my parents and get my own place? A job? University? Whatever is out there? You're getting to that place a little before us, but it's something we all face eventually."

"A job? University?" Harry laughed bitterly. "I wish that was all I had to worry about. I'd be happy to face that. Income taxes! A mortgage! Soiled nappies! Those should be the worst any of us ever face." He threw another rock, viciously. "What have I got to look forward to, though? War. Death. Murder. You guys have a choice, you can leave. You can go do whatever you want. I don't have a choice. Everything I am, everything I do, everything I learn, is all shaped toward one thing. Killing Voldemort. And every time I screw up, every time I mess up a potion, or have trouble in Transfiguration, all that does is tell me I'm. Not. Good. Enough. I make too many mistakes. And any single mistake is likely to get people killed. Oh, no, not myself, mind you. Except maybe the last one, and that one doesn't count because I won't remember it. How do you think it feels to know that any mistake I make could be the one that kills you, or Ron, or ... or ...?" Harry drew his knees up and wrapped his arms around them, hooking his heels onto the edge of the riverbank. "And now there's all these other people getting into it ... I thought Mrs. Weasley just meant the immediate family, I didn't know there'd be all these people ... bringing their kids in to sign up for the privilege of being one of the folks I can kill! Think young Gerry up there knows what he just signed on for? I don't think they bothered to explain it to him! But I know. So I have to be perfect, don't I? I have to go find Dumbledore's damned secret weapon, and I have to learn all the Hogwarts stuff *as well as* whatever they'll teach in America, and I have to go through all of the stuff in those books Remus gave me and learn them by heart until I'm a killing *machine*, and I have to get everything note-perfect because the one thing I don't learn could be the one thing the fate of the Wizarding World depends on. And *I CAN'T DO IT!* I can't be perfect! Maybe you could, with your being the smartest witch in a hundred years. I wish I could be like you. You have no idea how much I've envied



you, ploughing through book after book and finding the solutions you need, if you don't have the answer already. I can't do that. I've never been able to do that. I'm not good enough, it takes me too long, I don't remember." He turned his face up to the sky, and Hermione could see tear tracks reflecting the moonlight. "Do you know, there are nights ... when I go out alone in the dark ... and I think about just ... calling to Voldemort ... I could, you know, I can feel him and he can feel me ... and letting him come and take me? Just so it would be over? But then ... but then I think of you, and Ron, and hell, even Mrs. Figg's cats, and I think what life might be like with him running things, and I can't do it ... I can't. But I'm afraid I can't save everything, either."

For once in her life, Hermione Granger had no answer. There was no pat solution, no fact that she could use to put everything back in order again. She pulled Harry closer to her, and held him, and soon he became aware that she was crying as he was crying.

"And now I've made you cry," he whispered hoarsely. "I never meant to make you cry. I want you to be happy. I want to see you and Ron be happy together. At least you two have a reasonable chance for it."

"We want you to be happy too, Harry. We want all of us to come through this in one piece. And you're not going to do that if you've already given up. We can help you with everything else ... haven't we already been there with you before? You know we're not going to leave you now. Even if you want us to. We're too stubborn for that. Nothing in the Prophecy says you have to do it alone. You don't need to do it all alone. That's what friends are for."

Harry did not reply, but clutched her tightly. She could feel his muscles fighting each other, tense under his t-shirt, and it was a long time before he relaxed. The lights of Ottery St. Catchpole were going out across the river, and the moon was moving on. Silently Harry got up, and silently he helped her to her feet, and silently they returned to the house.

## Harry Potter and the Junior Year Abroad The Facts Of Life

### Chapter Eleven

#### The Facts of Life

Whether because of exhaustion or Mrs. Weasley's chamomile and lemon verbena tea, Harry's sleep was deep and dreamless that night. He slept a little later than usual, and by the time he stumbled down to breakfast, everybody else was finishing up. Mr. Weasley was drinking coffee and reading the *Daily Prophet*; the younger Weasleys and Hermione were cleaning the last off their plates, and Bill and Charlie, who had both stayed the night, had taken their coffee into the living room. Mrs. Weasley handed Harry a muffin and a glass of milk for starters, before turning to the stove to make a fresh batch of eggs and bacon.

"Harry, my boy ... I hope you're feeling a bit more the thing this morning?" asked Mr. Weasley, looking over the rim of his coffee cup. "Hermione said you were feeling a bit ... er, over-Weasleyed, as it were?"

"A bit, I guess. I just hadn't realized people outside the immediate family would be coming in."

"This is nothing. Wait until a wedding happens. Nothing but red hair as far as the eye can see. We Weasleys are prolific, but we also love to travel. The Burrow passes to whichever son loves it the most, and the rest scatter to the ends of the earth. But we always come back for the big occasions. And the adoption of a child into the clan is a Big Occasion. Even if your hair isn't the proper colour." His eyes twinkled as he looked at Harry. "Wonder if a bottle of Muggle hair dye would help? I've always wanted to find out how that works. You've certainly the eyes to go with it."

Harry smoothed his hair down self-consciously. "Probably not. My mum was a redhead, though. Does that help any?"

"There's hope for the grandchildren, then," said Mr. Weasley with some satisfaction.

"Grandchildren?" squeaked Harry.

"Certainly. One day, anyway. It's something to look forward to."

"I'm having enough trouble thinking about getting through the next week without thinking about ... about ..."

"Arthur, stop embarrassing the boy," said Mrs. Weasley. "There's time and plenty for that. And other sons who should be getting about the grandchildren business first."

"Well, that's my cue to leave," said Bill, from the living room.

"And mine," Charlie agreed. They put their cups down and stood up.

"No, don't be silly," Mrs. Weasley said. "I'll stop teasing you. We see you both so seldom these days. Sit back down. Have some more eggs."

"Yes, Mum," they chorused, grinning.

A flurry of wings broke into the morning conversation, and no less than six owls, each straining to carry a large bundle of letters, flew in through the kitchen window. "Gracious, what's all this, then? Fred, George, have you been subscribing to Muggle magazines again?"

George jumped up and untied a bundle from an owl as the others waited impatiently. "No, this is all for Harry. How come you're getting so much mail?"

"Huh. I dunno." Harry was honestly puzzled. This was a lot even for the 'fan club.'

"Oh, that's right," said Mr. Weasley. "When Harry was in hospital, it was in the *Prophet*, and they got quite a few cards and such for him. I had his mail held until he was better able to deal with it, and then forgot about it until yesterday. So this is all the mail for the last few weeks. Sorry about that, Harry."

"Let's see what you've got here then." Fred joined George at the counter and started opening bundles.

"Hey, don't ..." Harry grabbed for one of the bundles, and George held it out of his reach.

"Maybe it's more of that 'fan mail,'" said Ron, an evil gleam in his eye. "You should have enough pictures to be able to share them around a bit, hm?"

"Pictures? This sounds interesting ... toss me a bundle, would you?" said Charlie from the doorway.

"Ron, you promised!" said Harry reproachfully.

"I only promised not to tell Fred and George, and I haven't even spoken to them, now have I?"

"Now, now, boys, you just give Harry back his mail ..."

"Not more of *those* pictures?" Hermione asked, confirming that she had, indeed, seen what was in Harry's trunk.

"You saw my pictures?" Harry cried in dismay.

"Hey, that owl just stole my bacon!" Ginny added to the cacophony.

"Give me back my mail, George!"

"I'm Fred, he's George!"

"This one's perfumed," said Charlie.

Harry whipped his wand out of his back pocket. "*Accio* mail!" Five bundles and assorted loose pieces of mail leaped into his arms. He grinned and slithered under Ron's waving arms and out the back door into the garden, pursued by a pack of screaming redheads.

An hour later, the young men were all sitting in a circle under a spreading oak tree; Harry was just about finished opening his mail, piling it into stacks of innocuous cards from well-wishers, mail that would need to be answered, and pictures of girls. Including a few more explicit ones. Somehow it was a little easier to deal with now, with a bunch of guys, older guys, but not so old they seemed like adults. They helped him get past being embarrassed about it. About looking, anyway. Beyond that, though, it just got worse.

"This one's as good as the broomstick picture," said Ron, turning one of the photos over as he tried to decide which side was 'up'. "Maybe not as inventive, but a lot more action."

"Keep it if you like, then," said Harry.

"Really? Wow."

"You're giving away a perfectly good wank shot?" That was Fred – or maybe George.

"A what?"

"You know, a picture that's perfect for wanking to. That one is downright inspirational," said the twin, leaning over Ron's shoulder to look again.

"I wouldn't know." Harry suddenly realized that he'd said something wrong when he saw all five of them gape at him in astonishment. "What?"

"You wouldn't *know*? You mean you've never ..."

"What? I ... no!" He was honestly shocked. "That's just ... I wouldn't ..."

"Why on earth not? It's practically the national sport for teenage guys. After Quidditch, I mean," Ron clarified helpfully.

"But it's ..." Harry was so flustered he couldn't form a complete sentence.

"Harry." Bill's voice was calm and gentle, cutting through the confusion in Harry's mind. "What exactly were you taught about ... about touching yourself? Masturbating?" Harry winced involuntarily and rubbed his right hand with his left, as if massaging an old pain. That told Bill everything he needed to know.

"That it was ... something nasty. That I shouldn't ..."

"Uh huh. And just who taught you this?"

"Aunt Petunia." Harry's voice was little more than a whisper, and he'd obviously gone somewhere inside himself, not seeing the Weasley brothers any more. "I was six. I was taking a bath, and she caught me ... touching ... she pulled me out into the living room and told me never to do it again, it was nasty and vile and she ... she hit me."

"What did she hit you with?"

"The fireplace poker." Bill inhaled sharply, and Charlie winced and looked away. The twins muttered curses that would have reduced Aunt Petunia, had she been in earshot, to a smoking pile of ash.

"A *poker*?" Ron could barely believe it.

"My hand swelled up and I couldn't use it for a week."

Why do you still believe what she told you? Live according to her rules?" asked Charlie.

Confusion was written on Harry's face. This was obviously something that ran so deep he'd never thought consciously about it.

"Have you ever kissed a girl?" Bill asked.

Harry was getting defensive now. "Yeah, I kissed Cho Chang last year."

"That's impressive," said one of the twins, both of whom had had their own fantasies regarding Cho at various points.

"Ask him who started it," muttered Ron.

Harry glared at him. "She did."

"Did you like it?"

"Sort of like being attacked by the giant squid, actually."

"Hmm. That's more of a comment on *her* technique, then," said Charlie. "Anybody else?"

"Not really."

"Think about it?"

"Some."

"Harry ... what do you know about sex?" Bill persisted in his gentle questioning.

"It's ... you have to do it when you're married and want to have children. I've got a general idea of the mechanics, I think."

"Any other reason to do it?"

"No. Why should there be? It sounds pretty disgusting, actually."

One of the twins muttered, "Oh my god," and the other went pale.

"This, gentlemen," said Bill, "is why Hogwarts needs a sex ed program. Sounds like Aunt Petunia was trying to make sure Harry never reproduced. Harry, how the hell did you manage to get through five years sharing the Tower with these three maniacs," gesturing at Ron, Fred and George, garnering an outraged "Hey!" from the twins, "without knowing at least ... never mind. I think we have just gone beyond my ability to cope with the situation."

Ron was looking at Harry with a puzzled expression. "Harry ... down at the pond yesterday ... you were looking at Ginny and said something about 'the things that went through your head after she took her shirt off.' What exactly did you mean?"

Harry looked at him, aghast. "I can't tell you that! With all of you here? You're her brothers, you'd pound me into mince!"

Ron rolled his eyes heavenward, as if to say "I am going to regret this," got to his feet, and dragged Harry to his feet and around to the other side of the massive oak, pushing him up against it. "Harry, tell me. We're not going to do anything to you. Promise."

It took a bit more cajoling before Harry whispered a few things in his ear.

"That's it? That's what you were thinking about?"

Shamefaced, Harry nodded.

"All you wanted to do was cuddle and maybe kiss her? You know, I didn't think they made people like you any more. You know what I thought you might be thinking about?"

Harry shook his head.

Ron pulled the "wank shot" out of his pocket. "Stuff like this."

Harry got a 'rabbit in the *lumos*' look on his face. "With *Ginny*?"

"It's called a fantasy, and it's perfectly normal. It's like ... I cannot believe I am even having this conversation! And it's a damn good thing we found out about it before Ginny actually got her hands on you! Bill's right, this is something for Mum and Dad. Come on."

"No, I can't talk to your folks ... not your Mum ..."

"Who do you think told us about it? And how do you think they wound up with seven kids? They know what they're doing. If there's anybody that can get you straightened out about this, it's them. Come on. "

They collected the stacks of Harry's mail and took him back up to the house, shoving gently when necessary to overcome his reluctance. What followed was the most embarrassing two hours of Harry's life, spent with Mr. and Mrs. Weasley. When he came out of the den, he took one look at

Ginny and Hermione, who were at the kitchen table working on something for school, turned bright red, and fled up the stairs to his room. The sound of the door slamming echoed throughout the house. "Well," said Ron to the room at large. "That went well, I think."

Hermione tried to follow him up the stairs, and Ron stopped her. "I don't think so. If he's anything like I was when I first got The Talk, he's not going to be able to look at anything female for a few days, much less carry on a conversation. Especially with one of the girls he thinks he might like."

"Do you really think it was a good thing to stress him with this, with all the other stuff he's got on his plate right now?"

"Look, it's at least going to distract him from worrying about You-Know-Who for a while. Give him something normal to chew on for a change."

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True to Ron's prediction, Harry did not come down for lunch, and Mrs. Weasley brought dinner up to him on a tray.

He did come down the next day for breakfast, ate quickly and left the house without saying a word to anyone. When he didn't show up for lunch, Ron went looking for him, taking a sandwich with him. He found Harry out in the meadow by his tree. The little sapling had already grown appreciably, and had new leaves. "Hey," he said.

Harry reached out and touched a leaf, gently. "Hey, yourself."

"Missed you at lunch."

"I didn't need it. Three meals a day is more than I'm used to, remember? Especially the way your mother cooks."

"Then you won't mind if I eat your sandwich?"

Harry sighed. "Give it here." Ron grinned and passed it to him, and they sat in companionable silence for a while.

"You can't spend the next two weeks hiding from everybody, you know."

"Try me. I learned how to be invisible before I ever got my father's Cloak."

"Are you angry at us? At me? For telling?"

"No. Not really. You were just trying to help."

"Did it?"

"I don't know. At least embarrassment isn't fatal. I just ... felt so stupid. For not knowing something everybody else knows. And now everybody knows I didn't know."

"Not everybody. Just us. And we'll keep our mouths shut."

There was more silence. "Did Ginny and Hermione ... laugh when you told them?"

"No. They both cried a little. And Hermione got angry. She thought we were putting too much stress on you."

"Did she now? That's kind of weird, given this is a problem that can actually be solved by her specialty – a little information. I'm surprised she hasn't trotted off into town and got me a self-help book on it and considered the situation dealt with."

Ron grinned. "Who says she hasn't? I haven't seen her this morning, either."

"I'm doomed," Harry moaned.

"Hey, at least this is just a little growing-up thing, not the godawful monster of the month."

"The godawful monster of the month was Dudley, I think. Which leaves me the rest of the month free to wonder what they've got waiting for me in Minnesota. Somehow I don't think this is going to be a nice quiet trip. My life doesn't seem to work that way."

"I wish I could go with you. Or Hermione. So you'd have somebody with you to help."

"I wish you could, too. I don't even know who I'll be stuck with on this trip – fifty/fifty chances on Lavender or Parvati from our House, who knows who from the others. I just hope I don't get stuck with Malfoy for a year."

"They wouldn't!"

"I don't know what they would or wouldn't do. I don't know who did the choosing or how they chose. I'll find out soon enough, I guess."

"I guess you will. I wonder what these Americans are like that will be staying with us? And will they be staying in our dorms? It would be really weird having someone else sleeping in your bed."

"I hadn't thought about that. That probably will be strange. But at least they'll be staying in one place all year. I'll be bouncing all over."

"You're going to be going by plane each leg?"

"No, just to Minnesota and home from San Francisco. I think the rest of the hops are going to be Floo or Portkey."

"I wonder why they're bothering with the plane at all, then? They could probably get you from Hogwarts to Minnesota by Portkey, too."

"Probably for the 'experience.' Or so there's an official record of our being in the country if there's a problem."

They were silent for a while, relaxing in the sunlight and listening to the sounds of summer in the country.

"I'm going to miss you guys."

"There's still two more weeks."

"I learned fourth year just how fast two weeks can go. It seemed like one minute I had plenty of time to work on how to function underwater, and then the next thing I knew they'd taken you away, and Dobby had to give me a kick in the pants about what to do. Once I got started, it was easy enough, though. It's a good thing I think best on the fly."

"True. You're a tactical genius, but your strategy stinks. I'm the other way around. Give me long-term planning any day; throw me in an emergency and I panic."

"What do you mean my strategy stinks?"

"How many times have you ever beaten me at chess?"

"Umm. None."

"Right. Your strategy stinks. I'll demonstrate again tonight after dinner, if you want."

And sure enough, after dinner Ron got out his chessboard, and soon his queen was rampaging through Harry's pawns. After quite a tussle, Harry finally and triumphantly took her down with his bishop, only to discover that one of Ron's knights had got through and checkmated his king without him knowing it was there until it was too late. "How did that happen?" Harry puzzled.

"I told you, your strategy stinks," said Ron, leaning back in his chair and looking smug. "You're too worried about what's going on right now, or in the next few moves, to think ahead to the end of the game. Plus you're not willing to sacrifice when you have to. You really really hate losing any of your pieces, but especially your queen. Sometimes you're better off losing her and doing something unexpected."

"Knight to H3," said Harry quietly, toying with the little black knight.

"Don't remind me," said Ron. "My shoulder still hurts sometimes where that white queen hit me. I wasn't as good at thinking ahead then as I am now. But I keep replaying that game in my head and I still can't win without losing that knight." He shrugged. "You just have to do what's necessary sometimes, even knowing the cost."

"Did you know you'd only be knocked out?"

"No. The chessmen were designed to be 'killed' and then reactivated for the next game. I wasn't. I had no idea what would happen. Sometimes you plan ..." he reached out and toppled the knight. "And sometimes you take the leap of faith and hope for the best. At that point, whatever happened to me was irrelevant to the final outcome."

"It wasn't irrelevant to me."

"Nor to me personally, but as far as the ultimate goal was considered, it was. And that's why you lose at chess. You look at the pieces. You don't look at the game."

Late that night Ron woke to hear choked moans coming from Harry's room, but by the time he got to the door, they'd stopped. He listened for quite a while and heard no further noise, and eventually went back to his own bed. The next day, Harry would only say that he'd dreamed of chess pieces and snakes in the grass.

Sunday brought three new batches of Weasleys, but Ron dragged Harry away from the house to do a little "fishing" – really an excuse to drift on the river in the old rowboat and talk about nothing in particular – so he only had to actually meet one set, a second cousin of Mr. Weasley's with his wife and two sons, one a little bit older than Ron and one a little younger than Ginny. They had Portkeyed in from Australia and were extremely sunburned, and did not seem to regard a Dark Wizard as anything to be worried about. "Now bunyips, *those* are something to worry about," said the older boy, grinning and looking an awful lot like Charlie.

When Harry took them out to the tree, instead of leaving something there, each of them took a stick and drew a figure of an animal of some kind in the soft earth: a bird, a lizard, some kind of four-legged creature Harry didn't recognize, and a snake. The youngest son carefully put pebbles in to be the eyes of each creature, and the outlines flared briefly in coloured light. "Abo protective totems," the boy explained proudly. "The oldest known magical system in continuous use. About 10,000 years or so. I learned them from an old blackfeller on walkabout. Scary old guy. Great teacher. They'll keep watch over the tree and over you."

"Snakes again. They seem to be popping up all over the place suddenly," said Harry.

"That one's the Rainbow Serpent. Creator god, in charge of fertility, growth, rain, all that sort of thing. Very powerful. Keep an eye out for them; snakes are dangerous if you don't handle them right, but they won't steer you wrong if you respect their power."

Monday, thank God or whoever, brought no visitors, but Mr. Weasley came home early from the office to have a Harry before dinner.

"A couple of things have come up. First, Ms. Stone wants to see you in her office Thursday morning. She says she'll have the paperwork drawn up by then and you can sign off on everything, and so will I, as your temporary guardian, and then your funds can be made available to you. She says that there's a solicitor who's willing to see you in the afternoon about the other matters you needed to discuss. Very interesting woman, Ms. Stone. I almost got the feeling she was looking right through her telephone and seeing into the fire at my office. Very odd. I wonder if there's any wizard blood in her family. However. I also heard from the police, who want to talk to you again and get a detailed statement from you before you leave, since you won't be around for the trials of your cousin and his parents."

"Dudley ... and Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon?"

"Oh, yes, the investigation is still underway, of course, but they're being charged with child abuse, neglect, even involuntary servitude – and Dudley for assault, of course. He's still hospitalized, though, and may never actually stand trial if he's found incompetent – but since you'll be away when the trials are likely to happen, the police need your full statement now. So they've asked me to bring you in tomorrow and Wednesday. I talked to Ms. Stone again after I talked to the police and she said she'll sit in on the depositions with you if you think you need it. It's going to be a rough couple of days, Harry. And unfortunately I can't take the time off right now to go with you for more than the one day, so having Ms. Stone accompany you would be a good idea. I already made the arrangements on that assumption."

"All right."

"Good, then we'll go in together tomorrow and I'll drop you off before I go in to the office." Mr. Weasley looked down at his hands, almost as if he were embarrassed. "There's something else I want to talk to you about ... it's this whole O'Dwyer situation." Harry had managed to almost forget about the incident with the unscrupulous wizard; it was an incident that he wanted to put behind him. He had a nasty feeling, however, that he was not going to be allowed to. "I made the initial report of O'Dwyer's activities the same day you gave me the samples and your narrative about what had happened. That was on a Tuesday. Dudley snapped and the attack on you happened in the wee hours of Thursday morning, less than forty-eight hours later. There was a lot of magical activity going on in Surrey that night, and for several days after; we're still cleaning up the mess, and that's why I've been working late so many nights. We suspect that O'Dwyer had a number of his Muggle victims under direct magical control, and when he sent Dudley off to kill you, a goodly number of others also went right off the deep end. Not all of them went off immediately; it depended on how many of those potion-laced pills of his they'd taken. Oh, yes, there were all sorts of unfortunate things in those pills – O'Dwyer – or whatever his real name is – was working Dark, very Dark indeed."

"What was he up to?"

"A deep con of some sort. As far as the Muggle police know, he was collecting 'donations' from his victims, overcharging for the herbal stuff, getting people to fund his 'educational institute,' which mostly seemed to exist for the purpose of paying him a very large salary, stuff like that. Apparently he'd decided that Muggle money was as good as Wizard money, and easier to get. But the potion was one to increase people's susceptibility; it gave him an effect very like an Imperius from a much less dangerous suggestibility spell. Mind control. It wouldn't have worked on a wizard for much the same reason it didn't work on you – too slow, too mild. A wizard would notice it happening to him. But a Muggle, and particularly one who's already in a delicate state of mind? Most of the people he was fleecing were recovering from recent mental or emotional trauma."

"Like Dudley?"

"Like Dudley. Your cousin was desperate to find something to give him a sense of reality again after the dementor attack. Your aunt and uncle were denying that anything was wrong, and wouldn't bring him to see one of the Muggle mind healers for fear Dudley might say something about you, or about magic in general. And of course they wouldn't dream of taking him to a wizard Healer. Dudley, it seems, is not unintelligent, he's just never had anything to exercise his brain before. When faced with the puzzle of needing help, he sought it out for himself. How he came to a wizard con artist, however, is beyond me. It's just a bit too coincidental for my tastes. And, apparently, O'Dwyer's." Mr. Weasley frowned ferociously. "In any event, Dudley was drawn into his net like so many others. And O'Dwyer was using them for his own purposes, exerting direct control over those most open to it, we think establishing connections with their sleeping minds through projected dreams."

"Like what Voldemort did to me to get me to go to the Ministry last June?"

"Just like that. In this case, O'Dwyer sent a dream to Dudley aimed at sending him after you in a berserk rage. The dream leaked over into a number of his other victims, though, and that's what caused all the mayhem that night. He knew you wouldn't be able to work magic during the summer and were no match for Dudley physically. He also knew you had some of the sleeping pills, and may have thought you might have taken some of them. In which case," Mr. Weasley said grimly, "Dudley could have easily killed you in your sleep. He also knew that an attack on you would keep the attention of quite a few of the Aurors focused on you for some time, and the rest would be kept busy dealing with the other victims, many of whom assaulted friends or family, or turned their rage on themselves. All of these incidents had to be carefully evaluated, obliations done, paperwork destroyed. It's been very difficult, very slow going because they have everything on computers now, you see, and we don't have anyone who's good at those. We may not be able to get all of it. The Minister has been hopping mad about it, let me tell you. This has the potential for being the biggest violation of the International Secrecy Statutes ever. And we've all been working so hard to control the side damage that, well ..."

Harry suddenly realized where this was going. "He got away, didn't he?"

"Yes. He got away. It was the Muggle police, of all people, who managed to track down his base of operations, although they didn't find his potions lab. That was our boys. We also found a series of illegal Portkeys leading to other bases. But no trace of O'Dwyer himself. He may have taken another Portkey to another base and gone to ground, or he may have left the country. We don't know. We're going to keep looking, but ... we don't know. And of course there was no way to keep your name out of it. The *Prophet* was running regular reports on your condition while you were in hospital, and now that you've been taken to 'an undisclosed location for rest and recuperation', they're going a little bit spare."

"Has the Ministry at least alerted the authorities in other countries?"

"Oh, yes, Fudge did that himself right away."

"Maybe he'll show up in Australia and a bunyip will eat him," said Harry, with grim humor.

"That's my boy! Don't worry, it will all work out in the end."

"You know, I used to believe that when I was growing up. Even when the Dursleys were at their worst. 'It will all work out in the end.' What they don't mention is that the ending may not be happy at all."

Mr. Weasley had nothing to say to that, and they sat in silence until Mrs. Weasley needed Harry to help set the table for dinner.



## Harry Potter and the Junior Year Abroad Questions and Answers

### Chapter 12

#### *Questions and Answers*

The next morning found Harry and Mr. Weasley up early. Harry dressed as nicely as possible in his new Muggle-style clothes, and even tried to comb his hair, which, as usual, cooperated for about thirty seconds before becoming an untidy mess. He gave up in disgust and went down for breakfast, where he found he was too nervous to eat much. Then he and Mr. Weasley went out into the living room, where Mr. Weasley picked up a folded newspaper from the side table. "Here, Harry, this has been made into a Portkey for our use in getting to and from Surrey for the next few days. Deuced few public Floos in that area, and it wouldn't be a good idea to be showing up covered in soot in any event." They held the newspaper while Mr. Weasley counted down under his breath, and the familiar pull took them off. They appeared in a thicket of bushes. They fought their way out through the encircling branches to find themselves in a quiet corner of a park. Mr. Weasley tucked the paper into his briefcase, and they set off to find the exit.

Ms. Stone was waiting for them in a coffee shop near the police station, where she took charge of Harry. Mr. Weasley stayed only a few moments and then hurried off to head to work himself. A short time later, Harry, who was listening for it, heard a sharp "bang!" and knew that he had found a safe place to Apparate from. Everyone else ignored the car backfire.

"How are you doing today, Harry?" asked Ms. Stone. "Have you had breakfast?"

"Yes, Ma'am."

"That must have been a while ago. Would you like a pastry to hold you for a while?"

"No, thank you. I'm kind of nervous, and I don't think it would sit well."

"I can understand that. Now, here's what will happen today and tomorrow ..." She described the procedures the police would be following, the types of questions they would be asking. "When they took the first statements you gave at the hospital, they were just trying to get an overview of what had been going on, as a place to start. Today they will be asking for details. Names, dates, places. As exact as you can make it. They realize that most of the abuse happened when you were younger, so they will make allowances for your not having every detail down. They will also try to trip you up, to see if you contradict yourself. Because if they can find weaknesses in your story, so can a barrister for the defence, and enough discrepancies can ruin your credibility. Then you become just another vengeful teenager spreading lies about your relatives to get back at them for imagined slights."

"Imagined! I didn't imagine that cupboard or the skillet, or ...!"

"I know you didn't imagine it. But that's how the court could look at it. So be careful, and think about all your answers. They're going to try to get you angry or confused. Don't let them. A few contradictions are normal, and expected, given that human memory is fallible. Don't try to be too perfect. But don't let them goad you, either."

"Are you going to be with me?"

"Yes. As I said, I'm your advocate. I'm not legal counsel, but since you're not the one being charged with a crime, that's not necessary. I won't be saying very much, but if they get into territory that they shouldn't, I can steer it back onto safe ground. For example, there's no need for them to get into anything to do with your schooling. They have your records, and that's all they really need to know." She looked at Harry consideringly. "Of course, it would be easier to steer them away from ticklish areas if I know what those ticklish areas are. Is there anything you need to tell me before we go in there?" she asked gently.

That was such an incredibly Dumbledore-ish question that Harry just gaped at her stupidly for a second before pulling himself together. "That's hard to tell without knowing what kinds of questions exactly they'll ask. Um. They won't ask if I have a girlfriend and stuff like that, will they?"

"They might. Should I steer them away from that? Relationships in general?"

"If you could."

"That shouldn't be too difficult. If that's all, then? All right, let's go on in."

They stopped in the lobby of the police department building and picked up visitors' badges and a guide. The police station was one of those municipal buildings that had been built about forty years ago and never painted since. The walls were a colour somewhere in between beige and pea green, and not as attractive as either. The floor was worn linoleum. Offices designed for two desks had four, plus battered file cabinets crammed into them, and the halls were filled with people in uniform and out, so that Harry and Ms. Stone came close to losing their escort through

the maze several times. Eventually they were deposited in a dingy room with a battered table, uncomfortable metal chairs, and an old-fashioned water cooler, where they waited for what seemed like forever before the investigating detectives showed up.

Harry recognized one of the inspectors as the one who had taken his statement when he was in hospital and who had been there at Privet Drive when he was released. "Well, Harry, how are you doing? You're looking a fair bit better than the last time I saw you. They're treating you well at your foster home, then?"

"Yes, sir, very well. Um, if you don't mind, Inspector, I don't think we were really introduced before, and I'm afraid I don't remember ..."

"You weren't in much of a state to go remembering things like that, so don't be concerned about it. I'm Inspector Higgins, this is Inspector Munroe." The man seemed genuinely pleased to see how well Harry was doing. His partner, a paunchy individual with a bushy moustache, seemed much less enthusiastic about the prospects of spending the day questioning this teenager. Ms. Stone had warned Harry about the "good cop/bad cop" routine, and sure enough, Inspector Munroe, who Harry privately dubbed "Inspector Moustache" was generally grouchy, surly, and unpleasant, and seemed to take positive joy in trying to trip Harry up. He reminded Harry rather unpleasantly of Uncle Vernon, in fact.

It started off relatively well, with Inspector Higgins going over the notes of the questioning he'd done in the hospital, asking Harry to verify his statements now that he was 'under less stress.' This Harry was able to do easily. Then Higgins started to go into the night of the attack in more detail, and it was then that Munroe started in. "Diving out the window? Dark room, dark night out, little tiny window? And managing it without breaking your fool neck? Are you sure you didn't get down the stairs and just tell us you dived out the window because it was more dramatic? A good story?"

"I could see the window because there was some light from the streetlights. Just a little, but enough. And if your people bothered to take a picture of the garden the next morning, you'd see a big head-shaped mashed spot in the marigolds."

Higgins sorted through the piles of photographs they'd brought in with them, and passed it to Munroe. "That a big enough head-shaped mash in the marigolds for you, Jake?" Munroe grunted, and Higgins took over again until they got to the part about the final fight with Dudley. Here Harry had to be careful not to mention the *Stupefy* spell, and Munroe seemed to sense that he was hiding something and went after it like a bloodhound. "So you're on the ground, and this bloody great brute is kicking you, and then he just falls over? Just like that, and you've no idea what happened to him?"

"No. I thought ... I thought I might have kicked him off-balance ... but I don't remember that very clearly."

"You remember everything else rather clearly."

"I'd cracked my head on the sidewalk then ... or was it that he had hit me? It was all happening at once then ... and I don't remember much of anything else until I woke up in the Casualty Ward."

"There was a stick in your hand, do you remember that? Didn't you pick up a stick and whack your cousin with it? And he fell down then? Isn't that what happened?"

Inspector Higgins interjected, "You know, Harry, if that is what happened, you don't need to be afraid to tell us. You were entitled to defend yourself, and if you did hit Dudley, nobody's going to think worse of you for it."

"I didn't hit Dudley. Once I was down, I stayed down. My biggest concern was not getting stomped on. A good Dudley stomp could have split me wide open."

"So why did he fall?" Munroe again.

"I told you, I don't know. Maybe he had a stroke or something!"

Higgins sat back. "You know, that's a possibility. Given his weight problem over the years, the Dursley kid may just have been heading into stroke territory. And with the rage he was feeling, it would have driven his pressure way up."

"Come on, the kid is sixteen. You don't go having a stroke at sixteen."

"Still, we should probably look at Dursley's neuros. I think they ran some when he didn't wake up for so long."

Harry was just as happy to listen to Higgins and Munroe go at it between themselves for a while; he was trying to keep a firm grip on his temper, and any time they weren't going after him was time he could use to calm down. Meanwhile, Ms. Stone just sat back and listened, making occasional notes for her own file. She apparently thought he was handling himself well enough, though once she called for a break and got him a cup of water from the cooler in the corner. It was unpleasantly warm, but it felt good to his dry lips and throat.

It took all morning to get through the night of the attack, walking through it several different times, until Harry's head was pounding and he thought he could recite his story in his sleep. Then there was a break for lunch, and Ms. Stone took him out to a lunch counter where he had a rather pathetic excuse for a roast beef sandwich, especially in comparison to Mrs. Weasley's excellent cooking. She also took him over to the chemist's and got him a little bottle of aspirin, since his headache showed no signs of going away on its own.

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The afternoon was, if anything, even worse. Higgins and Munroe were now onto the details of daily life at number four, Privet Drive, from the time of Harry's earliest memories through the prior month. They heard about the frying pan and the poker (with blushes, and Munroe backed off on this particular topic after a consultation with Ms. Stone out in the hall), the slaps and the hair-pulling and the pinching, and the constant yelling. They

heard about how he learned to cook breakfast the hard way, when he was barely tall enough to see the top of the stove. They learned the various routes he took home from school, with avenues of escape carefully laid out in case Dudley and his gang ambushed him. They learned about gardening and lawn mowing and car washing and using toothbrushes to clean the grout in the bathrooms. They learned about bread crusts for breakfast and cold tinned soup for dinner and the best ways to keep Dudley's hand-me-downs from falling off. They learned about primary school, where his teachers had all been warned about his "behaviour problem" and he sat in his seat and hardly dared breathe for fear of getting a note sent home, and during recess Dudley prowled the playground looking for him.

By four o'clock, Higgins was showing signs of weariness, but Munroe was as energetically antagonistic as when they'd started. "These are all wonderful stories we've been hearing, but I find it hard to believe that this kind of thing could go on for so long without somebody noticing it. Are you sure you're not exaggerating for effect, *boy*?"

It was the 'boy' that did it, Harry realized later. It was said with just that tone of disgust that Uncle Vernon used to have in his voice. Before he knew it, he was standing, his balled fists resting on the table and he was leaning over to put his face next to that of the seated Inspector. In contrast to his posture, his voice was low, calm, and even. "No, Inspector, I'm not exaggerating a thing. If anything, you're not getting a full picture, because I can't remember every detail of every day for sixteen years. I can't detail every single beating, every time they yelled at me. But everything I've said is true. And if you can't handle it, maybe you're in the wrong line of work!"

As if to punctuate his sentence, the water-cooler jar exploded. Broken glass flew in all directions, fortunately not hitting anyone, and the walls, floor, and even ceiling in that corner were drenched. Some of the water splashed onto the table, and Munroe snatched a box of papers out of the way before they could be soaked. Ms. Stone helped them move things and got some of the broken glass out of the way, while Harry slowly sat back down. He'd done it again. Wandless, out of control, he'd done it again. He just *had* to get his wretched temper in hand.

"I think that's a sign from the heavens that we've had enough for the day," said Higgins. "I know I certainly have, and ... Ms. Stone, please leave the glass alone, the Department doesn't want the liability if you cut yourself on it, that's why we have maintenance people. Would you mind waiting out in the hall with Mr. Potter, please? Jake, go find some poor slob with a mop." Munroe muttered something as Harry and Ms. Stone were leaving. Harry couldn't make out the question, but he could hear Higgins' answer. "No, this is not going in the report. It's a stupid accident – that cooler is ninety years older than God anyway, now maybe we'll get it replaced." Mutter, mutter. "No. I don't want this file to disappear like the others. Now go get maintenance!" Ms. Stone looked at Harry and raised an eyebrow, while he just shoved his hands in his jacket pockets and tried to look like none of this was bothering him.

On the good side, his headache had disappeared.

Higgins came out of the room a few minutes after Munroe left, having made sure all the paperwork was properly stowed. "I really do want to apologize for that accident," he said sincerely. "The equipment around here is a little old, and I guess maybe there was a flaw in the bottle. But I do think that was as good a place as any to stop. Harry, I'm sorry if Inspector Munroe went a little over the top at the end there. He gets like that sometimes. I hope it won't stop you coming back tomorrow so we can finish this."

"No, sir. I'll be back. I just want to get this over with."

"Good lad. You know, it's been a pleasure to work with you so far. Usually what we get in here are sullen little thugs. I think maybe Munroe's problem is he doesn't recognize a decent young man when he sees one. I'll talk to him about it, maybe see if I can get him to back off you a bit tomorrow. In the meantime, I'll see you to the lobby, if I may? Ms. Stone?"

"Thank you for your concern for my client, Inspector. We'll be back tomorrow. Same time?"

"If you don't mind."

Higgins led them back through the warren and left them in the lobby. Ms. Stone used the public phone there to place a call to Mr. Weasley's "office" – he was "in a meeting," so she left a message to let him know she and Harry had finished early, and asking him to come to her office to pick Harry up. Then they walked the few blocks to her office. The Department of Child Protective Services was housed in yet another civil-service drab building, but here, perhaps because there were likely to be children about, some effort had been made to make the place a little cheerier; the beige walls were decorated with colourful posters – most of them involving safety tips, but they were better than nothing. Ms. Stone's office was actually comfortable; in addition to her desk, she had a sofa, low table, and a shelf full of games and toys geared for younger children. "Welcome to my home from home, Harry. Have a seat. It will probably be a while before Mr. Weasley gets here – the traffic out of the City is murder at this time of the evening and the Underground isn't much better. I was thinking maybe we could have a little talk while we're waiting? Oh, and would you like some chocolate? Heaven knows I need some, and you've had a pretty bad day. Chocolate cures what ails you on bad days." She winked at him and broke a piece off the humongous Cadbury bar she pulled out of her desk. Harry just stared at it. "Seriously, you're white as a sheet. You're still a growing boy and you need energy and you haven't eaten nearly enough today. Eat your chocolate." Harry took it wordlessly and nibbled at it. Inspector Munroe wasn't in the same league as a dementor, but the chocolate did help all the same.

"You did well today, Harry. Very well. I could tell Higgins was impressed, and so was Munroe, despite his attitude."

"It was good it stopped when it did, though. I wanted to ... well, I don't think they'd have thought kindly of my assaulting a police Inspector."

"But you didn't. Thanks to an exploding water jug."

"Yeah." He finished off his chocolate.

"That was kind of weird, don't you think?"

"I suppose."

"You suppose. Like things like that happen all the time."

"Don't they?"

"Not to most people."

Harry chose not to respond; the subject was beginning to get uncomfortable. Ms. Stone let the silence stretch for a long moment before changing the subject to something more innocuous. She asked what Harry had been doing while he was staying with the Weasleys, and he described his birthday party, and shopping trips for clothes and school things, and swimming in the pond, and fishing with no bait on the line just because they wanted to have an excuse to be out in the boat, and all the other delicious summertime things that were basically the same for Muggle and Wizard, and therefore safe to talk about, even if he did have to edit things to put them in Muggle terms.

For all that she was sure he was leaving things out, Agatha Stone was very pleased as she listened to Harry's narrative. The tone of his voice lightened as he talked, and after the heavy, dead way he'd talked of his time at the Dursleys' during the day, it was welcome to hear him speak the way a young man should. His face lost its closed, wary expression, and became more open. It was only when she asked about his plans for the future that he became guarded again.

"I really don't know what I want to do," he explained. "For a while I was thinking about joining the police. Now I'm thinking about maybe teaching, but I don't know what it is that I would be best at teaching. It's more the idea of teaching itself than any particular subject that I'm interested in. I'm hoping that I may be able to figure it out while I'm on this American trip."

Ms. Stone flipped her file (now quite a bit fatter than when she'd first met Harry) open and found her copies of his "school" transcripts and grade reports. "Well, you have ten GCSEs, and all of them passing, some of them passing very well. Your sciences in particular seem to be high, decent maths. Your history is only so-so ... fairly awful in psychology..." She quirked an eyebrow. "You took psychology?"

Harry decided that's what his Divination class must have turned into. "Um, well, I really didn't understand a lot of it. I mostly did it because a friend of mine did it ... turned out it wasn't a good idea."

"With everything that was going on in your childhood, I can see that a lot of things in psychology might have been a bit frightening. Perhaps you didn't *want* to understand it because it hit too close to home?"

"That ... kind of makes sense."

"If you do decide to become a teacher, you'll have to have at least a couple of university courses in psychology. But maybe by then you'll be able to focus on it better. At least it was a low pass instead of an Unclassified. I'm assuming that with the American tour, one of your A-levels will be General Studies. That will serve you quite well. What else will you be taking?"

"Well, I've got, um, Chemistry and Botany both, some intercultural studies things ... maths ... pretty much the same stuff as I was doing before. American History and Literature. It'll be kind of interesting comparing their view of history and ours ...." Harry felt he might be babbling, but Ms. Stone seemed to consider it all reasonably.

"The American system does teach more courses at the advanced levels, instead of focusing on four or five. You may have to make up some work in one or more classes when you come back."

"The school is going to evaluate us when we come back and help us make up anything we're missing."

"The more I hear about this school of yours, the more I think I like it. It's certainly doing you a world of good."

"I believe so. I think I'd probably be dead by now if I hadn't gone there."

"You could be right. Certainly you wouldn't be in nearly as good physical condition." Ms. Stone turned away from Harry's academic records, much to Harry's relief, and took up a copy of his medical reports. "Through most of your early childhood, you were subjected to systematic low-level starvation."

"You don't need to tell me that."

"True. I'm sure you remember it quite well. What you may not be aware of is that malnutrition can have severe long-term consequences. In your case, it did slow your growth and physical development somewhat. But it wasn't severe enough that you were badly stunted. For one thing, your relatives wanted to get a certain amount of work out of you, and that meant they had to provide you with a sufficient amount of food. Your school provided a much higher level of nutrition generally, and you were able to make up for some of the lost time. Schools out in the country usually include a lot of local produce, whole foods and such in the diet, less processed breads and things, am I right?" Harry nodded numbly. "So you got a lot of the vitamins, minerals, proteins and such that you needed to catch up some of the difference, without a lot of the junk city children eat. And you've always been physically active, that helps too. You probably won't be as tall or as heavily built as you might have been in other circumstances, but probably the deficit is only around an inch or two – certainly nothing too noticeable. And there doesn't seem to have been a permanent effect on your mental development. That's always something to be concerned about. Had you remained at home, er, with the Dursleys, however, continuing nutritional deprivation would have affected your body and might have affected your brain. That's not even taking the effects of physical abuse into consideration. And at that, you can thank your lucky stars that you weren't born female. Given the dynamics of that household, there's a very good chance sexual abuse might have been added to that list."

Harry must have looked slightly ill at that, because Ms. Stone leaned forward suddenly. "Harry ... is there something you haven't told us? Because if there is ..."

"No, no. Nothing like that. I just ... found the idea sickening, that's all."

"Can't say I blame you. I think they're a pretty sickening bunch, myself." Her face and voice were grim.

"You'll get no argument from me on that count," said Arthur Weasley, breaking into the conversation. Both Harry and Ms. Stone looked up, surprised to see him in the office doorway. "I hope you don't mind that I came up directly, it's after five and your receptionist has already gone," he said apologetically.

"No, I don't mind, I'm just a little surprised ... you must have made excellent time from the City. Your secretary said you were in a meeting when I called."

"Yes, well, I'd left a little early to make sure I didn't keep you waiting too long. 'In a meeting' is what she says when I do that. I trust everything went well?" He settled himself in one of the office chairs.

"It was rather a long day, but Harry here did very well. I'm sure he'll tell you all the details on your way home tonight. There was a little trouble with one of the Inspectors, but nothing he couldn't handle."

"Our Harry is a very capable young man," agreed Mr. Weasley, and Harry felt himself flushing at the praise. "Shall we see you tomorrow at the same time, then? In that coffee shop?"

"That will be fine. I can't see this going for more than another day. And then Thursday we'll need the two of you to come directly here, of course."

"Of course. I've already cleared my schedule for that day."

"Mr. Weasley ... would it be possible for you and Harry to come to dinner with me after everything is done on Thursday? A celebration, if you will ... of a successful resolution to the matter, and Harry's freedom. What do you say?"

"It sounds excellent to me. Harry? What do you say?"

"At a restaurant? I've never been to one. I wouldn't know what to do."

"Then I think we definitely should. The experience will be good for you."

"I suppose." Harry was dubious, both of his own ability to handle it and Mr. Weasley's. Although the older man had refrained admirably from his usual "what will Muggles think of next?" comments so far.

"I'll make a reservation, then," said Ms. Stone. "And I won't keep you, the traffic will only get worse from here on out."

"I know ways to beat the worst of it," said Mr. Weasley, and they took their leave.

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Less than half an hour later, they were sitting down to dinner at the Burrow. They did not discuss the day over the table, but Mr. Weasley and Harry went into the study afterwards. Harry summarized what they'd talked about, and told Mr. Weasley about the incident with the water cooler. "I'm sorry, I just ... the Inspector was so like my uncle, and when he called me 'boy' in that tone of voice, I just ... I could feel it building up all day, and then it just ... sort of went off. At least it was just the cooler, I didn't blow him up or anything. I was surprised not to be buried with Ministry owls again."

"If all you did was blow up the cooler, it wasn't a strong enough magic to warrant attention. Accidents of that sort don't require explanation or reversal, thankfully, since sometimes they happen even without magic, and the Muggles are pretty good at explaining them away. You're learning control, that's good."

"Inspector Higgins did say he thought it was a flaw in the glass. But I also heard him and Inspector Munroe talking. They said they didn't want this file to disappear like others. Is the Ministry in the habit of Vanishing files?"

Mr. Weasley frowned. "We've been known to, when there's something that's too suggestive. But if the Muggles are noticing it, perhaps we've been doing it too often. I'll have to bring it up at the next staff meeting. In the meantime, if you can keep from doing anything untoward tomorrow, it should be fine."

"Can you promise me you won't Vanish mine? I haven't gone through this just to have everything disappear and let the Dursleys walk after all."

"I'll keep an eye on it. Was there anything else?"

"Well, Ms. Stone was bothered by the water cooler thing, too. She picked up some of the glass and looked a little disturbed. And she gave me chocolate afterwards."

"Did she now?"

"Said it would cure what ailed me. She also said I hadn't eaten enough."

"She was probably right. Muggles know about chocolate's restorative powers, too. They're the ones who discovered it, after all. I think we're all right as far as Ms. Stone is concerned. We'll just have to watch ourselves on Thursday."

Wednesday they repeated the Portkey trip into the park and met Ms. Stone in the coffee shop. Inspector Munroe was much less abrasive this time, confining himself to grunts and the occasional muttered comment. Today they were going over interviews taken with family, friends, and neighbours of the Dursleys. Most of it was simply refutations of the more outrageous lies the Dursleys had spread, and by the time they broke for lunch, Harry was beginning to think he was in the clear. Ms. Stone, too, seemed to be pleased.

But after lunch, everything went straight to Hell and stayed there.

"Okay, I think we've covered most of the obvious matters. Now we have some anomalous material. Most particularly, the statements of Dudley Dursley and his parents. Dudley was quite willing to talk about you. As a matter of fact, we couldn't shut him up. And he told us some ... rather unusual stories about you. For example, he told us you know how to do magic."

"I do what?"

"Magic. Not the sideshow kind, either. Witchcraft. Spell-casting. That sort of thing. He seems to think you're a wizard of some kind who has been putting him under spells to destroy his entire life."

"I'll bet he told you I fly on a broomstick, too," said Harry, trying to put an appropriate tone of disbelief in his voice.

"Oh, yes, I think that was on the list."

"Yes, here it is, broomstick," put in Munroe, looking at one of the many reports in the file. "And according to him, that birdcage was where you kept your ... pet owl?"

"Owl? I had budgies. They lasted a hot two weeks, if that. Can you even keep an owl as a pet?" Harry looked at Ms. Stone in a confused fashion.

"I don't think so. I'm quite sure you need special permits to keep wild animals, and you can't keep them in suburban bedrooms."

"It would be cool to have an owl, though. I didn't think Dudley's imagination was that good."

"Neither did we. But Dudley has told a story of a whole series of escalating events, getting worse every year, leading up to, let's see, an attack on him by monsters last year – which you, for some reason, seem to have both sicced on him and rescued him from – that's not very clear. Dudley himself seems to have decided things were a little strange after the monster attack, and that's when he got involved with O'Dwyer. Then he claims he got a message in a dream showing him you getting O'Dwyer arrested. By other wizards, no less. He seems to think there's a conspiracy of wizards in Britain whose sole purpose is to make his family miserable."

"That's just ... wow. I don't know what to say about that."

"I don't think I have ever heard a clearer example of a schizophrenic break," put in Ms. Stone. "The Dursley boy is obviously in severe need of hospitalization."

"That's roughly our conclusion, too. The problem is that there are some details of his story which are confirmable by third parties. Just enough to be bothersome, you understand."

"Confirmable?" Harry choked.

"Well, yes. There's a pattern of anomalies that were reported by various other witnesses. Most of them involving glass, for some reason. Let's see, your Aunt Marge reported a brandy snifter exploding in her hand during one visit. She became ill shortly after that and cut her visit short, but remembers the snifter incident quite clearly. Do you remember anything about that?"

"I remember, because I had to clean up the mess and I almost cut myself. She said it was just that she had a firm grip, though."

"Hm. Let's see, there was a surprisingly high incidence of broken windows and car windshields in your neighbourhood during the summers, going back about six years."

"That was Dudley and his gang. They liked to throw rocks."

"Not surprising. Some of it happened at times when you weren't there, anyway, so we can assume you had nothing to do with the rest of it, either. Was your cousin responsible for the incident at the zoo, also?"

"At the zoo?" Harry was sure he was gaping stupidly at the Inspector.

"About ... six years ago, on Dudley's birthday. He told it with great detail. His friend Piers Polkiss confirmed it in almost all details. He says you were in the Reptile House at the zoo, and you were having a conversation with a snake."

"A conversation? With a snake?"

"Er, yes. You were hissing at it, and it was hissing back. Then you made the glass on the display tank disappear and caused the snake to attack him."

"He was pounding on the glass and broke it. And the snake fell out of the tank. I didn't have anything to do with it. But I got blamed for it, right enough."

"Curiously, according to the zoo staff, no shards of glass were found. They claim the glass didn't just break, it disappeared. That one even made the newspapers."

"That can't happen. He must have broken it."

"And, of course, there were the incidents at the hospital the night Dudley attacked you. At the exact moment you were having your dislocated arm, er, relocated, all the light fixtures and a number of glass bottles in the room you were in exploded. This was the only incident, by the way, which caused any appreciable damage to other persons; several of the nurses were cut by flying glass and an orderly had to be treated for electric shock."

This was the first Harry had heard of that. "He wasn't ... wasn't hurt badly was he?"

"No, it was just a mild shock. They sent him home for the night and he was back on duty the next day."

"Good. I'd hate to think I ... that somebody had gotten badly hurt."

"Then there was the frog incident the same night, don't forget that one," said Munroe.

"Frog incident?" Harry vaguely remembered Tonks saying something about frogs.

"Precisely three hundred and twelve European tree frogs were discovered in the Casualty Ward's waiting rooms. That's including four that got out into the hall and were squashed by a gurney before somebody realized they were in there and closed the doors. The animal control people have been very interested in finding the prankster who released them in such a hostile environment."

"What happened to the frogs?"

"Oh, they found homes in various zoos and aquariums. They're not native to England, so would not have survived if released. Don't worry about the frogs, Harry," Inspector Higgins said kindly. "What else have we got? Oh, yes, a neighbour reporting how he had to loan your Uncle a ladder to get you down out of a tree once when you were five or six. The lowest branch was twelve feet off the ground. He had no idea how you'd gotten up there. And a similar incident, about the same time, with getting you off the roof of a chemist's shop. And another, when you were on the roof of your primary school. Did you just like climbing things?"

"I climbed a lot of things getting away from Dudley and his little gang. Their favourite game was Chasing Harry," Harry explained bitterly. "I don't remember any chemist's shop or any specific tree. I do remember the school one because I was punished pretty badly for that one."

"Maybe you wouldn't remember all of the times it happened. You were pretty young at the time of those incidents."

Ms. Stone entered the conversation again. "Inspector, if I may ... I remember when I was young - about that same age, I think - I was being chased by a rather large and vicious neighbourhood dog. My family had to get me down off a neighbour's garage. I had no memory of having gotten up there, but someone said they'd seen me go up the drainpipe. It was not something I'd have been capable of doing normally. Adrenaline does strange things, however. Perhaps something similar ...?"

"Quite likely. If the tree had a slender enough trunk, he could have shimmied up it even if it had no low branches. We also questioned Vernon and Petunia Dursley at length, of course. Given Dudley's statements, we were very interested in what they had to say about you. Which wasn't much, actually. Once they realized that we were interested in *them* as well as their son, they clammed right up. But that wasn't before we heard some rather unflattering things about yourself and your parentage. They also seemed to blame you for everything that broke or was damaged around the house. Your aunt even seemed to blame you for the way your hair grows." Higgins flicked a glance at Harry's black mane. "A little hard to manage, eh? Well."

"Inspector ... it almost sounds like you *want* me to be a ... wizard or whatever it is. Like you're trying to prove they're right, that I *deserved* the way they treated me. I've come to expect that of them, but I hadn't expected it of the police!"

"No, no, you misunderstand me, Harry. I'm not trying to prove any such thing, or to get you angry."

"Lest you blow up another water jug," muttered Munroe, who flushed a deep red when both Higgins and Harry glared at him. He obviously hadn't meant his *sotto voce* comment to be heard.

"Look, statistics show that one person in ten in Britain believes in space aliens, crop circles, and/or the Loch Ness monster. The fastest growing religions in this country are Witchcraft and the Jedi Knights. And don't even get me started about Elvis! And if one of these people gets on the jury, and thinks there's even a possibility that you might be ... whatever, then they could hang the jury and your aunt and uncle walk. So we have to do the legwork now. Chase down as many of these so-called anomalies as we can and turn them back into the mundane occurrences they undoubtedly were before your relatives got hold of them. Do you understand me? So far the only ones I can't explain away easily are the zoo window and the frogs. I think you're right, I think Dudley just broke the damn window, but we've got three separate people, Piers, your aunt, and the reptile keeper, claiming *there was no broken glass*. And when a reputable and independent witness like the reptile keeper goes on record – in print! – as saying something unusual happened, we have to address it. *What happened to the glass?*"

"I don't *know* what happened to the damned glass! I had nothing to do with it!"

"Inspector, this line of questioning is disturbing my client. He's denied any involvement, and I don't believe there's any indication that he was, or even could be, the causative agent. As you've noted, my client was in an examination room, almost unconscious, with five other people at the time

the frogs were released; there can be no connection there. Coincidence, nothing more. There were a lot of disturbed individuals around that night; perhaps one of them was responsible for the frogs. And there must be some reasonable explanation for the glass as well. Window panes don't just disappear. It's not my client's job to figure it out, though. He was ten years old when it happened. Ask the adults, ask that reptile keeper, ask the maintenance crew. But don't ask Harry. Now, are you going to find another line of questioning, or are we through?" Somehow, from being an overweight black woman in a power suit, Agatha Stone had promoted herself to Avenging Fury, and both Inspectors gave up the fight quite abruptly. Harry thought she was magnificent.

Inspector Higgins seemed to decide that discretion was the better part of valour, and shifted the questioning to what Harry privately called "The O'Dwyer Incident", and Munroe found Harry's hospital records to be fascinating reading. The rest of the afternoon was spent going over Harry's (carefully edited) version of what happened the night Dudley took him to the O'Dwyer lecture.

And then they were done. Higgins gave Harry a card, and asked him to drop him a letter if he remembered anything else when he was in America. "Of course, but I think we've already gone over most of it. Can I ... I assume you haven't actually arrested my aunt and uncle yet?"

"Not yet. I don't think they're a great risk for flight right now. If nothing else, they're so convinced their behaviour was justified that they don't see any reason to try to run away. And they stay close to visit Dudley in the Prison Ward regularly. We have a few more details to track down, and we'll be making the arrest once we've got the solidest case we can."

"I kind of wish I could be there to see it."

"No, you don't. You want to be in America, making new friends and enjoying your life without this hanging over you. Don't take this wrong, Harry, but I hope I never see you again. Okay?"

"Okay." Higgins stuck out his hand and Harry shook it, and also shook Munroe's beefy hand, and then he and Ms. Stone left the building.

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Harry had no after-dinner chat with Mr. Weasley that night. He had to leave again immediately after delivering Harry home, and didn't return before Harry went to bed. Instead, Harry, Ron, Hermione and Ginny sat out in the garden, watching the fireflies twinkle in the dark.

"Dudley told them *what?*"

"Told them I was a wizard, broomsticks and Hedwig and magic and the whole sodding lot. And Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon didn't confirm it – how could they? – but they didn't deny it, either. The only good thing about it was that Dudders went so far over the top that nobody could believe it. If he doesn't wind up in jail, they'll put him in a mental hospital for sure."

"Fudge is going to have a fit with this one," said Ron.

"I think he already is. But they can't do a damn thing about it. They can't *Obliviate* the Dursleys, because that would basically eliminate sixteen whole *years* of their memories – might even wipe 'em as blank as Lockhart. That would be too noticeable. And they can't get the Muggles to back off on the case, it's got too high a profile now. I've been in the Muggle papers and everything." Ms. Stone had given Harry a folder with some clippings from the local papers, and Ron and Ginny were looking through them. It was the first time Ginny had seen what the Dursleys looked like, and she was appropriately horrified. Harry had told her about the little piggy tail Hagrid had given Dudley, though, and she thought that piggy ears and a snout to go with it would only have been an improvement.

"And because he can't do anything about it – and probably because it's me – he's going bats on the other stuff, all the side stuff ... that probably would just go away on its own if he didn't keep poking at it."

"Well, the part with the police is over now, at any rate. Maybe the rest of it will just fade away into obscurity once you're safely in America," said Hermione. "Now you just have all the paperwork to get through tomorrow."

"I will be so glad when all this is over," said Harry, rolling over on his back in the grass and looking up at the stars.

"Which 'this'?" asked Hermione, and Harry had no answer.

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Harry was up early again the next morning, and he and Mr. Weasley went from the park directly to Ms. Stone's office. It was quite crowded, with Ms. Stone, Harry, Mr. Weasley, a Trust Officer from the Bank of England (which understandably had an interest in a fairly substantial sum of money changing hands), a solicitor from the Family Court, and a notary public who'd come with the solicitor. There was a thick folio of papers on the desk, and by the end of the morning, Harry thought he'd read and signed every one of them, and they were then taken off to be photocopied. First there were papers to be signed by Mr. Weasley accepting his guardianship of Harry. Then there were papers, presented by the Trust Officer, to be signed by Mr. Weasley as his guardian reactivating the old trust accounts. Then the Family Court solicitor questioned Harry to establish his ability to understand what being an emancipated minor entailed, and his willingness to assume that state. There were papers to be signed by both Mr. Weasley and Harry terminating the guardianship, and then more papers transferring the trusts from Mr. Weasley's guardianship into Harry's name and direct control. It seemed rather a roundabout way to be doing things, but Harry supposed it was necessary to make sure every step was documented. Then there were still more papers for Harry's signature alone, transferring part of the trust funds into regular accounts, and he was given a card which would access both accounts and a book of cheques with a folder of instructions. The notary's sole function seemed to be to put a stamp and seal on the corner of each document anybody signed, and Harry thought that was probably a very boring job to have. The man from the Bank of England shook hands with everybody, stuffed copies of all of his papers into his briefcase, and left. The Family Court solicitor took a set to be put into the Court files, and left, along with the notary. Mr. Weasley and Harry both were given heavy envelopes containing copies of all the papers. "Welcome to adulthood, Harry," said Ms. Stone with a wry smile. "As you get older, you'll discover it's all in the paperwork. Enjoy what's



left of your childhood while you can."

With a start, Harry realized that this business had taken up the entire morning, and it was now nearly lunchtime. With the extra three people gone, the office seemed far less crowded, and Ms. Stone ordered some sandwiches and crisps up for them. They ate while she explained to Harry how to keep his new chequebook, and gave him a list of recommended books on budgeting and household accounting. "I imagine Mr. and Mrs. Weasley could give you a hand with that, as well," she said.

"Molly would be best at that, she handles most of the household finances," replied Mr. Weasley. "Or my sons Fred and George. They may be young, but they've got a better head for money than most and have managed to turn a small investment into quite a healthy business already."

"Good. The bank has an investment advisor you can contact, too. As I said before, you're not wealthy, Harry, but quite secure for the next few years at least, assuming you don't squander it."

"I won't, I promise. I know where it came from, and what it ... what it cost." Ms. Stone looked at him, pursing her lips, and nodded.

"Then let's be off to the next step, shall we?"

A short walk took them to an anonymous-looking office building; in a blandly furnished office on the fourth floor, Harry met his solicitor, who took Harry's folio of papers to make copies for his own files, and then explained at length and in great detail the purposes of an estate plan. It all seemed quite complicated at first, but once Harry understood the basic idea, it was really quite simple. He made a couple of layers of beneficiaries (since it seemed quite likely to him that if he were dead, there was a great likelihood of Ron and/or Hermione, who were his primary beneficiaries, also being dead – he didn't explain that to the solicitor, but the man was quite enthusiastic about Harry's "maturity and understanding"), with the money going to a Hogwarts scholarship fund if *everybody* was dead, which was really quite a depressing thought. Once he'd got that figured out, though, it only took a short time for the solicitor's quite amazing secretary to ram it all into her computer and produce a final copy on creamy paper. Harry signed with great ceremony, witnessed by Mr. Weasley and Ms. Stone and the lawyer. The secretary turned out to be a notary as well, and she put more little stamps and seals on the pages. Harry also signed a Power of Attorney giving both Mr. and Mrs. Weasley the authority to act for him in those things where he still needed an adult, and to take care of his finances while he was away. Still more copies of all the papers were made, and the original Will was taken away to be put in a bank vault for safekeeping.

All in all, Harry was feeling quite bewildered by the end of the day, and not at all sure he wanted to try the new experience of going to a restaurant on top of it, but he had very little choice and just hoped he'd manage to get through without embarrassing himself too badly.

The restaurant Agatha Stone had chosen was elegant and discreet, and fairly uncrowded this early in the evening, which was primarily why she had chosen it. She and Mr. Weasley showed Harry how to negotiate the intricacies of the menu, and they discussed food choices, with Mr. Weasley placing the order for all three of them when the waiter came. They discussed the events of the day until their meals came, when they fell silent with the reverence that truly great steaks deserve.

Over the remains of the meal, Ms. Stone looked considerably at Harry, and seemed to come to some sort of decision. "Harry, I do have some final things to discuss with you before we say goodbye tonight. You're on your own now, and we may never see each other again, so ... I think you know that I think you're a very special young man. And it's not just because you've managed to maintain your human decency in the face of truly appalling circumstances." She sipped at her wine delicately. "Harry ... and Mr. Weasley ..."

"Please. Arthur."

She nodded. "Agatha. To both of you. What I'm about to say is a little unusual, and I could be out of a job if this gets back to certain parties, but I think both of you are capable of handling a few odd concepts."

Harry looked sideways at Mr. Weasley, who was merely gazing at Agatha in mild curiosity.

"A few more questions, Harry ... if you don't mind. Just to help me get the last few pieces in place. I know you denied it when you were being questioned by the police, but I could tell that you do feel some personal responsibility for the strange things that they were talking about. And that the things they knew about were only part of what goes on around you. When you get frightened, or angry, things happen, and you know it's you causing them to happen, but you don't have conscious control over it. Am I right?"

Harry froze, unable even to breathe, pinned by Ms. Stone's ebony gaze. "I ... I don't know ..." and then the water glass at his place began to shake violently. He grabbed for it just before it tipped over.

Mr. Weasley put one hand on his arm. "It's all right, Harry. Calm down." Harry saw his wand slide into his other hand. "Agatha, I'm terribly sorry, but ..."

"That's what I wanted to explain," she said, leaning forward intently. "Has either of you heard the term 'Recurrent Spontaneous Psychokinesis'? Or 'Paraphysics'?"

Mr. Weasley stopped before he was fully committed to the Obliviation spell. "Excuse me?"

"Paraphysics is a branch of science that studies things which are often considered strange and anomalous. Hauntings. Telepathy. Psychic healings. Things of that sort. It's called 'para' physics because we don't understand how they work, exactly. If and when we do understand them, they'll move into the realm of regular physics or quantum physics. Do you have any idea what I'm talking about?"

"Er. No," said Harry apologetically.

"Psychokinesis is commonly referred to as 'mind over matter.' The ability to move – or break – things using mental power only.

Spontaneous' means it happens to stimulate in the environment, not in a planned fashion. 'Recurrent' means it happens more than once. The phenomena centre around an individual – called the agent – who is often, but not always, a teenager, and usually under some extreme mental or emotional stress. Where most people express anger by shouting or screaming, an agent represses it and it finds expression through a physical manifestation in the vicinity."

Agatha looked down at her plate, poking at the remains of her jacket potato with her fork. "The day before yesterday, Harry was angry, under stress, when Inspector Munroe, either knowingly or unknowingly, pushed quite a few of his emotional buttons. Harry exhibited some signs of anger, but not as many as I would have expected under the circumstances. Instead, the temperature of the water in the cooler began to rise. Harry, you remember the water was warm when I got you a drink?"

"Yes. I thought the cooler wasn't working."

"It was, because I'd gotten a drink earlier and it was quite cold then. Later, Inspector Munroe triggered your anger to a peak. Your posture at that time said you were angry enough to strike out, but your voice was perfectly calm. Then the cooler jar shattered. When I picked up a piece of the glass, it was decidedly warm to the touch. And you didn't show the startle reaction Higgins and Munroe and I did. You just sat down, with that look on your face that said you *knew* what you'd just done – and knew you'd done wrong."

"You're saying ... I caused that to happen?" said Harry, cautiously. He was having a serious sense of déjà vu in this whole conversation. He'd had a similar one with Hagrid on his eleventh birthday.

"Your anger was shunted into the water cooler and shattered it, thereby relieving the stress on you. If you noticed, you were expressing your feelings more directly yesterday, so there was no collateral damage. Likely a number of the other instances the police mentioned were the same thing. The damage you did to the hospital room was impressive, and a direct reaction to the amount of pain you were in at the time. I don't know about the frogs, though. I still don't see how that could be connected. You're one of the youngest agents I've ever heard of, since the documented RSPK manifestations around you go back to early childhood, and also one of the longest-lasting. Not surprisingly, since your entire childhood was one of great stress." Ms. Stone shifted her attention to Mr. Weasley. "Arthur, I've been a social worker for almost twenty years. In that time, I've met hundreds, perhaps a thousand or more children and teens in untenable mental, emotional and physical circumstances. Of that thousand, I have met four others who manifested physical phenomena like Harry. The other four were all girls. Most agents are female, since girls are not encouraged to express their anger in this culture, and need to find another way. You can see it's not a very common thing at all."

"I've certainly never heard of it before," said Mr. Weasley.

"Children who are RSPK agents tend to be extraordinarily hard to place in foster homes, often because the foster families realize on an unconscious level that the child is responsible for a whole string of small disasters; this causes fear and stress for the child, and this results in more problems, until the family rejects the child and she or he goes on to a new home, but the stress level increases so it's practically guaranteed to happen again and again. I remember one girl – my first RSPK case – who was a firestarter. Things spontaneously burst into flames around her, usually rubbish bins and the like. She never caused a major fire, but she went through six foster homes in four years. I lost track of her when she turned eighteen and went off on her own, but I've often wondered what happened to her."

"What usually happens?"

"Oh, it's usually quite a temporary thing. Most agents grow out of it in their late teens to early twenties, perhaps when they learn how to handle stress better, or even just because they leave the stressful situation. I have great hopes that once Harry is confident that the stress of living with the Dursleys is over and done with, the incidences of RSPK activity will decrease markedly in the long run. But in the short run, it may happen more often for a while, since any change – even for the good – is stressful. And I'll admit I'm a bit worried about him going off on this exchange trip by himself. That's going to be another stressor."

"So then the Dursleys were right. I am a freak." Harry deliberately kept his voice flat.

"No, you are not. Never a freak," said Ms. Stone with some heat. "What you are is a sensitive person who has learned how to express strong emotion in a way that's safe for you. If you'd acted out your fear and anger in front of Dudley or Vernon Dursley as a child, what do you think would have happened to you? What happened to you on the occasions when you did show it?"

"I was usually beaten."

"Exactly. And if something else happened?"

"It ... wasn't as bad. They'd just lock me up instead of hitting me. Because they were afraid then. Or maybe they didn't even notice it."

"So it was a survival trait. No more than that. If it's any consolation, children with RSPK tend to be more intelligent than the norm, more empathetic and creative. That's a good set of traits to have. And in some cases, instead of losing their RSPK, they can get it under control and use it consciously for their own benefit. That's also a good thing. Harry, don't ever be ashamed of who and what you are," Ms. Stone continued urgently. "You were an innocent child placed in an impossible situation. And you learned to cope with it by doing something that you didn't know was supposed to be impossible. And if you hadn't done that, odds are you'd be dead long since. This is an incredible gift you've been given. You should try to make the most of it."

"Arthur, I brought up the difficulties of placing RSPK agents in homes not to try to warn you about Harry, but because I think, for a variety of reasons, that your home may be the best possible placement for him. I think that you're already familiar – intimately familiar – with the unusual things that happen around psi agents, even if you're not consciously aware of it."

"Are you saying—"

"I'm saying that there may be more than one agent in your own family, and that you all are so used to the chaos that a little more won't hurt. I think at least two of your sons may be agents, although not manifested the way Harry is."

"The twins?"

"I have never seen more active chaos agents," said Agatha. "Quite a lot of it is conscious, but even when they're trying to be on their best behaviour, things get very strange around them, true?"

"True."

"And I think they come by it honestly. Psi talents aren't always the result of stressful situations. They also tend to run very strongly in certain families." Now she was staring at Mr. Weasley, and Harry was glad someone else was at the centre of her attention for a change. "I have noticed, Arthur, that time and distance are strange around you. The first time I went to your house, when you were with me, it was perhaps an hour's drive. The second time, when I visited alone, it took three *hours* for me to get there, and a lot more mileage on the dial. I get paid for mileage. I kept a record, submitted my mileage and petrol expenditures for both trips for reimbursement. Most people would find it impossible to make a six-hour daily round-trip commute into London from where you live. But you do it. Somehow, you chopped four hours off the round trip, and I didn't notice it until I repeated the route alone. On Tuesday and Wednesday, you brought Harry to meet me, and he wasn't even hungry, although by rights breakfast should have been hours before if you ate at home. And you managed to be at my office shortly after five both nights, despite the terrible traffic tangle that is London at rush hour. I'm not sure Harry would even have noticed these things; I don't think he has any idea just how far out in the country you live, or what normal traffic patterns are like."

"Ms. Stone ..."

"Agatha."

"Agatha, may I assume that what you've noticed is not general knowledge?"

"Absolutely. I hold everything in the strictest confidence where my clients are concerned."

"I am not your client."

"True. But my client's best interests would not be served by taking him away from you, or by exposing the more ... unusual ... aspects of your home life. It's not anybody else's business anyway. I'm just warning you that there might be people who do notice ... and who might have less than your best interests, or Harry's interests, at heart. I am well aware," she said darkly, "that when matters such as this come to public attention, records seem to vanish, even memory fades unexpectedly. It happened to me, with my young firestarter. Somehow I managed to forget she existed for five years, until I came across a spare set of records I'd kept. And this despite the fact that I've had a long-term interest in the paranormal, and the circumstances of her case should have guaranteed that I'd remember her. So now I keep multiple copies of all my records and notes. I don't want to find myself forgetting her, or any of the others, or Harry. These children are too special, they deserve more than that." She sighed, and rubbed the bridge of her nose. "There are organizations that study this sort of thing; I can give you some references if you're interested. They've collected hundreds of case studies over the years. If I can get your permission, Harry, I'd like to submit yours – it's one of the best documented cases I've come across. I'd change all the identifying information, of course, so as not to violate your privacy. For that matter, when you're back in England next summer, I'd like to ask you to take a battery of tests for other forms of psi potential. Usually where there's one, there's more. Arthur, that goes for your and your family, too. Being able to demonstrate a familial link would be a real coup for the researchers."

"I'll consider it. But I must tell you that I don't much like the idea of becoming a rat in anybody's maze."

"Arthur, this is on the very cutting edge, where science and magic and spirituality all get mixed together and we really don't know what's going on. Many scientists don't even recognize that there *is* something going on, and will fight to the academic death to preserve the *status quo*. That's why I said I could lose my job if this got out. My understanding of parapsychics is considered 'fringe' by others, and RSPK is not an official diagnosis in any psychiatric diagnostic manual. But if it ever does become accepted as part of the normal scheme of things, it will be because people like you allow yourselves to be tested. And then people like Harry can grow up knowing they're not freaks, and learn to make the most of their talents. I think it's important for him and the other children like him. Please just think about it. That's all I ask."

"I said I would consider it."

"On that note, then, shall we consider dessert? I understand they do a truly spectacular cheesecake here ..."

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"So let me get this straight. Your social worker thinks you have this Spontaneous Psychohysteria thing and make things blow up from time to time, but she thinks you'll *get over it*?" asked Fred. The younger Weasley set had joined Harry and Hermione in the garden, which was rapidly becoming one of Harry's favourite spots, to discuss the day's events.

"Yep. And the two of you are Chaos Agents, and your dad does weird things with space and time, but that's okay because it's all quantum physics," said Harry.

"I knew Muggles tended to rationalize things, but that's ridiculous," said George.

"What's quantum physics? I've heard of Newtonian physics and astrophysics. What's this quantum thing?" Hermione seemed upset that an entire new branch of science had popped up without notifying her.

"According to Agatha, it's where magic and science overlap," said Harry. "Of course, she was using it to try to explain *me* , so it may be more magic and less science."

"Well, why shouldn't science be able to explain magic?" Hermione was pouring herself a refill on her lemonade. "Maybe the two aren't as incompatible as we've been taught. Maybe ..." she froze, lost in thought, the pitcher still tilted above her glass.

"Uh-oh, she's having a brainstorm again," said Ginny, taking the pitcher away from Hermione before the lemonade overflowed the glass.

"No, I'm the one that has brainstorms these days," said Ron, not without a touch of bitterness. "Last night it was ancient Roman military tactics for some reason. Pretty soon my brain is going to run out of storage space."

"Do you actually retain all of that stuff?" asked Harry, curiously.

"Not all of it. I get the gist of it. But the details come back if I think about it."

"Too bad we can't link your brainstorming up with her storage capacity. You'd be awesome."

"I can't deny it's worked well for my schoolwork so far. I think my summer essays this year are better than I've ever done, and I'm actually finished with them. For once I won't be scrambling to get them finished while packing for the train at the same time. But it's a pain having to make sure I'm with somebody who can pull me out of it when I'm done."

"I'm sure you'll get control of it sooner or later. For now, it looks like you'll have to snap Hermione out of it for a change. She's still thinking about rewriting the laws of magic."

"Hey. Hey, Hermione!" Ron snapped his fingers briskly in front of her, and she blinked, startled.

"What?"

"Good. I was afraid I'd have to slip some ice down your back or something."

"You wouldn't dare!"

"He probably wouldn't, you'd turn him into something nasty once you're back at school."

And the evening slipped away in laughter, and Harry was, for a time, able to forget about what had happened and stop worrying about what might happen, and just enjoy what was.

## Harry Potter and the Junior Year Abroad In the Gardens of Avalon

### Chapter Thirteen

#### In the Gardens of Avalon

That weekend, Mr. Weasley asked Harry if he still wanted to visit his parents' graves, and Harry jumped at the chance. Hermione hesitantly asked if she could come along, since she didn't know how the Wizarding community did these things and would like to find out, but if it was too personal for Harry, she would gladly stay home. Harry said he'd be happy if she came, and invited Ron and Ginny, too. So on Sunday morning, Mrs. Weasley packed a large picnic basket, everybody dressed in nice but comfortable clothes, and they set off.

To Harry's surprise, the first stop was the Leaky Cauldron. From there, they headed into Diagon Alley. At the far end of the Alley there was a high fence with a gate in it. The branches of some apple trees growing on the other side hung over and shaded the gate. There was no sign to identify it, and Harry, on his previous trips to the Alley, had just assumed this was the back entrance to somebody's private garden.

Mr. Weasley pushed the gate open and led them inside. Harry looked around curiously. It was a roughly pentagonal garden, with an apple tree growing in each corner. Planters containing tasteful arrangements of potted herbs and flowers were scattered about casually. In the centre of the garden was a white marble basin perhaps two feet high and ten feet across, filled with clear water. The central image of the fountain was a golden boat, occupied by three standing cloaked and veiled women, one of whom carried a pitcher from which water poured into the fountain's basin. A draped body lay at the women's feet. Placed seemingly at random around the edge of the fountain were a number of golden apples. It was Hermione who voiced Harry's questions. "Surely this isn't it? It isn't big enough, and there are no headstones ..."

"Wizards don't use headstones, my dear," murmured Mrs. Weasley. "Stone is so cold. It isn't a fitting memorial for the lives of our loved ones. This garden is just an entryway to the real place." She picked up one of the golden apples from the rim of the fountain. "This is a Portkey to take us there."

"It doesn't look like a regular Portkey. Those are all rubbish," said Harry.

"That's because they need to be hidden from the Muggles, or are only temporary, so we don't bother to make them out of anything valuable. These never leave this garden or the memorial grove, and are reused constantly, so of course they were made to look nice. Now everyone touch the apple, please. All ready? *Take us to Avalon*," she commanded the Portkey, and with a stomach-wrenching lurch they were elsewhere.

They appeared at the edge of a fountain of the same design, only much larger, so that the boat, the women, and the body were life-sized. The area around the fountain, where they stood, was paved with coloured stones in a complex interwoven design. From the edge of the pavement, crushed gravel paths led off in various directions, winding through a landscape marked by beds of flowers and apple trees growing in small groups or singly. Some of the trees were in flower or bore ripe fruit, despite the fact that it was not the season for either. Birds and butterflies abounded. The air was fresher than Harry had ever experienced before, even in the country where the Burrow was located, and the clear sunlight brought out details of things even when they should have been blurred by distance. The cumulative effect made him feel slightly giddy.

A young woman veiled from head to toe in white approached them. "Welcome to Avalon," she said in a sweet, melodious voice. "May I ask who you have come to visit?"

"James and Lily Potter," answered Mr. Weasley.

The young woman flicked her wand, and a small ball of pink light appeared. "Please follow the guide; it will take you to the correct grove. When you wish to return, or if you wish to visit someone else, ask it, and it will lead you where you wish." Mr. Weasley thanked her, and she bowed slightly in response, then went to speak to a couple who had just appeared on the far side of the fountain.

The ball of light floated off along one of the paths, and the group followed. They did not dawdle, but neither did they walk fast, and Harry felt the tension he had been under for months, or perhaps years, gradually fading away.

"Where are we?" asked Hermione in a whisper.

"We are in the Gardens of Avalon," said Mrs. Weasley in a normal tone. "We're not quite on the material plane now, you understand. This is a place where the earthly and spiritual realms overlap. If we were on Earth, I think we'd be somewhere in the vicinity of Glastonbury."

"Avalon? You mean like King Arthur and all that? I thought that was just a myth!"

"If you accept that Merlin was real, why not the rest of it?" responded Mr. Weasley. "No, it's like a lot of Wizardly things, the Muggles got hold of the story and changed some things, but the core of it is true. The magical folk of Britain have been bringing their dead here since long before the first Roman ever set foot on the island. Even Arthur is here. For all he was a Muggle, he was a King recognized by magical folk as well. He's one of the few so honoured."

"Are all Wizards buried here?" asked Harry.

"Not all. All are entitled to be if they wish, and most of the purebloods have family groves. Muggleborns often request to be buried with their families in the Muggle world, or where they lived, but they can have trees here as well."

The pink light was now leading them along a path lined with apple trees, all of which were in bloom, perfuming the air with sweet scent and sprinkling the path with pink and white petals. At the end of the lane, the light stopped before two trees which grew so close together that their trunks had twisted together, and their branches were interlaced, one bearing flowers and the other fruit. "Oh, how lovely!" said Mrs. Weasley. She set the picnic basket down on the grass under the trees; opening it, she pulled out a picnic cloth and started to set places.

Harry walked up to the trees, gently touching the bark and the crease where the trunks of the trees had joined. The bark felt warm, and a gentle tingle ran through his fingertips where they rested against the tree. "So these trees were planted for my parents? Like the trees at the Burrow?" he asked.

"Like that, yes. It was Albus who saw to their burial, of course. They were buried in the same grave, together in death as they were in life, and their trees reflect that."

"What if ... what if there's no body? Like if it gets blown up, or ... or." He was unable to finish his sentence.

"You're thinking of Sirius?" asked Mr. Weasley. Harry nodded mutely. "I believe Tonks and her mother, as his closest family members, were going to make sure he had a tree here. We can ask the guide to take us there later, if you want."

"I'd like that, yes."

"Good. Now sit down, Harry. We're almost ready."

Harry turned to find a meal laid out, and places for eight. Harry started to sit down at the nearest place, but Mrs. Weasley pulled him around to sit across the cloth from the trees, next to Hermione. Mr. and Mrs. Weasley sat at the right hand side of the cloth, and Ron and Ginny at the left. While the teenagers helped themselves to sandwiches, crisps and salads, Mrs. Weasley picked an apple from the tree, the branch seeming to sway down to make it easier for the short, plump woman to reach it. She sliced it in half crossways, so that each half revealed a five-pointed star made from the seeds, and placed one half on each of the plates nearest the trees, while Harry and Hermione watched curiously.

Suddenly there was a shimmer of silver-white emerging from the bark of the apple trees. Harry gasped and his sandwich slipped from suddenly nerveless fingers as the two figures resolved from formless mist into detailed, silver-white images. A tall, slim man with shaggy hair and glasses, and a shorter woman with her hair drawn back in a bun at the nape of her neck, both dressed in slightly dated Muggle clothing.

"Mum? Dad?" Harry whispered, and the two spectres nodded. He lurched forward, heedless of the picnic cloth between them, but Ron grabbed his arm to stop him.

"If you touch them, you'll break the spell and they'll vanish," he said urgently. "You too, Hermione." Hermione lowered the hand she had involuntarily reached out towards the spectres, and twisted her fingers in her skirt to keep from succumbing to temptation again.

The two figures were now fully formed, more opaque than any ghost Harry had ever seen. They stepped forward to take their places at the picnic. Lily sat gracefully, her legs curled beneath her, while James sprawled out next to her.

"It's so good to see you, Harry," said Lily. "You've grown so; what are you, thirteen, fourteen now?"

"Err, I just turned sixteen, actually."

"Sixteen? Stand up, let me see you," demanded James, climbing back to his own feet so he could compare heights. "No, you can't be sixteen. I was already almost my full height at sixteen, and your mother's family aren't short, either."

Harry flushed as he resumed his seat. This wasn't quite what he had expected. "There are ... reasons for my height, unfortunately. It's a long story. But that's not important now ..."

"Yes it is important!" said Lily in a huff. "If someone's been doing things that affect my baby, I want to know about it! And where is Sirius? He was supposed to bring you every year on your birthday so we could see you grow!"

"Oh, God." Harry buried his face in his hands. "That's part of the long story. He couldn't. And nobody told me you were here. I would have been here every day if I'd known!" He felt Hermione putting her arm comfortingly across his shoulders.

"Well, we're all here now, that's the important thing," said Molly. "There's plenty of time for everybody to explain everything. Harry, dear, try to pull yourself together. I think there are lots of questions that need to be answered."

"Yes, Mum," Harry answered, and then realized what he'd said in front of his real mother.

Lily raised an eyebrow. "'Mum'?"

"That's one of the things we need to talk about," said Molly. "Harry here desperately needed a family, so we took him in, first in fosterage. Then we did a magical adoption, so he's a Weasley now as well as a Potter. I hope that's all right."

James was frowning mightily. "I wish we'd been kept up on all this, but I suppose it's all right. I don't have any doubts that you'll take care of him

properly, Molly, Arthur. But would somebody please tell us what's been going on?"

"Like I said, it's a long story," said Harry. "It all starts the night you ... the night you ..."

"Died?" said James. "You don't have to worry about saying that, Harry. Not to us."

"Yeah, well ... I'm still not sure exactly what happened that night. Nobody is. After Voldemort killed you two, he tried to kill me ... and it didn't work, and he was blasted out of his body. Nobody knows why. Anyway, Dumbledore and Hagrid and Sirius came, and Dumbledore told Hagrid to take me away for safety. They didn't trust Sirius because they thought he was your Secret Keeper."

"But he wasn't! It was ..."

"Pettigrew, we know that now. But nobody except Sirius knew that then, and knowing Dumbledore, he didn't even give Sirius a chance to get a word in edgewise. Anyway, Sirius loaned that flying motorbike of his to Hagrid to take me away, and then he went after Pettigrew, but Pettigrew blew up an entire street to fake his death and made it look like Sirius did it. The Aurors came and took Sirius to Azkaban, where he stayed for twelve years without a trial. So that's why he couldn't take care of me."

James' face showed his fury at this, while Lily's eyes widened in shock.

"So Dumbledore brought me to the only place I'd be safe. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia's house. And he told them to take care of me."

Now it was Lily's face that showed fury. "WHAT!! My sister was the *last* person you should have been left with! How could he!"

"He said the blood protection your death made would keep me safe as long as I was there."

"Well that's just ... James and I both cast blood rituals to protect you, that's true, but they had nothing to do with Petunia! The protection was to follow you, wherever you went."

"This was one that *he* cast, I think. I'm trying to remember what he said, exactly ... something about a charm that he placed on me ... because of your blood in me and Aunt Petunia, as long as I could still call it home, I was safe from Voldemort. Mind you, apparently I wasn't safe from anything *else*, since Umbridge was able to sic those Dementors on me last year ..."

"Dementors!?" Lily squeaked.

"And I wasn't safe from the Dursleys themselves, since all three of them had their shot at me over the years. But I was safe from somebody who was a disembodied spirit and couldn't get at me anyway." There was more than a little bitterness in Harry's voice. "I wonder if there was really all that much difference between Dumbledore's blood wards and Sirius' family wards on Grimmauld Place. Or what's on The Burrow now. He never even brought that up when I had to move in with the Weasleys. And it was a Muggle social worker who made that happen."

"Why should Dumbledore have had anything to do with it?" Lily was becoming a little hysterical. "He wasn't your guardian! Sirius was! You should have been living with him!"

"He was in Azkaban, remember? And then when he finally escaped, he was on the run for two years, and then the last year he was stuck incommunicado at Grimmauld Place, and then ..." Harry took a deep breath. "And then he died."

"Sirius is dead?" whispered James. "When?"

"A few months ago. Just before the end of term. It was my fault," Harry said, his resolution not to assume all the guilt forgotten. "I was tricked into thinking he was in danger. So I went to help him. Only he had to come rescue me instead, and he ... he died."

"That's not quite how it happened," Hermione said to comfort him.

"YOU DON'T KNOW THAT!" Harry snapped. "It was my fault you and Ron and Ginny were hurt, too. And Neville and Luna. Not one of you would have been there if it hadn't been for me. Sirius wouldn't have been there."

"Stop! Stop!" cried Lily, holding up her hands. "This is getting too hopelessly scrambled. Can we start at the beginning again and try to put this in some kind of order, now? Harry, you can start by introducing your friends, all right?"

Reminded of his manners and with his angry train of thought effectively derailed, Harry performed the requested introductions and began again, managing to give a fairly detailed rendition of his adventures with only a few side discussions along the way.

"I think I understand everything now," said James, rubbing his temples. "This is all so far from the way we planned it."

"Planned it? You knew about things in advance?" asked Harry.

"Well, of course we knew we were targeted by Voldemort," his father replied. "With me in the Ministry's Foreign Affairs department and your mother writing for the Prophet, we were fairly high-profile. I'm actually surprised we lasted as long as we did."

"You were with the Ministry? I thought you were an Auror or something."

"No, Sirius was the Auror. I think he was hoping to be an Unspeakable eventually, but that's Sirius for you. Some of that Slytherin ambition coming out. In any event, none of us had very long life expectancies. But we did have some time to prepare. We closed up my parents' house – it was too obvious – and hid in the Muggle community at Godric's Hollow. In retrospect, we were still being too obvious, but we trusted the *Fidelius*. We

should have moved to Birmingham or some such right away. We were planning on disappearing into the Muggle world if necessary, so we had some money put aside there."

"I know about that. The police found out about it when they were investigating the Dursleys, and my social worker arranged for me to get it. Between that and my Gringott's vault, I'm set for a while."

"The Gringott's vault you have now is just your trust fund. It's set to siphon interest from the family account to support you through school. The rest of it will become available to you on your seventeenth birthday, and the house will unseal then, too. Our family isn't wealthy on the scale of, say, the Malfoys, but we're well off."

"I'm not all that concerned about that, really. It's nice to know, but I always figured on supporting myself. What I'm really interested in is, well, you said there were blood rituals that you did that weren't related to Petunia? What were those about?"

"Since we knew we were at risk, we took steps to protect you magically, just in case. Your mother actually did most of the research ... she's a demon in a library ..."

"Sounds like someone else I know," murmured Harry, looking sideways at Hermione, who blushed.

"Blood magic is usually considered Dark," explained Lily, "but I found some old rituals that are not, because they draw on self-sacrifice instead of harming someone else. They were a bit iffy, because we couldn't be sure the right circumstances would occur, but it was all we had. So your father and I both performed rituals, except for the last step – which was, of course, the offering of a life – and then hoped that if we were killed, at least our deaths would do some good. Your father had the advantage of a Faerie Gift, so his ritual was designed to transfer that to you in the event of his death."

"A Faerie Gift? What's that?"

"Just what it sounds like," said James. "My parents were old-fashioned and arranged for a nurse when I was born. Nanny was even more old-fashioned, and in the night between my birth and my Naming Ceremony, she put out a bowl of cream and honey for the Good People, asking for their blessing for me. It must have worked, because I had the gift of insanely good luck all my life. Given some of the situations I found myself in, it was a damned good thing, too, or I'd never have made it through Hogwarts in one piece. From the sound of it, the ritual worked and you have the same luck as I did."

Harry thought about trolls and Bludgers and the Whomping Willow and had to agree that faerie luck probably played a large part in his continued survival.

"The thing with faerie luck, though, is that if you start to rely on it, it will abandon you. So you make what plans you can, and hope for the best as to the rest of it."

"I think I understand that. What about the one Mum cast?"

"Well, that one's a little more subtle," said Lily. "I didn't have a specific gift to pass along to you. But I looked at the relationship between your father and his friends, and I wanted to make sure that you would have friends like that, people you could depend on to help you if needed. So I put a spell on you to draw the people you needed to you."

"You mean my friends are my friends only because of this spell?" Harry was horrified. Ron and Hermione had been his only support through some very tough years. He didn't want to think it hadn't been real.

"No, not at all. I just made it easier for you to meet them. To make sure that compatible people would cross your path. Which of them you wound up developing relationships with was completely up to you and them. As it happens, from what you told us, you met Ron and Hermione and Neville almost immediately upon entering the magical world, and Ginny, Fred and George as well. And they're still part of your core group. You're even still friends with Hagrid."

"But it wasn't the spell that made them become my friends?"

"No. No spell can guarantee that. From what you've told us, Draco Malfoy was probably drawn to you, too, but you're so incompatible that no friendship could develop. If you'd been slightly different, you might have been Sorted into Slytherin and actually made friends with him. Or into Ravenclaw or Hufflepuff and made friends there, as I understand you started doing through your study group last year. What I wanted was to make sure you'd never be alone. If we couldn't be there for you, at least you would have friends who would be like family to you." Lily smiled softly at Harry. "And I can see that I wrought better than I knew. My spell is still with you, Harry, and your own need has made it stronger. Wherever you go, whatever you do, you will be able to find friends and allies."

"There was another component to both rituals," interjected James, trying to distract his son. He could see the boy was not happy with the information he'd just received. "We did straight-up protections, too – you know, the deflect evil, keep harm away sort of thing – but that hasn't seemed to work as well. From the sound of it, trouble just keeps seeking you out anyway."

"I don't think any spell could keep it away," said Harry grimly. "It seems to have my address down in its little black book. But maybe that explains why Voldemort's spell bounced that first time. If it ran into not one, but two blood protections? And maybe that weakened the protections or burned them out so I'm not defended anymore."

"That's a distinct possibility," said Hermione, interjecting into the conversation for the first time. "Theoretically, every curse has to have a counter. None has ever been found for the Killing Curse, though. That's the main reason it's considered an Unforgivable even though other spells with more horrific ways of killing people aren't classified that way. The only way to avoid the Killing Curse is to not be there when it hits, or to put something



massive in its way. If a pre-existing ritual blood protection is the only magical counter, then I can see why nobody's discovered it until now. They're not exactly common."

"You can say that again!" laughed Lily. "You have no idea the amount of research I did before I found those spells!"

"I think I might," said Hermione, grinning, and the two smartest witches of their generations shared a moment of sisterhood.

"Now then, we still have a picnic to finish, and I think Harry has quite a bit to think about," said Molly. "Perhaps we can talk of lighter things for now? And now that Harry knows how to get here, he can come back on his own when he's ready."

"Of course," said Lily. "I imagine all of this has been a bit much to find out about at once."

"That it has been," agreed Harry. "But it's better than how Dumbledore finally told me about things after the Ministry. I trashed his office pretty badly after that one."

"I'd have liked to see that," said James. "Did Sirius ever tell you about the time we ..." And the conversation turned to happier and more innocent times, and laughter rang among the apple trees.

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Afternoon was apparently eternal in Avalon, because there was no change in the light despite the hours they spent at the picnic. James and Lily finally became more ghost-like, and faded into their trees, but not before assuring Harry one last time that they loved him. Molly picked a number of apples from James' tree and put them in the now-empty picnic basket, while the pink ball of light that was the guide came down from where it had been hovering in the foliage and waited for instructions.

"Did you want to see Sirius?" Mr. Weasley asked Harry. "We still have plenty of time."

Harry nodded, Mrs. Weasley collected a couple of apples from James' tree, just in case, she said, and the pink light led them off to another grove. Here, at the edge of a group of older trees, there was a little whip of an apple tree growing. It stood barely as tall as Harry himself, and was in leaf but not flower or fruit. The earth at its base was still disturbed from its planting, and whoever had done the planting of the tree had surrounded the trunk with a circle of forget-me-nots. As she had before, Mrs. Weasley sliced one of the apples in half and placed it on the ground before the tree, and a silvery-white shade emerged from its trunk.

"*Sirius!*" Harry cried, and had to make a conscious effort to stop himself from attempting to hug his godfather.

"Harry!" Sirius apparently had the same problem. They both stared at each other for a few moments, trying to figure out what to say.

"I'm so glad you're-"

"I'm so sorry I-"

They paused and laughed at the same time. "You go first," said Harry.

"I'm so glad to see you're all right," said Sirius, a wide smile lighting his face. "I was so worried about you. I couldn't see what happened after ... after I fell through the Veil. I didn't know if you'd made it out all right. But you did. You did." He braced his hands on his hips, looking down at Harry fondly. "And that makes everything all right."

"No it's not all right! Sirius, I *killed* you! And I'm so, so sorry things-"

"Hold it right there, Harry. You did not kill me. My annoying cousin killed me. And she wouldn't have had the chance if I hadn't been stupid in the first place. The middle of a firefight in an environment with unknown dangers was not the place to go having a private duel and taunting Bella! If I'd been that stupid in training, Moody would have had my hide, and justifiably, too. I'm the one that's sorry, Harry," he said softly. "Sorry I left you alone."

"I'm not alone anymore, Sirius. So that's okay, anyway. I've been adopted by the Weasleys now."

"Well, that's just fine! It should have happened a long time ago. Why Dumbledore kept sending you back to those-"

"Sirius, can we – not talk about that? I'd rather not think about it ever again."

"All right, that's fine. We'll talk about something else. Are you folks still staying at the house, by the way?"

"No," said Mr. Weasley. "It was compromised by Kreacher, so Dumbledore had us clean our things out and abandon it."

Sirius frowned. "My Will didn't kick in?"

"You haven't officially been declared dead. There's no way to prove you were even at the Ministry, except having Kingsley or Tonks admit they let you in through the Aurors' entrance, and that would get them kicked out of the Aurors, so Dumbledore wouldn't let them do it."

"Well, tell Dumbledore to get off his aged ass and get me declared dead. Or get Andromeda Tonks into that house to stay, one or the other. If it's not claimed by a member of the Black family or the title passed on according to my Will, in one year from the date of my death it will vanish. Completely. Gone forever. And there are things in there that Harry will want, trust me."

"Do you mean the set of Carmarthen? Remus got me those."

"Good, good, but there's more than that. A lot of things you won't be able to use until you're seventeen, unfortunately. But they have to still be there in order for you to use them. Molly, Arthur, much though I hate to say it, you have to save that house. Dumbledore may not understand. Fight him on it if you have to."

"We will. Would Tonks do to claim the house? She's with the Order."

"No, she was never entered on the family Tapestry. Andromeda was, even though my mother tried to burn her off. It takes more than that to get someone disinherited, trust me. Once a Black, always a Black. Otherwise I wouldn't have been able to get into the place, either. Bella, Narcissa or Draco Malfoy could claim it, too, but we don't want that to happen. The *Fidelius* is the only thing keeping them out right now." The ghostly shade seemed to shiver and become a bit more insubstantial. "I guess I don't have much time left. I have to go back. I just want to know ... Harry, did you get my birthday present?"

"Yes, and I'm getting ready to go to America. I wish we could have gone together."

"I wish so, too. But it wasn't meant to be. Just enjoy it, kid. Relax, live a little ... raise a little hell. And remember old Padfoot while you're doing it, eh? Then come back next year and tell me ..."

"I will, I will. Sirius, don't go..." But Sirius sadly raised his hand in farewell, and turned into a twist of silver mist that slipped into the trunk of the tree.

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The pink ball of light floated in front of them again. Harry sighed heavily. "Okay, I guess we're done. Take us back, please." The ball floated off with the Weasley party trailing along behind it. Soon, however, it approached another grove, with another young tree growing near it. This tree seemed somewhat older than Sirius', but not much.

"What are we doing here?" Harry asked. "There was nobody else we needed to see, was there?"

"Maybe somebody else needs to see us," Mrs. Weasley murmured. She pulled another apple out of the basket, cut it and placed it at the base of the tree. The now-familiar silver-white mist appeared and took shape.

"Cedric!" Harry whispered.

"Hey, Harry. It's good to see you."

"Cedric, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to-" Harry stopped as Cedric waved his hand dismissively.

"Nothing to be sorry for. We both decided to take that damned cup together. If you'd had it your way, I'd have been there alone. And I doubt anybody would ever have heard what became of me then. I wasn't prepared to get out of a situation like that, Harry. You were."

"I feel like I should have done something."

"In what, the one and a half seconds' warning we had? I was the adult there, I was supposed to protect you, and I didn't." The ghost awkwardly stuffed his hands in his pockets. "I just wanted to tell you a couple of things, so I put in a request for your guide to bring you here. I knew you'd come eventually."

"What did you want, then?"

"Well, I wanted to apologize for not helping you. And to tell you I'm glad you made it out of there. You're a good man, Harry, and I'm sorry I didn't have a chance to tell you that during the Tournament. Too bad you weren't a Hufflepuff, I'd have liked to know you better."

"Too bad you weren't a Gryffindor. Me, too." Both boys smiled at each other.

"I also wanted to thank you for getting my body back to my family. You didn't have to do that – probably shouldn't have, given the way you were hurting right then – but it meant a lot to my parents."

"I couldn't leave you there. You wouldn't have left me."

"You definitely would have been a good Hufflepuff. Listen, can I ask you one small favour?"

"Whatever you want."

"It's kind of awkward. It's about Cho."

Ron made a choking sound, and Hermione pounded him between the shoulder blades. Cedric glanced at them, clearly not understanding Ron's reaction.

"What about Cho?"

"Well, you remember we went to the Yule Ball that year ... we were getting pretty close by the time of the Third Task, and I was beginning to think ... maybe ... But she hasn't come to visit me. I don't know if that's because she doesn't know about Avalon – her family is pretty traditional and

think they have their own ways – or because she really wasn't that interested."

"Oh, she was interested, all right," said Harry wryly. "She kept trying to get me to talk about you all year. But I didn't know enough to tell her what she wanted to know."

Cedric's face lit up. "You have no idea how much that means to me, Harry. Listen, could you ... could you tell her I'm here? Tell her I'd like to talk to her? If she wants to, that is?"

"I'll do that, Cedric. I may not get a chance to tell her in person, but I'll send her a letter. Will that be all right?"

"That will be fine. Just fine." Cedric's face was more relaxed now. "That was all I really wanted to say, then. Just thanks, again. And good luck." Cedric waved farewell and vanished.

"That was unexpected," said Mr. Weasley. "We should definitely be on our way, then." The little pink light swayed indecisively. "Unless there's someone else we should see?" he asked it. The light brightened and bobbed up and down rapidly. "Lead on, then," he said resignedly.

"I wonder who this one is going to be?" Harry whispered to Ginny as they followed the light down more paths. "I'm about out of dead people in my life."

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The light led them a long way, finally ending up at a grove full of apple trees that were gnarled and twisted with age. The light flickered about uncertainly between the trees for a few moments, then sank to the ground in the centre of the grove. The Weasleys looked at each other and at Harry in puzzlement.

"I have no idea, Harry," said Mr. Weasley in answer to the unspoken question. "I don't recognise this grove. It's old, though. Very old. Maybe a family that's died out?"

"If a family dies out," said Hermione, working through the idea, "what happens to the last person in the family? If there's no one to plant a tree for them? Can they still come here?"

"Let's find out," said Mrs. Weasley, pulling another apple from the picnic basket. Deftly, she sliced it and placed it on the ground where the pink light was.

For a long moment, nothing happened. Then a thin silver-white wisp emerged from the ground and expanded into the form of a short woman who was unknown to Harry. She was rather attractive, he supposed. Large, expressive eyes were her best feature. Her figure was hidden by the shapeless Muggle fashions of the 1920's, and her hair was cut in a then-stylish bob. She looked as if she were in her late 20's. When she had materialized fully, she looked around as if puzzled. "Who are you? Why have you awakened me?"

"We were led here by the guide, child," said Mrs. Weasley soothingly. "We thought that you had called us. We are the Weasleys, Molly and Arthur, and our children. Who are you?"

"Weasley. I think I may have heard that name before, but I can't remember." The ghost seemed weaker than the others they had visited, more confused. "My name is ... Constance. Constance ... Marvolo ... Riddle."

Harry's eyes darkened with anger and his fists clenched. "Constance Marvolo *Riddle* ? Are you related to Tom Marvolo Riddle?"

The ghost seemed to become a little more solid as recollection came to her. "Yes, that was it! My son is Tom. My poor little boy," she crooned sorrowfully.

Harry found it hard to think of Lord Voldemort being anybody's 'poor little boy', but he supposed even a mother might love him. From what little he knew, the woman had died when Voldemort was born, and had never had a chance to raise her son. He wondered if things might have turned out differently if she had.

"Err, Ma'am, did ... Did you want to talk to someone ... about your son?" Harry reflected that this could easily become a very sticky conversation indeed.

"In a way ... I know what he has become. Even in the realm of the dead, there are whispers ... he has turned his back on his people, they say. Using his magic to destroy. That is not ... not what I would have had him become. Not what I would have him be in the future. And I called ... to one who might be able to help me change things. Is that you, young man?"

"Well, it's a little too late to stop him becoming it, ma'am, but if there's something I can do about the future, I will. My name is Harry Potter, and I've already crossed paths once or twice with your son."

Constance reached up and passed her fingers over Harry's scar, so close he fancied he could feel the chill of a ghostly touch. "He has placed something of himself in you. I can feel it. He has marked you."

"As his equal, I know." Harry's voice was flat.

"Then if you are his equal, I shall treat you as my son as well, Harry."

*Great*, Harry thought. *Suddenly I have three Mums?*

"Are you of age?" she asked.

"Not quite, no."

"Then when you are of age, you may go to my home and claim the birthright that Tom never did. It should still be there waiting for you, since my family's wards are strong."

"Your home? Your family? But your family is ..."

"Of the line of Slytherin? Yes. But it is not what it once was. And it is not what you think. Regardless, it is now ended. My son shall have no child of his body, but he has a child of his magic. That child is you."

"I have no desire for anything of your son or his magic," Harry spat.

"Nonetheless, it has been given. What you do with it is up to you."

"It's not going to turn Harry evil or anything like that, is it?" Ron asked, his eyes huge.

"There is no good or evil," the ghost replied. "Only power..."

"And those too weak to use it," Harry finished.

"Yes!" The ghost seemed delighted. "You do understand! The power is there to use or not use as you see fit. And my family's legacy is yours as well, if you wish. My son is insane. *He must not win*. You understand that. *He must not win*."

"At least we see eye to eye on that one," Harry agreed.

"Then when you are of age, go to the village of Enderby Mires. Take the main road north; it will lead into the swamps. The snakes will lead you to the right place, and the wards will permit you to pass. Use well what you find, Harry Potter. *He must not win*." And with that, the spectral form of Constance Marvolo Riddle faded away.

## Harry Potter and the Junior Year Abroad Greetings and Farewells

Chapter Fourteen

### *Greetings and Farewells*

Harry never remembered the trip back from Avalon to Diagon Alley; the next thing he knew, he was sitting in Florean Fortescue's ice cream parlour with Hermione determinedly pushing a spoonful of Double Double Chocolate ice cream between his lips. "Snap out of it, Harry," she was saying with some irritation. "Remus is always going on about chocolate being so good for you, it had better work now."

"Okay, okay," he said. "Sorry, I just... how did we get here?"

"You've only been moving like a zombie for the last half an hour. Did that witch do something to you? Do we have to take you to an exorcist?"

"Uh, no, I don't think so. I just got overwhelmed a little. It was worse than the day with all the Weasleys. I'm okay now. Thanks for the ice cream." He took the spoon and started feeding himself. It did make him feel better. Hermione was dubious, but let it pass. By unspoken agreement, they would not discuss what had happened in Avalon until they returned to the safety of the Burrow.

Once they had returned home, Mrs. Weasley busied herself with fixing everybody a light dinner, which Harry understood was her way of dealing with things. He plumped himself down in one of the overstuffed armchairs in the parlour. "Okay. That was one hell of a set of revelations. How soon do you want me to move out?"

"What are you talking about? You're not going anywhere," said Mr. Weasley.

"You heard what Constance said. There's some of Voldemort in me. You can't want me to stay."

"You're overreacting, Harry," said Hermione. "She didn't tell us anything we didn't know already. She told us that Voldemort gave you something. That he marked you. We've known that since second year."

"But if even Ron wonders if it'll make me evil... and if this means I really am the Heir of Slytherin ..."

"You know me," said Ron. "Open mouth, insert foot, wiggle toes. No, if you were going to be evil, I think it would have shown by now, especially this last year. I was a little bothered, though, about that thing Constance said ... about power. It sounded like you were both quoting something."

"It was something Voldemort said to me when he was still riding around on Quirrell's head. 'There is no good and evil, only power and those too weak to use it.' At the time, he was trying to talk me into joining him, and I thought it was his motto or something. If Constance knew it, too, it was probably a Slytherin saying."

"It's not all that different, really, from one of Albus's favourite sayings," said Mr. Weasley. "You know the one that says it's not our abilities that show what we are, but our choices."

"He told me that when we found out about the Parseltongue," said Harry.

"So maybe this birthright thing will help. If Constance was correct that Voldemort hasn't accepted it, maybe that's the 'power he knows not,'" Hermione said.

"Maybe it is. And maybe she was wrong that he hasn't accepted it. None of the spirits we met seemed to be exactly up on what's been going on in the real world."

"True enough," sighed Mr. Weasley. "But there's no point in fretting about it until you turn seventeen and can go and find out. There's still a long way to go until then. In the meantime, there's dinner and then I think bed for Harry, with a dose of Dreamless Sleep potion. A day like today will be bound to set off one of those nightmares, otherwise."

Harry couldn't argue with that.

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The last week of August slipped away so rapidly that Harry couldn't grasp it; his concerns about nebulous legacies were displaced by the frenzy of packing and repacking, convinced he'd forgotten something important, changing his mind about which books he'd take with him to read on the plane, and so on. Ron, Hermione, and Ginny were in the throes of their own last-minute packing for school, so the house was in an uproar for a

good four solid days. Mrs. Weasley insisted on sending a huge bundle of dried chamomile and lemon verbena herbal tea, with instructions that Harry was to drink a cup of tea with honey every night before bedtime, without fail. Harry had the nasty feeling he was going to be finding Ron's things in his trunk, and vice versa, but it couldn't be helped.

The exchange group was leaving from Heathrow Airport on Saturday morning, August 31. This meant they had to be at the Leaky Cauldron to take a bus to the airport sometime roughly around dawn. And this, in turn, meant that they either had to get up in the wee hours of the night to Floo into London, or just get there the night before and stay over. Harry and the Weasleys had decided to do the latter. They had taken rooms for two nights since Ron, Ginny and Hermione would be leaving on the train for Hogwarts the next day.

Friday afternoon, before they left for London, and after a last check of everybody's trunks, Harry brought out a stack of small packages, all carefully wrapped.

"What is this, Christmas?" asked Ron.

"These are for you all. Because you've been so wonderful to me, and until now I haven't been able to do anything for you." He started distributing packages busily, enjoying the feel, for once, of being able to give something to someone else. For Ron and Hermione there were two identical square packages, each containing a brown leather-covered journal with "A Message from Harry" written on the cover in gold letters. "I got a couple of sets of those pink ones and had them change the covers," Harry explained. "I've got the matching ones in my trunk. So you can just write me a message and I can write back and it will be a lot faster than owls."

"You didn't get me one?" Ginny asked mournfully.

"I'm sorry, I didn't know you'd want one. While we're at the Leaky, I'll run down to the stationers and get another set, okay?"

"Ooh, thank you!" she almost squeaked. "Now what's this?" She opened her own little box, pulling out a silver chain with a silver unicorn pendant. "Oh, it's lovely!"

Hermione pulled a silver phoenix pendant, with a carnelian teardrop, out of her box, and Ron gasped at the gold dragon on a twisted rope chain that was in his. Mrs. Weasley teared up at the moonstone pendant carved into a beautiful woman's face, and Fred and George both beamed as they received gold key rings with oval cabochons, malachite for Fred and tiger's eye for George. Harry kept the boxes for Mr. Weasley and Bill aside, since they'd be meeting them in London, and gave Mrs. Weasley a box for Charlie, to be passed on whenever he came home again.

"As long as we're doing presents now," said Hermione, "I got these for you." Harry started to open what was obviously a book – it was wrapped in the distinctive paper of a Muggle bookstore chain that had a branch in Ottery St. Catchpole – but she stopped him. "No, no, open that one later. When you're, um, alone." Harry raised an eyebrow at her, and she blushed furiously while he tucked it into his carry-bag. "The other one you can open now."

The small box contained the silver Aesculapius coin that Harry had found at the tree planting, now with a silver ring through the hole above the god's head, hanging on a silver Greek key patterned chain. "I thought you could wear this, for luck. And who knows, maybe it will bring you the right kind of dreams."

"I won't take it off until I come back home again," Harry promised solemnly as she clasped the chain around his neck. "Ow! What was that?" he cried as magic flared under Hermione's fingers.

"I don't know but it stung me, too... wait, where'd the clasp go?" The chain was now linked all the way around Harry's neck, with no sign of the lobster-claw clasp. "Did you do that?"

"No, I thought you did that."

"Well, I guess somebody wants to make sure you wear it," said Mrs. Weasley. "There doesn't seem to be anything dark about it, though. When we get to the Leaky, Arthur can take a look at it. It is his field of expertise, after all. Does everybody have everything? Four trunks, two owls, one cat? Off we go then..."

The fireplace at the Leaky Cauldron was seeing a lot of traffic, judging by the number of sooty footprints all over the hearth. Old Tom had even laid out a welcome mat so the soot and ash didn't get tracked out into the main room. Harry checked out the crowd in the taproom as Mrs. Weasley checked them all in; Fred and George commandeered his trunk and shoved him off toward what he presumed was a gathering of other exchange students. He saw Susan Bones and Lavender Brown sitting at one end of the long table, and waved at them. They both waved back, and Lavender motioned for him to come sit by her. That answered the question of who his Gryffindor traveling companion was going to be; he would really have preferred Parvati, but Lavender wouldn't be too bad, if he could convince her that this didn't mean he was going to be her boyfriend or something. But from the look in her eyes, she was going to take some convincing. Oh, well... He didn't see any of the Ravenclaw contingent yet, or Susan's Hufflepuff counterpart, but two Slytherins were here. At least it wasn't Malfoy. He didn't know Blaise Zabini well; the darkly handsome boy was not part of Malfoy's usual set, and was usually competent but quiet in the two classes they took together. Seated next to Zabini was Daphne Greengrass, presumably the female representative of Slytherin House and also, presumably, Blaise's girlfriend, judging by the clasped hands on the table. Blaise looked up with an unspoken question as Harry passed, and he nodded courteously in reply.

"Well, that answers that," Blaise murmured quietly to Daphne. "They wouldn't have laid this little jaunt on for anyone else. I guess we're just along for the ride."

"Maybe, maybe not," replied Daphne. "I doubt we were picked by accident, either. We're both pretty isolated by Malfoy's crowd. Remember what the Sorting Hat's said the last two years? Maybe we can use this trip to find some common ground with the others."

"It's worth a try. Anybody Malfoy hates can't be all bad."

Across the room, Ron and Hermione came down from stashing their trunks and owl cages in their rooms, and looked at the gathering at the end of the table. Lavender was dragging Harry down to sit next to her, and Susan was turned towards the pair with a smile on her face. Even Zabini leaned forward to offer a friendly greeting, and Harry replied with an uncertain smile. "It's happening already," Ron said quietly, with unhappiness in his voice. "He's not going to be part of Us anymore. He'll be part of Them for the next year."

"I know, Ron. We knew it was going to happen, but I didn't expect it to happen so fast."

Harry looked up and met her eyes, seeing the sadness there. He suddenly became aware of the expanse of table between them, jumped up and beckoned them over to join the group. He snagged a waiter in passing, and soon the entire Hogwarts crew, Ginny and Daphne's younger brother included, were merrily chatting away over bottles of butterbeer and big bowls of crisps. Even Fred and George got into it, for all they were at least two years older than the rest of the group; and when Justin Finch-Fletchley, Mandy Brocklehurst, and Michael Corner finally showed up, the party was in full swing. The assorted parents, guardians, and other adults sat back and smiled indulgently, letting the young ones cut loose one last time before school started.

At one point, Harry made a dash into Diagon Alley to pick up the message book he'd promised Ginny, even if it did have to be the embarrassing pink version, but the few who noticed that he was missing quite forgave him when they noticed he'd been to the sweet shop as well, and was freely distributing his largesse. Fred and George managed to slip some of their specialties into the pile of sweets, however, which resulted in Susan abruptly turning into a canary, and a moment later, Harry blowing multicoloured bubbles out of his mouth whenever he spoke. The canary chirped irately and looked accusingly at Harry. He shrugged, pointed at Fred and George, and said, "Don't look at me. This is all their fault," in a stream of lime-coloured bubbles.

"Harry, dear brother, you wound us," said Fred.

"Would we do something like this?" asked George.

"YES!" shouted and chirped everyone at the table in unison.

"Ah, our adoring public," Fred and George responded. "How well they know us." A few moments later, with a puff of yellow feathers, Susan returned to normal, but by that time Daphne had gotten something that turned her hair bright purple, and everybody was trying to find the joke candies and sneak them into other people's assortments. Someone managed to slip George one of his own sweets, and even he admitted it was a good joke, once he was no longer a canary. It was later agreed by all and sundry that the party would not have been nearly as good without the Weasleys.

Earlier than the young people would have liked, but far later than was probably good for them, the adults broke up the celebration and chivvied the children off to their various rooms. Harry was sharing with Ron, Fred, and George, so the party in that room continued rather later, with assorted giggles, guffaws and bangs coming from behind their door until well after midnight.

They regretted it at five the next morning, when Mrs. Weasley, with an evil grin, roused the four of them out and down to the taproom for breakfast. At a quarter of six, as they were finishing their porridge, a short, round witch in Muggle clothes climbed on a chair and whistled through her fingers to get everybody's attention. "All right, you lot, it's time to get moving! For those of you who don't know me, I'm Emma Broomfield-Hill, and I'm the Muggle Studies Professor at Hogwarts. My husband, Kenneth Hill, and I will be your chaperones for the next year. Wave so everyone can see you, Kenneth." Mr. Hill stood and waved cheerily, and Harry stifled a snort. Mr. Hill had to be a foot and a half taller than his wife, and probably didn't weigh as much; he was wearing a blue jacket over bright yellow shirt and red tie, and for a moment Harry thought he exemplified the worst of Wizards trying to emulate Muggle fashions, but Professor Broomfield-Hill continued, "My husband is a Muggle, but has equal authority with me over the lot of you, so if you just pretend he can hex your socks off, you'll do fine. And yes, he always dresses that way. He'll be good cover for the rest of you. I see most of you have done a good job of camouflage, but we'll be checking details on clothing and trunks before we board the bus. I want you all to understand that we'll be making sure your behaviour is up to Hogwarts standards. You are young ladies and gentlemen, and there will be no hanky-panky of the sort that could reflect badly on yourselves or your school, is that clear? Let me hear a Yes, Professor, that way I'll at least know you're awake."

"Yes, Professor," they chorused dutifully.

"Good. Now, I also want it understood that if any of you have a problem, of any sort, and you need adult help to straighten it out, you should feel free to come to myself or to Mr. Hill as needed. Boys, my husband teaches physical education at a Muggle school, you'll find him very knowledgeable about the sorts of difficulties young men get into; girls, you'll come to me for the girl stuff. Are we clear on that?"

"Yes, Professor."

"Fine, then. Now, I'm going to call your names one by one, and you'll bring your trunks up to the front of the room here; Mr. Arthur Weasley of the Ministry for Magic has kindly agreed to help check your belongings and your clothing to make sure they are consistent with Muggle standards so that you will not excite comment as we travel. Here, we only have to worry about getting through London and environs to the airport; once on the plane, you will be in a safe area again. Once we land in Chicago, you will have to get through Muggle Customs and then we will take a completely Muggle airlines flight to Minneapolis, then a long bus ride to the school. You will be exhausted at the end of it, but please do try to stay on your toes until we are all safe at the Nokomis Institute. Each of you must be able to rely on all the others; if one of you causes a problem, it will be a problem for the whole group. I realize that this may be the first time some of you have travelled extensively in the Muggle world, and I hope those of you who are Muggle-born or half-bloods will assist those who have less experience with Muggle ways." She consulted a list of names on a clipboard. "Susan Bones! Bring your trunk up here, dear, now let's have a look at you..."

Susan grabbed a last piece of toast and dragged her trunk to the front of the room, blushing furiously to find herself the object of attention. Professor Broomfield-Hill looked over her clothing critically while Mr. Weasley opened her trunk. Her clothing was pronounced marginally acceptable, while Mr. Weasley performed a quick Wizzywig to disguise her school supplies. Mandy Brocklehurst was from a pureblood family, but

being Ravenclaw, had done her research and had done a good job of disguising both herself and her supplies, and Lavender Brown, being the half-blood daughter of a Wizard and a Muggle, and brought up in the Muggle world, was unremarkable. She had even managed to get all her books into a Muggle carry-on which her father had enchanted in the same way as Harry's trunk, and all her clothes were in a huge duffelbag which didn't need any disguising at all. Michael Corner also came from a thoroughly mixed family, and passed for a Muggle quite nicely, and of course the Muggle-born Justin Finch-Fletchley had no difficulties. Daphne Greengrass needed a Wizzywig and some wardrobe adjustments, and of course Harry had the best disguise of all – real Muggle books and clothing in the fifth compartment of his trunk, the other four keyholes being hidden by a modest Wizzywig. With Blaise Zabini, however, they ran into real trouble. A member of one of the oldest pureblood families, he had never been abroad in the Muggle world at all, and had no idea what they wore or didn't wear. Even on casual weekends at Hogwarts, he wore traditional robes. While the contents of his trunk were easily hidden, he had no suitable clothing for the trip, and Mr. Weasley was not confident that a simple Wizzywig would hold until he was safely in Minnesota – the more people looked at it, the weaker it would get, given the extreme nature of the change in Blaise's appearance that would be required. Finally, though, a solution was discovered, when Susan Bones diffidently pointed out that Zabini and Harry were of almost the same size and build. Professor Broomfield-Hill rather hesitantly asked if Harry would be willing to loan Zabini some of his clothes, just for the trip over.

"Of course, Professor," said Harry, keying open the wardrobe section of his trunk. "Here we go ... underwear, that's never been worn, so don't worry, socks, um, jeans ... what colour t-shirt would you like? What about shoes?" Zabini was wearing short suede boots, the traditional footwear with robes, and those would do well enough since Harry's shoes were not the right size. The boys gathered up the chosen clothing and adjourned to Harry's room upstairs.

Harry explained the unfamiliar clothing to Zabini and helped him where necessary, resulting in the other boy becoming absolutely mortified by his ignorance of even simple things like underwear. "Don't mind it," said Harry. "I remember the first time I wore robes – it felt like I was going about in my bathrobe all the time. It feels weird to be wearing strange things at first, but you get used to it. You look good, anyway. Hell, you look better in my clothes than I do. That's not fair."

"Oh, I don't know. I think we both look about the same," said Zabini.

"Really?"

"Really. Look in the mirror. See? My hair's better, of course. But you have better eyes. There's not much difference otherwise, and I know I look damn good so you look damn good, too. Ask Brown, I'm sure she'd be willing to give you an ... unbiased opinion."

"I'm the right gender, that's all it takes for Lavender," said Harry. It was making him feel odd to be looking at Zabini and himself standing so close, so he stepped away and bundled the other boy's robes up. "Let's get back down before they get impatient and leave without us."

"Potter. Before we go down ... I'd just like to say thanks. I know Slytherin House hasn't treated you well over the years, and you've got no cause to be kind to me, so I appreciate your willingness to help. I'm hoping we can make a new start." He extended his hand.

Harry looked at the young dark-haired man and remembered another Slytherin with his hand extended, and what had come of it when Harry turned away. Impulsively, he reached out and clasped Zabini's hand. "Call me Harry."

"Much better," said the Professor a few moments later. "We'll have to get you some things of your own at the other end, Mr. Zabini, but this will get you there, at least. Thank you very much, Mr. Potter."

"Glad to help."

"Are we all ready now? The bus is here, we have all our luggage checked ... everyone have your passports and travel documents? Zabini?"

"Got them," he said, waving them in the air for proof. Given the clothing debacle, he was very pleased that he'd at least gotten the documentation part right – thanks to his father's friends at the Ministry.

"All right, then, last goodbyes to family. I want everyone out by the bus in five minutes!"

There was a flurry of good byes, hugs and kisses in the Cauldron, and more on the sidewalk out in front as the luggage was stuffed in the rear of an ancient rental bus, and one by one they boarded. Harry got in one last hug to Ron, reminding him to give Ginny the message book Harry had left in their room, and then whispered in his ear, just before he boarded the bus, "Oh, and you were right ... it should be the national sport!" With a grin, he climbed on board.

"Hey, wait!" called Ron. "You can't just say something like that and leave! Harry!"

Harry waved at him from the window of the bus, and then the doors closed, and they were off, into the sleepy dawn traffic.

"What did he say, Ron?" asked Hermione.

"Huh? Oh, nothing ... just a private joke." He shook his head as the taillights of the bus vanished from view. "You dog, you," he muttered, shaking his head. "Safe journey."



## Harry Potter and the Junior Year Abroad Welcome to America

### Chapter Fifteen

#### Welcome to America

Professor Broomfield-Hill counted heads one more time to make sure she had everyone as the bus rattled off through London. As expected, the students had paired up by houses on the two-person bench seats. "All right, listen up! You students should all be aware of what could happen if you break the International Secrecy Statutes, even accidentally. While we're at the various schools, you may do magic as you would at Hogwarts. Three of the schools are protected by isolation or bands of terrain which discourage intrusion by Muggles. There are also the usual spell barriers to turn Muggles away. However, the Norton Institute, the fourth school on our visit, is in the middle of an urban area, so you must be especially circumspect there. Hopefully, by the time you get there, you will have learned how to pass as Muggles in public. We will also be making visits to other locations where you will be interacting with Muggles, especially during the winter holidays, when we'll be spending two weeks in New York City. In general, there is more interaction between the Wizarding and Muggle communities in the United States than you find at home. You will also find, however, that the general population of the United States is more magic-sensitized than at home. There are very fanciful depictions of it in their popular media, such as books, cinema, and television shows. As a result, you may find yourself in contact with someone who claims to know about magic, may even claim to be a witch, but is nonetheless a Muggle. You must be extremely careful when dealing with these people. Do not encourage them. Most particularly, do not do magic where they can see it, or even when you think they might see it. The penalties for breaking the International Statutes are harsh for a reason; they range from penalties and fines which your parents would have to pay, you being minors, but then you would have to answer to your families, up to and including being expelled from school or even having your wand snapped, depending on the egregiousness of the offence. That's just for using magic in front of Muggles; depending on what exactly the magic is, if any harm is done, penalties can include incarceration in Azkaban or Alcatraz, the American equivalent."

Harry nodded, grimly. He remembered all too well his experience on the wrong side of those statutes the previous summer.

"Not only don't we want to risk breaking the law, but we're going to have to be extra sure no magic happens while we're in the air. Muggle airplanes are full of electronics, and they're very sensitive to magic, and the law of gravity is even harsher than Wizarding law. To make sure that nothing happens, even accidentally, I'm going to have to ask you all to give me your wands for safekeeping. They'll be returned when we're safely at the Nokomis Institute. Even my own wand will be going into storage, see?" She unrolled a black velvet cloth that had nine narrow wand pockets sewed into it, and carefully slid her own wand into the first pocket. "May I have all your wands, please?"

With some reluctance, Harry handed his wand over, and Lavender followed suit. Blaise was the last to pass his up, and did so only after Daphne elbowed him in the ribs. With no robes and no wand, he felt more than a little lost. He felt a little better, though, when Potter – no, Harry – looked back at him and gave a quick, reassuring wink. The professor carefully rolled up the wands in a velvet cocoon, and put it in her carry-on bag.

"Very good, thank you all. Now, once this bus stops, there is to be no discussion of magic, wizardry, anything of that sort at all, until we are on the plane. It's a special charter flight, run by Muggles who have Wizard connections, sort of like the Knight Bus, so once aboard, you may speak freely. If you have any doubts, it's best to keep silent – or ask me, my husband, or one of the Muggle-born students if you can do so discreetly."

Harry hoped it wasn't going to be too much like the Knight Bus – if it flew as erratically as the Bus drove, he wasn't sure how long his stomach would hold out. And if the steward turned out to be named Shunpike, that was it, he was just going to run off and hide in the Forbidden Forest for the whole year.

The bus wove its terrifying way through London traffic and then out to Heathrow, where the traffic was, if anything, even more terrifying as cabs and jitneys and private cars jostled for positions at the departures building. Amazingly, with no visible magic but lots of horn blowing, the bus driver managed to get them up to the kerb in front of the appropriate departure lounge. Justin Finch-Fletchley and Michael Corner went in search of luggage trolleys. Once they had returned, Harry and Mr. Hill unloaded the trunks from the back of the bus. Blaise helped keep the stack from falling over as he watched the pride of Gryffindor doing the unloading like a common labourer, and grinning at Mr. Hill's thanks when they were done.

The crowds at Heathrow made Harry think fondly of the crowds at King's Cross station. Even Platform Nine and Three-Quarters just before the Hogwarts Express left was not as frantic as Heathrow, and he could only imagine what it must be like for the purebloods. Blaise looked almost sick with nervousness, so Harry kept him close and guided him as needed, making sure he didn't get lost and making sure they both stayed right behind the rather noticeable Mr. Hill. Daphne stayed right behind them, and after a time they found themselves at the end of an extremely long queue. Once they had crept to the head of it, they parted company with their trunks and the trolley. Professor Broomfield-Hill fussed with tickets and boarding passes, and soon they were off again to find their departure gate.

Security, identity checks ... to Harry's relief, nothing blew up when Professor Broomfield-Hill's bag, with all their wands, or Harry's own carry-on, with its enlarged inside, went through the X-Ray machine. Harry was half expecting to find the Wizarding charter departure gate to be hidden, of a magical nature, but instead it was a normal gate all the way at the end of the terminal, with a sign for "Magical Mystery Air Tours". There were other people there, mostly bearing the subtle (and not so subtle) signs of Wizards in Muggles' clothing: the mismatched patterns, the odd hat, the

rather unusual tie. The Hogwarts group were the most "normal" looking ones in the bunch, even with Blaise goggling at all the unfamiliar Muggle things. Really, he was worse than Arthur Weasley. Harry nudged him as he ogled the passers-by. "Don't gape. Or if you must, turn around and look out the window. Gape at the planes. That's expected."

For the first time, apparently, Blaise realized that these large ungainly craft were actually going to attempt to fly, and that he was going to be inside one of them when it did so. "You mean those ... those things ... they'll never get off the ground! How do they stay up? They make no sense!"

Harry grinned. "You know, there's lots of Muggles who think that, too. But they do stay up. Mostly."

"Mostly? What do you mean, *mostly*?"

"Harry, you're a bastard!" Lavender laughed.

But in a little while the door opened and groups were being called for seating, and even Harry found himself thinking that planes only mostly stayed up. Mostly.

Harry looked out the window of the terminal as the coach passengers were called for boarding and moaned slightly. What was it with Wizards and their colour schemes? The plane was painted bright purple, with yellow stars and moons and spirals all over it. It was so garish that most people would wind up looking away from it and attempting to forget they'd ever seen it. Which was probably the idea. Other than that, it looked like a normal plane, but Harry kept a weather eye out for anyone who looked even vaguely like a Shunpike.

The Hogwarts group, all ten of them, took up the first several rows of first class, and so, of course, were called last. Automatically, they started to pair off by House, but Professor Broomfield-Hill called them to attention while they were still messing about with overhead luggage compartments for their carry-ons.

"Before you sit down – I want everyone sitting with someone from a different House! I also want everyone on a first-name basis. We are all representatives of Hogwarts here, and I want no inter-house rivalries that might reflect badly on the school. By the end of this trip, you all will know each other as well as your dorm-mates, and that process starts now. Mix it up, mix it up, please – Mr. Zabini, perhaps you should stay with Mr. Potter for a bit, that's good ..." The Professor ruthlessly arranged the students to her liking, and made sure they were all buckled into their seats. A stewardess gave them a little lecture on safety, how to find the exits in an emergency, and where the airsickness bags were; more than one of the Wizard-born students looked like they were going to need them before the plane ever left the ground. Harry suspected that the usual boarding lecture on Muggle flights didn't include instructions to keep one's wand in a properly warded storage pouch while the plane was operating.

And then the plane was moving, and the students sitting next to the windows pressed their noses to the glass while their seatmates craned their necks to see, and the plane moved away from the terminal, stopped and started several times on the way to the runway, and finally the whine of the engines ramped up and the plane picked up speed and the ground fell away beneath them.

The highest Harry had ever flown on a broom was the trip from Surrey to London the year before, and he hadn't been able to see much then because it was at night, and Moody had mostly kept them in the clouds. He did remember seeing the roads stretched out like lines of jewelled light in the darkness below him, though. Now he saw whole counties stretched out beneath him like patches on a quilt, with roads and rivers just like the lines of stitching between. He wondered if you could get a broom to fly this high. Would it be too cold? Would there be enough air up here? And if there wasn't, would a Bubble-Head Charm be any good? Maybe someday ... maybe after Voldemort, if there was an after ... he could find out. Then the patchwork of the land ended, and out before him was an endless stretch of silver water, and thinking of the future with anticipation for the first time in months, Harry Potter flew away from the only home he'd ever known.

It wasn't long before looking at the ocean and the clouds palled, and Harry turned to his seat-mate. Blaise sat almost rigid in his seat, gripping the armrests tightly. "Er, you can relax a little bit. It's going to be a long flight. You're going to wear yourself out like that." Blaise managed to pry his fingers loose with an effort.

"All right, ladies and gentlemen, you can unbuckle your seat belts now," said Mr. Hill. "Breakfast will be served shortly, and they're going to be showing a movie later – that's a Muggle form of entertainment – and there will be a discussion period after, so those of you who understand Muggle things can explain it to those who don't. In the meantime, try talking to your classmates and getting to know those you're not familiar with. The seats swivel round, so those of you in the front row can talk to the ones in back if you've a mind to." He showed them how to adjust and turn the chairs.

Harry and Blaise spun their chairs to face Mandy and Justin. "Before anything else," said Harry, "I've got one very important question ... how many of you play Quidditch?"

"I thought you got banned last year," said Justin.

"In the United Kingdom. And as long as there are still folks in the Ministry who don't like me, that's going to stay in place." He made a face. "They couldn't ban me from flying altogether, though, and Dumbledore gave my broom back to me after he found it in the cabinet where Umbridge locked it up. I don't think the Ministry has authority in America, and they can't stop me from playing pick-up games either. Since we'll be jumping schools all year, though, I can't try out for any of their teams. So I thought we might put together a Hogwarts team and see if the American exchangers can put together a team, and at least play each other. And maybe against some of the school teams. What do you think?"

"Well ... I tried out for Beater for Hufflepuff and missed it by a hair back in third year. But I've spent a lot more time on a broom since then. I'd give it a shot," said Justin.

Daphne, it turned out, was a reserve Chaser for the Slytherin team, and although she'd never actually played in a House game, she did practice regularly. Blaise played pick-up games occasionally and had played all positions except Seeker. But Lavender didn't do well on a broom

and Mandy, Susan and Michael were nowhere near good enough. "How about trying to put together a combined exchange team with the Americans?" Lavender suggested. "With Harry as Seeker, we'd have a tremendous advantage, and with Justin, Daphne and Blaise that's four, and I'd be surprised if we couldn't find enough players among the Americans to make up the other three plus some reservists."

"Don't count me as such an advantage," Harry said. "I'm so out of practice it isn't funny. And we don't know how good the Americans are at all. They got blown out of the water in the last World Cup, but the national team doesn't necessarily reflect how good the school teams are. I just want to be able to play again, that's all."

"We'd all need to learn each other's styles," said Justin. "You Gryffindors play differently than the Slytherins, for example."

"You mean honestly," put in Lavender.

"Too right," agreed Daphne, much to everybody else's surprise. "That's why I'm only a reserve Chaser. I'm better than both of the ones they've got, but I don't like the sneaky plays. They need to have me to keep up the team roster, but they don't particularly want me to play."

"Let's do it, then," said Harry, his eyes gleaming at the thought. Miscellaneous talk of Quidditch tactics and broomstick models kept the students busy until breakfast was served by the stewardess. By now, most of them were ready for a little something, since breakfast at the Leaky had been several hours and much excitement ago. Harry thought the eggs, bacon and toast were adequate, but Justin was surprised at the quality. "Wow, magical airline food is a lot better than regular airline food. The regular stuff is only one step up from hospital food."

"That bad?" asked Harry.

"That bad. I suppose you know all about hospital food now, huh?"

"Do not remind me," said Harry, making a face.

"What was that all about, anyway?" asked Justin. "Um, if you don't mind my asking. It was all over the Prophet for a week, and then just suddenly dropped off. It was even in the regular papers."

"What exactly was in the papers? You'll understand that I didn't see them at the time."

"The Muggle papers had it first, really. It was a weird news day, I guess, what with all those assaults and things happening, and then frogs and lightning bolts in a hospital? I knew right then that there had to be a Wizard involved somehow. But your name wasn't mentioned at that point. That came up in the Prophet the next day. Their first set of stories had you going berserk and wreaking havoc for no apparent reason ..."

Harry snorted. "Typical."

"I'm beginning to think so. After the last few years, it's obvious to anybody with a brain that the Prophet is after you. But then the second set of stories told about how you were attacked – although they didn't say who did it - and any damage you had done was because of your injuries and the effect of Muggle medicines on you and you weren't really responsible. So somebody landed on them, I guess. Then there were all these speculations on how you got injured, but it was fairly obvious people were just making stuff up at that point. They kept running updates on your condition, and all these articles on how awful Muggle medicine is, and all that. There was a lot of talk about whether you should be living with the Muggles at all, or whether the Ministry should be in control of where you lived. Especially with all the panic about You-Know-Who coming back. Then there was the announcement that you were out of the hospital, and the Ministry had sent you to an undisclosed location where you could recover. The Muggle papers had an entirely different side of the story. Something about a shakeup in Child Protective Services because you'd fallen through the cracks?"

Harry suddenly lost his appetite for breakfast. "Well, I'd really rather none of it happened, but I can't get away from it, I suppose. I guess you all saw it?" There were nods and noises of agreement all around, and Harry looked at the circle of curious faces. Even the Professor was listening, although she at least was pretending not to be. "Okay, here it is ... my mother was Muggle-born, and her family are my only living relatives, so I grew up with them and stay with them for the summers. They don't like magic, and I'm not allowed to do it around them. I can live with that, but they haven't treated me very well because of it. And, well, my cousin Dudley is ... none too stable, and he just went psycho one night and tried to beat me to a pulp. Almost did it, too. But I got away from him, and someone called the police, and they took me to a Muggle hospital. The frog stuff happened when they gave me painkillers and then worked on my dislocated shoulder. The medication wiped out my control, I guess, and I made random things happen. Then the police and the hospital staff called in the Child Protective Services. They were upset because nobody ever filed papers with the Muggle courts when my parents died, so they didn't know about me and weren't aware of the way my relatives treated me. They didn't want me going back to live with my aunt and uncle again once they did find out. They were going to put me in a Muggle Orphan's Home, or maybe foster care. Ron's folks volunteered to be my foster family, so now I'm living with the Weasleys. And you do not want to know what we had to do to pull that off. I don't think we broke any of the Secrecy Statutes, but we sure as hell bent a few. Ron's dad works for the Ministry, so maybe I am living under Ministry supervision, at that." That notion did not sit well, really, and he wished it hadn't come up. "That's all, really. Now I just have to keep a low profile for a while until the Muggles forget and something else happens to keep the Prophet busy."

"That's it? According to the Prophet, you were nearly killed. And then you were taken off somewhere for 'recuperation' and nobody knew where you were for a month and then you waltzed into the Cauldron yesterday like nothing ever happened."

Harry snorted. "The Prophet is a rag. They wouldn't know how to write a story straight if their lives depended on it. If they couldn't find me, somebody high up decided it wouldn't be good for them to find me, and personally I'm just as glad that they didn't. I was with the Weasleys. I was even in Diagon Alley doing school shopping, and I spent another day in Muggle London getting ready for this trip, and a couple of days with the police in Surrey giving my statement. I even had dinner in a restaurant. I wasn't hiding anywhere. All I was trying to do was have a normal summer." *And failing completely, given all the other things.* "Can we talk about somebody else's summer now?"

Lavender immediately launched into a long story about her family's trip to Majorca, and soon had all the girls involved in a discussion of

fashions. The boys glared at Harry, blaming it all on him. He grinned, shrugged, and pulled a book out of his carry-on. It was Volume 1 of Carmarthen: "*Tilting the Playing Field in Your Direction*", and he'd put yellow sticky notes on pages that looked interesting during his reading last week. To his dismay, the book had spat them all out and he was going to have to start all over again.

"What's that?" asked Blaise, cocking his head at the book. "Getting a jump on schoolwork already?"

"Sort of extra-credit," Harry said, tilting the book so Blaise could see the title.

The Slytherin was suitably impressed. "Wow, Carmarthen! Who'd you have to kill to get *that*?"

Harry felt everything inside him go cold. He'd forgotten who Blaise was, which House he belonged to. Had forgotten that Slytherin trick of sliding the verbal knife in between the ribs, and twisting just so. Had forgotten that Malfoy wasn't the only viper in the nest. "My godfather," he said, his voice cold and cutting. "I killed my godfather." He jerked the book away, unbuckled his seatbelt, and moved to a seat on the other side of the cabin, where he just sat and stared out the window, with the back of his chair turned to the rest of the group.

Blaise attempted to get up and follow him, but Lavender's hand impacted in the centre of his chest and pushed him back down. "Zabini, I don't know whether that was malice or just stupidity, but I am warning you right now, if you say one more thing to upset him, when I get my wand back I'm going to hex you so hard you'll be lucky to reincarnate as a *slug* in your next ten lives!"

"I... I didn't mean anything ... it was just, like, those books are so rare, people are always saying they'd kill for one, so ... you don't mean he ..." Blaise's eyes grew round as he looked over at the back of Harry's chair.

"No, he didn't!" snapped Lavender. "But his godfather did die during that thing at the Department of Mysteries, you know. There were rumours all through the Tower about that. And I think Harry thinks he's responsible. Oh, come on, don't tell me you didn't know about *that*!" she said as Blaise shook his head.

"I don't know anything about what happened except what was in the Prophet about ... about You-Know-Who coming back. And that wasn't a lot. There were maybe three paragraphs about what really happened."

"And I suppose Malfoy and the rest of your Slytherin buddies didn't tell you what happened to their parents?"

"No, they didn't," replied Blaise, hotly. "Not all of us in Slytherin are Malfoy bootlickers. If he and his crew have spoken five words to me all year, it's been a lot. And nobody *else* in school will talk to me because I'm Slytherin. I've been pretty much isolated for the past five years. I was *hoping* to have a chance to change that this year."

"I'm not much better off," said Daphne. "At least I have Tracey to talk to. Bulstrode and Parkinson won't have anything to do with either of us. And some of the Ravenclaws talk to Tracey. But none of them knew anything solid about what happened in June, and you know Ravenclaws – if they don't know for sure what they're talking about, they won't say anything – no offence intended," she said, looking over at Mandy.

"I'd have told Tracey if I knew anything, which I didn't because certain *other* individuals," Mandy said, glaring at Michael, "wouldn't tell me anything."

"Well how could I, after what happened to Edgecombe?"

"What does Edgecombe have to do with any of this?" asked Blaise.

"Whoa, stop, stop! This is getting too scattered," said Lavender. "Blaise, Daphne, Mandy – here's the short version. You-Know-Who wanted to get Harry to go to the Department of Mysteries for some reason ... some trap or other, nobody knows the details. So Harry went, but he didn't go alone, some friends of his went with him, and they were having this big fight with Death Eaters that were there, and then some Aurors, including Harry's godfather, showed up, and his godfather got killed, but all but one of the Death Eaters were arrested, including the fathers of Malfoy and Goyle, and You-Know-Who and Dumbledore had a duel in the main lobby of the Ministry before You-Know-Who ran away along with that Lestrange woman who escaped from Azkaban a while back."

"This is the *short* version?" asked Mandy.

"Well, yeah. I mean, I wasn't there for the fight, but there was all this stuff with Umbridge before and after, and about the, um," she stuttered to a halt.

"Yeah, the, um," said Michael. "Mandy, Daphne and Blaise are the only ones here who weren't part of The Um. Oh, and the Professor – none of the teachers knew. And after what happened to Edgecombe, we don't want to know what would happen if we talked about it to somebody who wasn't part of it."

"Well, you're talking about it now."

"No, I'm talking around it."

"I'm still confused," said Blaise, "but it doesn't make any difference." He unbuckled his seatbelt and rose carefully, as if he expected the floor of the plane to buck beneath his feet, and crossed the aisle to sit next to Harry again. Harry's face remained still and shuttered, and it was anybody's guess as to whether he'd paid any attention to the conversation which had gone on so close to him.

"Harry, I'm sorry. I had no idea. Really."

"And why should I believe you? One of Malfoy's cronies?"

"I'm not. I never have been. I'll give you my Oath on that if you like."

"Like a Slytherin's oath would convince me of anything."

"Harry." Blaise paused to collect himself, took a deep breath, and spoke intensely. "*Cross my heart and hope to die, if I've told you any lie.*" He drew the index finger of his right hand across his chest twice, and Harry saw shining silver lines trailing after the fingertip form an X mark which lingered for a moment and then faded away. Blaise was slightly pale. "It's done. You have my Oath. I didn't know, and I've never been a Malfoy lapdog. I'm ambitious, yes, or I wouldn't be in Slytherin at all, but my ambitions and his are not the same. Pretty much opposed, actually." He glanced downwards at the book. "I didn't mean anything by ... what I said. It was only a turn of phrase. And if I could, I'd go back and unsay it, because I truly don't want to hurt you."

Harry unbent just a little. Children's rhyme aside, Blaise was making an effort here. And he'd seemed sincere back in the Leaky Cauldron. "All right. I accept your apology. And I'm sorry for overreacting. It's just that it's still raw, and I ... I really don't want to talk about it."

"All right then. But Harry ... you're going to have to talk about it sometime." Blaise returned to his seat on the other side of the plane.

Harry suddenly realized that everybody else's conversation had died down, and they'd all been listening to him and Blaise. He glared at the lot of them. "Okay, is everybody's curiosity satisfied? Can we get on to something else?" And he spun his chair back to the window. But this time, he was more aware of their conversation, no longer lost in his own thoughts.

Daphne leaned across Susan toward Blaise to touch his hand. "That was a hell of a risk you took, Blaise."

"Not really. I knew I'd never spoken to Harry much in the past, much less lied to him. But yeah, there's always the chance you've forgotten something. I've never done an Oath like that before. Now I know why you're not supposed to."

"I don't get it," said Justin. "All you did was a little nursery rhyme. That's a children's swear. It doesn't mean anything."

"Doesn't *mean* anything?!" exclaimed Blaise. "Justin, that was a *Wizard's Oath*! If I *had* lied to Harry at any time in the past, it would have *killed* me. That's why we so rarely make oaths and promises. They're flipping dangerous. Don't they teach you Muggle-borns *anything*?"

"No. No, they don't. They just bring us into the school and expect us to sink or swim on our own. They have Muggle Studies class to let the Wizard-born know about us, but we don't get the return favour. We manage to pick up most of it, but sometimes we run right into something like this. Hell, half the Muggle-born kids that come into the school would use 'Cross my heart and hope to die' to seal a promise or verify a statement and think nothing of it. I know I did."

"You're kidding!"

Justin gave a little smile and said, "Cross my heart." Blaise flinched.

"I thought so, too," put in Harry abruptly, swivelling his chair around again. "I thought it was something children would do, like pinky swearing." Blaise and Daphne exchanged a glance. "Oh, don't tell me that's something, too! I'm surprised first-years aren't dropping dead left and right!"

"It's probably because they don't think anything of it," said Michael. "If they intended it, or if there was a lot of emotion behind it, it could be binding."

"Still, they ought to tell people about these things. Hey, Professor!" The Muggle Studies teacher, who had been listening to the entire conversation with her chair turned around to give them at least the illusion of privacy, swung her seat around. "Why don't they teach the Muggle-borns about things like this?"

"Do you want the charitable reason or the uncharitable one?" she asked.

"Ah, both, please?" asked Michael.

"Charitable reason ... the Board of Governors and all the teachers with any influence are purebloods. They've been so steeped in their own culture that they honestly don't know how much the Muggle-borns don't know. Maybe not even Dumbledore. And certain sectors, like the majority of members of a House which shall not be named but its initial is S, can then feel smug about the stupidity of the poor Muggle-borns for not knowing something they were never taught. I know, Mr. Zabini, not all are like that. But the majority are. And I don't think you'd be willing to cross your heart and tell me you've never felt that way, either." Blaise swallowed uncomfortably and shook his head. "The uncharitable reason is that it's done deliberately, to hamper the Muggle-born and keep them from obtaining positions of power. You may have noticed that when you consider the population of the school as a whole, there are a lot more Muggle-borns or half-bloods than there are purebloods. But how many Muggle-born or half-bloods are there on the Board of Governors? In positions of influence in the Ministry? Virtually none. Oh, you get some in the lower positions, secretaries, clerks, low-level bureaucrats, some of the Aurors, or teachers like myself and Hagrid, who are marginalized. But in the positions where it counts? No, the purebloods keep their stranglehold on the political power, despite the greater numbers of mixed-blood witches and wizards in the general population."

"So ... which of the reasons is right?"

"That's the question, isn't it? One answer is right for some, another answer for others. And telling which is which ... and what, if anything, should be done about it ... those are questions you all will be facing as you grow up."

"Won't getting rid of ... of You-Know-Who kind of settle it?" Susan asked.

"You-Know-Who would not have been able to attract the group of followers that he did if the attitudes weren't pre-existing."

"I still don't know why the purebloods follow him in the first place, given how mixed his blood is," said Harry. "I mean, he's got less Wizard ancestry than I do."

This little bombshell resulted in everyone goggling at Harry. "What? How do you know that?"

"Remember, I've met him. His mother was a village witch from somewhere up in Yorkshire, I think – not from one of the big important families, anyway – and his father was a Muggle. Not even Muggle-born. A Muggle. Anyway, he rejected her because she was a witch, and she died in childbirth and the baby was raised in a Muggle orphanage until he was old enough to go to Hogwarts. Now I don't think he's even quite human any more."

"Does the Ministry know this? I bet if it were public, people wouldn't be so eager to follow him."

"They know. I told them. Dumbledore told them. It's in the records, if you know where to look. If it's not publicized, it's because they don't want people to know, for some reason."

"The Death Eaters are all bound to him personally. It wouldn't make any difference to them now," said Professor Broomfield-Hill. "And the pureblood agenda wasn't part of his original plan. Most of his original followers were pureblood, because they were most likely to go along with his aims. But if he were to drop dead ... again ... tomorrow, it wouldn't solve the long-term issues. As long as the pureblood community holds special knowledge and customs that are required for social acceptability but to which the Muggle-borns are denied access, and as long as the knowledge and customs of the Muggle-borns are regarded as unnecessary and barbaric, there will be a vast gap between the two. Purebloods and half-bloods whose parents practice magic in the home grow up seeing magic done, beginning to learn how spells work as naturally as breathing. Muggle-borns, and the half-bloods whose parents keep it secret, suddenly get it all thrust upon them when they're eleven and have to try to absorb it all then. Now, how would you go about solving the problems?"

Blaise thought. "Um, have a Wizard Studies class so they could learn about us?"

"That would be a start. Mr. Finch-Fletchley?"

"Make the Muggle Studies class mandatory for the Wizard-born? Most of them don't bother to take it."

"All right, that's another idea," said the Professor. "I've been proposing both of those steps for several years now. What else? Take it out of the school environment."

"Justin, you're the only one of us that's Muggle-born," said Mandy. "What would have helped you the most?"

"Mmm, I'd say knowing about it all in advance. I'm sure if my parents had known, they would have got me tutoring in Latin and maybe French or Italian, for one thing. Purebloods speak the languages of magic from day one. It's a lot harder for the rest of us to pick up, and it never comes naturally. Just listen to the way we pronounce things. Being in Hufflepuff helps, of course. So many of us are Muggle-born that the older students understand what the younger ones are going through and make a concerted effort to help them, and we all share spells that we find out about. I don't know if you get that in the other Houses."

"We don't get Muggle-borns in Slytherin," said Blaise. "But you're right, they wouldn't get that sort of help. We only share spells when it's really necessary for the good of the House."

"You're wrong about Muggle-borns in Slytherin," said Professor Broomfield-Hill. "It doesn't happen often, but it does happen. Remember that the defining characteristic of a Slytherin is mindset, not blood. Check your House histories some time. They tend not to advertise the fact, but some of the most outstanding Slytherins have been Muggle-born – or Muggle-raised, like You-Know-Who. So," she continued before Blaise could respond, "before school, increasing contact with the Wizarding world would help. How about after school? Mr. Zabini ... your family has a Grimoire, yes?"

"Of course."

"And it has spells in it which aren't in the Standard List, am I correct?"

"That's the point of having a Grimoire."

"Would you be willing to teach some of those spells to Mr. Finch-Fletchley? Assuming you and he were old enough?"

"No! That's my family legacy!"

"Even if you knew that he might need those spells someday to save his life? Or yours?"

"Um..."

"Um. Think about it. Miss Bones, your family also has a Grimoire. Would you share it with Mr. Finch-Fletchley?"

"Maybe not the whole thing. But if there was something he really needed, yes. And if he, um, married into the family or something, of course." Justin was surprised to note that Susan blushed madly and refused to meet his eyes after this comment.

"Mr. Potter, does your family have a Grimoire?"

Harry blinked, startled. "I have no idea. I never even heard of Grimoires before."

"Mr. Potter is the descendant of one of the oldest Wizard families. If any family has a Grimoire, his does. But through circumstances, he has been isolated from his family legacy. If not for this chance conversation, he might not ever know it had existed, because of the custom that one doesn't mention these things in 'mixed company'. Now at least there is the possibility of his recovering it, if it was not destroyed fifteen years ago."

"Where might it be?" asked Harry, while thinking '*Chance conversation, my foot! You steered it right to this. What House were you in, Professor?*'

"There are any number of places, and I think we should discuss this at another time, since it does not concern the rest of the group. If the Grimoire still exists, you will not be able to use it until you come of age anyway. That's the way these things work. But if you can find it, your family legacy will become available to you on your seventeenth birthday.

"As for the rest of you, those of you from mixed families should check back through your family lines to see if there are any links with pureblood families. If you ask for access to family Grimoires, they cannot deny you. For those of you who have no verifiable links, or who are Muggle-born, the only thing I can suggest is to start your own, so that your children will have their own legacy. Or, as Susan commented, if you marry into a family that has a Grimoire, you would gain access to it."

"How do we start making one?"

"Right now, you can't. However, by the end of this year, you will have learned many of the skills you need to do so. In the meantime, learning as many spells as possible which are not in the Standard Books of Spells would be a good foundation. It's always a good idea to have a few surprises up your sleeves. The Grimoire will assure that your children have surprises up theirs. Those of you who will eventually be able to access family Grimoires will benefit your families if you seek out spells which could be added at the time you gain access."

"You know, I suppose I should be glad Hermione didn't know she wasn't supposed to share spells," said Harry. "She's always researched things and shared them with Ron and me. If she hadn't, I'd probably be dead a couple times over already. And last year, I and a lot of others got together to share what we knew in DADA – most of us probably wouldn't have passed our OWLs if we hadn't."

"Harry," said Lavender warningly, shooting a glance at the Slytherins. "They weren't part of it."

"That doesn't matter now. Dumbledore told me he wanted the D.A. to be a public club this year with school sponsorship. Now that Umbridge is gone, we don't need the secrecy."

"Good, because I've been dying of curiosity ever since Lavender and Michael started dancing around it," said Mandy, leaning forward. "Now tell all."

So the five students who had been part of the D.A. told the others, and Professor Broomfield-Hill allowed the conversation to go the way it would. She had made the points she wanted to, and then some, and her charges would need to consider what she had said.

Some time later, the lights darkened, a small screen dropped at the front of the cabin, and the promised movie started. It was an American movie, and Harry had heard of it, though not seen it, of course, since it had come out the previous year while he was at school. It was all about the American space program and an accident which happened on one of their flights to the moon years before. He thought it fascinating, and even though he knew how it turned out, he was still holding his breath at the end and hoping they'd make it ... He thought poor Blaise's brain was going to squirt out his ears, though, at the notion that what they had seen was a reenactment of something that was true, and that the American Muggles had, in fact, been able to send people to the moon and get them back again. The question-and-answer period extended until well after lunch, when Blaise finally ran out of questions. The chaperones suggested that the students read quietly or rest for a while, and Harry, who was suffering the effects of the night with Fred, George, and Ron, thought that an excellent idea.

He finally did manage to do a little reading in his Carmarthen, replacing the sticky notes with bits of torn paper and hoping the book wouldn't get picky about those, too, before they had to put their belongings away for the descent to Chicago. According to his watch, which had adjusted to local time, it was still early in the afternoon, but his body was telling him that it was much later than that. His companions seemed to be having the same problem. The Professor and her husband hustled them off the plane and herded them through the crowds to reclaim their luggage, and then they had to wait in long queues to get through Customs. Harry obediently opened his trunk for the inspector, who pawed momentarily through the stacks of underwear, jeans, and schoolbooks. He flushed and looked down at his feet as the inspector found the magazines he'd stashed. The man smirked and confiscated them, telling Harry that just this once he wouldn't write anything up, but he'd better shape up and improve his choices in reading material. Then he gave Harry a conspiratorial wink, which told him that the magazines would probably end up being passed around the agents' locker room for a while.

Justin, who was in the queue just behind Harry, was mildly astonished and admonished Harry once they were past the Customs counter and waiting for the others to finish. "Harry! I'm surprised you read things like that!"

Harry grinned. "That was Fred and George's idea. Put something harmless in the trunk that they can find and confiscate, and they won't look farther. Or if they do look, they'll look at me and not anybody else – and my trunk disguise was the least likely to fail."

"Good thought," said Mr. Hill, joining them, "though I wish you'd told us, so we could have made sure one of us was right behind you if it turned out you'd got a prudish inspector. Some of them are ... well, look at the difficulty Miss Brown is having." Lavender's inspector was going carefully through each and every container of makeup or personal hygiene product, opening them all to make sure they contained only what they said they contained. Harry had no idea girls needed that many little bottles and containers, and Lavender was turning bright pink as the uniformed woman made her unpack and then repack virtually everything in her duffle bag. Daphne and Mandy, queued up behind her, were looking concerned, since they weren't sure if their trunk disguises would pass this rigorous an inspection. The Professor bustled over as soon as she was free from her own inspection and had a few words with the inspector. Harry couldn't hear what she said, but whatever it was, it made her give back Lavender's belongings and pass the other girls through with only a cursory look.

It was with great relief that the Professor counted heads again and started their group off again. "That was the worst part, the rest is just tedious. Come along, come along!" Harry was very glad for the wheels on his trunk by the time they had dragged their luggage through the terminal, onto a shuttle bus, off the bus again and through another terminal to check luggage again. Then it was off to another waiting area for another plane. They were travelling surrounded by Muggles now, so conversation was kept to a minimum.

The coach seats on the domestic flight were not as comfortable as the first-class seats had been and Harry was unable to focus on the novel he dragged out of his bag instead of the Carmarthen. Neither could he stare out the window, as somehow he was squashed in a centre seat between Justin and Mr. Hill. (Blaise had reclaimed Daphne as his seatmate across the aisle and was much happier now.) Harry found his thoughts wandering through the things the Professor had told them about earlier, and wondered if the Weasleys had a Grimoire. Certainly Ron had never mentioned it, nor had any of the other Weasleys. He also wondered just how far his 'adoption' into the Weasley clan went. If there were a Weasley Grimoire, would he be allowed to see it? Had his father's Grimoire survived? Was it possibly at the Potter house or in the vault? Could there possibly be something helpful in it? And what about the mysterious Black and Marvolo legacies? Could those be Grimoires as well? He drifted off into an uneasy sleep while considering these ideas, and was in the middle of a dream in which he faced Voldemort and could do no more than throw books at him, when Justin elbowed him awake. They were making the descent into Minneapolis. It was still afternoon. This was shaping up to be the longest day of Harry's life.

By now, even Blaise was getting jaded by airports. "All I want is a decent cup of tea and then bed," he muttered as they disembarked. There was a crowd of people waiting for disembarking travellers, including a number of suit-clad individuals holding signs with names on them. Next to them was a tallish, much less formally clad man holding a hand-lettered sign that read, HOGWARTS. Mr. Hill spotted him first, and waved to attract his attention, then dragged the group off to meet him.

"Hello, I'm Kenneth Hill, chaperone for the Hogwarts exchange group. Are you our driver?"

"Sure am. Welcome to Minnesota, folks!" he said, shaking hands with Mr. Hill and tipping his hat to the Professor. Harry looked curiously at the man; he was the first Native American Harry had ever seen. He was tall and slim and appeared to be somewhere in his mid-twenties; his skin was dark bronze, and he had high cheekbones, dark eyes, and a nose which was, well, downright Snapish. He wore jeans and a denim shirt, a wide-brimmed black hat with a beaded band, and moccasin boots. With his long black hair tied back in a pony tail and some sort of animal claw earring, as well as his easy smile, he reminded Harry a lot of Bill Weasley. "You got everybody? Okay, my name's Aispun, and I'm in charge of getting you all from here to the school in one piece, so we'll go collect your luggage and I'll get you all on the bus."

Aispun guided them down to the luggage claim and they reclaimed their luggage, thankfully without the need for any further inspections. The yellow school bus was parked conveniently close in the short-term parking lot. "Did the Parking Spot Location spell a good half hour out," Aispun explained, rather smugly. "You wait until you're almost at the airport, you're still stuck with a spot half-way out in the lot. Give it enough lead time, you get parking right in front of the terminal. Even for a bus this size." Luggage went into the back seats and was carefully strapped in, and passengers sat in the front seats. Although they looked like uncomfortably flat bench seats, they were actually as comfortable and welcoming as a sofa, and there were groans of relief from all as they sank into them. The coach airline seats had suited nobody.

Aispun got the bus out of the confusing maze of the airport – Harry thought they went through one intersection from each of five possible ways – and drove for a while before pulling off into what looked like an industrial park of some kind. At five o'clock on a Saturday evening, the place was deserted. He drove around to where there was a closed warehouse on one side and a stretch of woods on the other, and turned the engine off. He walked to the back of the bus and double-checked the straps holding all the luggage, then walked forward again. "See those straps on the back of the seats in front of you? I want everybody holding those straps. If you have carry-ons or purses, hold on with the other hand. I don't want to have to come back for anything. Okay?" He made sure everyone had a strap in hand, then sat in the driver's seat again, grabbed a strap attached to the side of the bus at his left, yelled, "Hang on tight!" and hit a button on the dashboard. There was a wrenching feeling just behind Harry's navel, and the industrial park whirled away. The afternoon colours of the countryside swept by the windows of the bus in a blur, and in a few moments solidified into quite a different place. "You can let go now, we're here!" Alan opened the doors of the bus, and the scent of a pine forest on a warm afternoon swept in. The bus was parked in front of a long building built in rustic log-cabin style; a quick glance around showed quite a number of other buildings, most much larger, in similar style. A group of people, mostly clad in Muggle-style jeans and shirts, but one elderly woman in beaded buckskin robes, came out of the nearest building and approached the door of the bus.

"The whole bus is a Portkey!" exclaimed Harry as he disentangled his hand from the strap.

"Sure is! Took me a couple of hours getting out to the airport, no time at all getting back!" Aispun grinned, his white teeth shining in his dark face. "Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the Nokomis Institute!"



## Harry Potter and the Junior Year Abroad Malfoy

### Chapter Sixteen

#### Malfoy

The Director of the Institute, who Aispun introduced as Little Deer, was an aged woman in full robes, with beaded designs all over them. She was not even as tall as Harry, her long braids were silver, and her black eyes twinkled from within a mass of wrinkles on her copper-colored face. When she spoke, her voice was clear but oddly accented; it was obvious that English was a language learned in her adulthood, and her speech, if anything, was even more formal than Headmaster Dumbledore's. "Welcome to our school! It has been a long time since there has been contact with our sister school overseas, and we are honored to be the first stop on your journey." She did not extend her hand, but bowed slightly in greeting to Professor Broomfield-Hill. "Allow me to introduce my companions. They are the heads of subject departments and the heads of our Clans – what you would call Houses. Tomorrow all of you will be assigned into Clans; while you will sleep here in the Guest Lodge, you will eat in the Dining Halls for your Clans and may use either the Guest Lodge common space or your Clan common space for study. Your Clan is your family while you are here. Clan Elders are your parents and advisers, other students are your brothers and sisters, and all Clan members help one another."

This sounded very similar to the House system at Hogwarts, and Harry wondered vaguely what their Sorting system was. Surely they didn't have a Sorting Hat here, too. He tried to pay attention to the introductions, although he knew he was too tired to remember most of it.

"The head of the Loon Clan is Napayshni Greg TwoBears. He is the Head of our Traditional Studies Department and also conducts the Vision Quest program and supervises the Warriors' Society – what is called the Dueling Club at most other schools." Harry looked with interest at the man, since Dumbledore had suggested he participate in both of those programs. Professor TwoBears was a tall and muscular Native man who wore his greying hair short, in contrast to Aispun. His face was craggy and there was a long thin scar running down the line of his jaw on the right side.

"The Great Fish Clan is headed by Curt Rivenbank, head of our Classical Magic Department. This includes the specialties of Charms and Transfiguration, as well as Ethics, Theory and Practicum." Professor Rivenbank was a short, thin man with thinning grey hair and a friendly smile.

"Hanako Oshima is the Head of the Marten Clan and also of the Natural Lore Department. That includes both Herbology and Magical Zoology. She also leads a meditation group and teaches quarterstaff and aikido, if any of you are students of those arts." The Marten Clan Head was short, slim, and surprisingly young to be a Department Head, Harry thought.

"The Head of the Deer Clan is Sofia Cobbley, who is also in charge of our Mundane Studies curriculum – that is History, Language Studies, Mathematics, the Sciences, and all those subjects that do not require magic but are necessary for a young person to know nonetheless." Professor Cobbley was a tall, thin woman with very black skin and the sort of no-nonsense attitude that Harry associated with Agatha Stone, even though she was dressed in a flower print dress instead of a power suit.

"And finally, the Head of the Bear Clan, and of our Potions and Healing Arts Departments, is Ivo Rozendal." Professor Rozendal, who had much the same formal bearing as Professor Snape although he was of stockier build and darker coloring, bowed slightly in acknowledgement.

"And of course you have already met Aispun; he is our Recreational Director and will also be serving as your liaison while you are here, and will travel with you as chaperone for the rest of your journey. If you have any questions or problems, please go to him with them. If he cannot answer or work out whatever situation it is, he will take it to the appropriate department head or bring it to me. He will be staying in the Guest Lodge with you for convenience. I am sure you and your young ones are tired and hungry after your travels. There is food in the Guest Lodge; we will go and eat and then you shall rest. Tomorrow the students from the other schools will be arriving, and then we shall be honored to show you our facilities."

"Thank you for your courtesy. We are tired. Traveling Muggle-style takes so long," sighed the Professor.

"Grandmother, if I may," said Aispun, using a tone more formal than he had previously used in talking to the Hogwarts group. "I'd like to get everyone's things put away. Could everyone identify which bags are theirs before we go in?" The elderly woman nodded, and the students and the Hills pointed out which bags were theirs. Aispun pulled a short wand, tipped with a grey crystal point, out of a belt sheath and tapped each trunk or bag in turn, and they quietly vanished. "Thank you. You'll find your names on your rooms and your luggage inside. Now let's go eat! I'm starved!"

"You are always hungry, grandson," said the old woman with a fond tone in her voice. "But you are right, of course. Let us go in."

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Harry woke to sunshine in his face. He groaned and put his pillow over his head. Some time later, it occurred to him to wonder why there was sunshine in his face. Both at Privet Drive and at Hogwarts, he tended to sleep on his left side specifically so that he wouldn't get light shining in his eyes first thing in the morning. But there it was. He peered out blearily from under the pillow. Yes, definitely sunshine. Gah. He rolled over to

reach for his glasses, and came completely awake when he bashed his knuckles into a wall.

Right. Strange room. Strange furniture. Glasses on the nightstand on the wrong side of the bed. Once he could see clearly, he climbed out of the bed and decided to go in search of the bathroom. There were three doors. The wide double door opened into a closet. Empty. Not the bathroom. The second door, praise be to Merlin, was the bathroom, and his thoughts were much more coherent once he'd attended to morning necessities and washed his face. There was another connecting door to the bathroom, something he only realized when someone started banging on it, with just the sort of urgency Harry had been feeling a few minutes before. "I'll be out in just a second!" he yelled at the unknown pounder, and grabbed a towel to dry his face.

"Zat you, Harry?" came a voice.

"It's me. Blaise?" he guessed.

"Yeah. Could you hurry, please?"

"I'm leaving now," said Harry as he went back through to his room, slamming the door hard enough that hopefully Blaise would hear it and know the loo was free.

Now he was able to take a better look at the room. It was a pleasant enough sort of room, he guessed, though he'd never really been interested in the fine art of interior decoration. The wall with the window was wood, with the solidity that said it was probably dressed timbers and not just paneling. The other three walls were sort of a dusty light green color. There were two beds, two nightstands, two dressers, and two desks with chairs. The floor was also wood, and there was a dark green braided rug covering the part where bare feet would hit the floor first thing in the morning. Both beds had white bed linens apart from the dark green blanket folded across the foot, and the curtains matched the blankets and rug. Harry's trunk stood at the foot of the bed he'd been sleeping in; his jeans were draped across the top of it, socks and trainers discarded on the floor. Harry was still wearing the underwear and his shirt from yesterday. Apparently he had only managed to get that far in undressing before he'd fallen into the bed.

He fumbled in his jeans pocket for the trunk keys and popped open the wardrobe compartment. Dirty things went in the laundry bin – it occurred to him that he'd have to find out whether they had house elves or what here – and he grabbed a change of clothes and his bathrobe, wrapping it around himself just as Blaise tapped on the door behind him and then opened it. "Harry, I wanted to, whoops! Sorry."

"It's okay, I'm decent. What did you want?"

"I just wanted to return the clothes you loaned me yesterday, and to thank you again."

Harry eyed Blaise, who was also bathrobe-clad, and holding out the bundle of refolded clothing somewhat awkwardly. "What are you going to be wearing today?"

"I figured just my regular robes would do fine."

"As long as we're on the school grounds. But you're going to need something for when you go out shopping for your own stuff. Help yourself." He gestured at the open wardrobe section of his trunk.

"I don't like owing you ..."

"Let me get the first shower and we'll call it even."

The look on Blaise's face said he didn't think it would be even, but he accepted a clean set of clothes and went back to his own room. Harry made his shower quick and rapped on Blaise's door when he was done. "I'm finished! It's all yours."

"Come through here a minute and look at this, Harry. Tell me what you think."

Curiously, Harry poked his head through. Blaise's room was the mirror of his, only the walls were pale blue and the blankets, rug and so forth were dark blue. Blaise's trunk stood at the foot of a bed which had clearly been slept in but not made. Blaise, however, was looking at the other bed. It was a double, much wider than either of the beds in Harry's room. "Look at that. Now look at this." Blaise opened the door which led to the hall. On the hall side was a sign that said, "Zabini, B. - Zavala, I./I."

"Two initials?" Harry shrugged. "Twins, maybe?"

"Maybe. But didn't they say they were only sending one male and one female from each other school?"

"It's either that or someone who's half-giant and needs a bigger bed and two names to cover him. We'll find out soon enough. Let me go get changed and you shower and dress and we'll find out about breakfast, okay?"

While he was dressing, Mr. Hill came down the hall knocking on all the doors to make sure people were awake and reminding everybody to wear robes this morning for greeting the students from the other schools, and shortly thereafter he heard the sounds of the other boys in the hall. He stepped out to find Justin and Michael standing in front of his door, Justin holding one hand in the air as if he had been undecided whether to knock. Both boys, rather oddly, were looking at the name sign on his door.

"What's wrong?"

"Harry ... did you see *that*?"

"What?" Harry looked at the sign. It read, "Malfoy, B. – Potter, H."

"MALFOY?! Tell me this is one of you guys pranking me! Please!" The three of them stood in the hallway looking aghast at the offending sign, which stubbornly refused to provide any more information, and then Blaise came out and looked at what they were looking at, and then they all looked at each other and then at the door sign again. They were still looking when Aispun emerged from one of the rooms at the end of the hall.

"You kids interested in breakfast, or do I get to eat it all?" he asked quizzically.

That broke the staredown stalemate between the boys and the door, proving once again that inanimate objects always win that sort of contest, and the boys went to tell the girls about the odd door sign.

The door at the end of the hall near Aispun's room opened onto a large common room, comfortably furnished with scattered groups of chairs, sofas and tables. A breakfast buffet was laid out on a sideboard, with dishes of scrambled eggs, sausages, ham, and something pretending it was bacon. There were also plates of pastries, muffins and a selection of juices. There was no pumpkin juice, so Harry tried something which was red and very tart and refreshing. While they ate, they discussed the first impressions of the Clan heads, speculated as to what Clans they'd be assigned to, and talked over the implications of the nameplates on various doors. Harry and Blaise weren't the only ones puzzled by the signs. Lavender, it turned out, was going to be rooming with someone with the unusual last name of "Ogunfowora", and they speculated as to who or what an Ogunfowora might be. Daphne was highly relieved that her roommate's last name was "Smith". But everyone was concerned about the implications of a Malfoy on this trip. After everyone had finished, the buffet dishes vanished quietly.

Aispun was relaxed in an armchair near the cold fireplace. "Can I ask for everybody's attention for just a minute?" he called out. "The groups from the other schools will be here in a little while, and I wanted to mention a few things before they get here." He seemed to be a little embarrassed. "Mostly it involves slang terms and names for things. I realize there's a lot of difference between British and American English. Most of it is stuff that can be sorted out as we go. Just remember, if somebody says something that you think is odd, ask for clarification before things get too confused. There are some terms in the magical community that I just wanted to make sure you knew about so that there won't be too many surprises. First off, we don't use the words Muggle or Squib for non-magical people. We call them Mundanes. It's a little less hurtful. We also don't use Witch or Wizard much anymore – the Women's Lib movement did those in a few years ago. It also avoids confusion with several Mundane religious groups that have adopted the title of "Witch". All magical people are Mages, both male and female. A Mage with no Mage parentage is a Natural Mage; a Mage with any Mage ancestry is a Heritage Mage. Are you with me so far?"

"Um, does it matter if only one parent was a ... a Mage? Or whether they were Natural or Heritage?" Lavender, who was a half-blood, was glancing sideways at the pureblooded Blaise as she asked the question.

"Not a bit. One parent or both, it doesn't matter, or whether they were Natural or have a family history like mine, that goes back a couple thousand years or so. We were shamans back as far as the oral histories go." Blaise's eyes widened as Aispun laid such casual claim to a blood line longer than any of the British pureblood families. "The only reason we even bother to differentiate is because Naturals don't know customs that have developed over time, and that can sometimes lead to interesting situations. Naturals are more likely to use wild magic since they don't get early childhood training to keep it under control. And of course you need to make sure Naturals marry in every few generations to keep Heritage lines stable in a small community. But I'm sure you already know all that."

"Wait, what?" said Susan. "What do you mean, stable?"

Aispun seemed surprised by the question. "Well, if families with long Heritage traditions don't get new blood in every so often, they get weak and die out. First they start having fewer children. If the lines don't get new blood from somewhere, sooner or later everybody is everybody else's cousin and then there are real problems. Not only does the power of the line go, but you actually start getting genetic problems in the last few generations."

"Well, that explains Crabbe and Goyle," Harry said thoughtfully. "And you know, an awful lot of the pureblood families have only one child. Even my own Dad was."

"This used to be more of a problem when the gene pool was smaller and people were likely to stay in one area from generation to generation, but having big families and moving around a lot have solved that for the most part. There are over a million Mages in the United States, and it's easy to move to, say, California and marry into a whole new community."

"A *million*?" gasped Daphne. "I don't think there's ten thousand in all of England! No wonder you can have four big schools like this!"

"The United States has been taking in magical folk from all over the world, and there's lots of mixing. Four schools doesn't even begin to handle all the kids. There are a lot of smaller schools, not to mention the ones in Canada and Mexico, and many of the others keep their kids in the public school system and train them magically at home, or still follow the old apprenticeship system. The various Indian Nations have problems now because our populations were reduced so badly over the last three centuries and we're trying not to mix too much so we maintain our cultural identity, but the Clan system avoids the worst of it, and we're very careful to identify and cultivate our Naturals to help us rebuild. They're precious to us, and we have a higher Mage-to-Mundane ratio than any other ethnic group now."

"You folks over in England also had internal wars two generations running that took out a lot of your young adults – and most of the ones that did have families didn't have big ones because of uncertain times, right? So your whole Heritage community is going to have to rely on your Naturals to revitalize your lines and keep you from dying out completely. What? What did I say?" he asked, realizing that six out of the eight students were staring at him wide-eyed, while Harry snickered and Justin was laughing out loud. Professor Broomfield-Hill was quietly amused.

"Oooh, wouldn't that just frost Draco, to know that the Muggle-born are going to be the saviors of the Wizarding world?" said Blaise, making a fast recovery. "I wonder if I should tell him?"

"Oh please," said Justin and Harry simultaneously. The pleading tones in their voices set Blaise off into a fit of hysterical laughter, which only

became worse when Harry added, "Only make sure we're there when you do it!"

Aispun was realizing he'd gotten in over his head with this discussion and wasn't quite sure where exactly he'd lost control of it, but he was very glad to see Grandmother Little Deer, again accompanied by the Heads of Clans, coming into the Guest Lodge. Three students followed after them.

The older woman was spry and energetic, wearing a long blue skirt and embroidered red tunic instead of the buckskin robes she'd worn the day before. "Good morning, good morning! I am glad to see everyone is rested from your travel. I would like you to meet the students from our school who will be traveling with you. This is Ellen Smith of the Bear Clan. She will be rooming with your Miss Greengrass? Ah, yes, please stand together, and would Miss Greengrass introduce Miss Smith around when you have a chance? Thank you." Ellen Smith was a stocky blonde with a sprinkling of freckles across her nose; she smiled at Daphne in a friendly manner and stuck out her hand, which Daphne shook uncertainly.

"And these are Ixvalchac and Ixvochac Zavala," said Little Deer, waving forward a pair of identical twins, both dressed in jeans and embroidered tunics. They were short but slim and graceful, with dark bronze skin and gleaming black hair. They had wide faces, high cheekbones, prominent noses, and slightly slanted black eyes. As they moved, Harry realized one limped heavily on the right side, and one on the left; it was the only obvious way to tell them apart because they were more identical even than Fred and George. "Val and Vo are two of our most exceptional students, and we are very glad that they will be having this opportunity to be with you. Mr. Zabini, if you would? They will be your roommates for the year. Thank you."

Blaise shook hands with both of them and said hello, vaguely wondering where these two were from and if they even spoke English, and he was relieved and surprised when they answered him in what the British students had already begun to recognize as an American Midwestern accent. "Hi, I'm Val," said the one with the limp on the left side.

"I'm Vo. We're looking forward"

"to showing you around the school. We're Deer Clan"

"by the way, so helping out is kinda"

"what we do. Glad to meet you!" they finished in unison.

Harry had experience in dealing with this sort of whipsaw conversation, since Fred and George did it all the time, but it was obviously Blaise's first experience with it. The twins grinned at his discomfiture, and then said, again in unison, "Don't worry, you'll get used to us!" Harry wondered just how much like Fred and George these two were. When they took positions with Blaise, they stood extremely close together, almost touching on their bad sides, and wrapped their arms around the other's waists casually.

Little Deer was obviously pleased with the way things were progressing. "Come, come! The others will be arriving. It is time to greet them." She gestured at the fireplace, and despite the heat of the day, flames roared to life in the great hearth and then turned green. "Who is ready to come through? Norton? Salem?"

The head of a woman, very black of skin and wearing an elaborate headdress, popped through the flame. "Laveau is ready. May we come?"

"By all means, come and be welcome!" The head withdrew briefly. In rapid succession, three people swirled through the flames and stepped out of the hearth. First was the woman who had spoken, tall and full-figured, wearing a gown to match the turban, in a bright orange, red and yellow pattern. The second person was obviously her daughter, just as tall but slim and graceful, in the same style gown and turban in shades of blue and green. The third was a young man whose skin was also brown but much lighter in tone. He was wearing jeans and a casual shirt. Both the students wore light robes, open in the front, over their clothing. The girl's robe was blue with green trim, matching her dress, while the boy's robe was red with yellow trim. Each of the newcomers was holding a trunk or suitcase, and Aispun quietly commandeered the luggage and sent it to the proper rooms while the introductions went on. The girl was introduced as Sanya Ogunfowara, Lavender's roommate, and the boy, Bathelus Elliman, would be rooming with Michael Corner. Their chaperone was indeed Sanya's mother.

The flames roared green again. "Norton is ready. May we come?"

The Norton pair was as mismatched as the Nokomis team. The male student stepped through first. Vijay Kumar had dark skin, liquid black eyes and a fine bone structure, and strongly reminded Harry of Parvati and Padma Patil. His speech was marked by an accent that said he had come to this country late. He performed a namaste to Justin Finch-Fletchley before also shaking his hand. His female counterpart was ... unusual, even by Wizard standards. Margaret Baumann had green hair. And green eyebrows to go with it. It wasn't the sort of chemical green that someone trying to make a "statement" might choose; it was a darker green with many shades of light and dark mingled, the way different shades normally mixed in a person's hair. It was obviously natural. Her eyes were brown and her skin was fair. She was wearing a long black gown, long-sleeved and well fitted to her torso, and the skirts flowed almost to her ankles. The dress would not have seemed at all out of place on the streets of Hogsmeade; here it did not fit at all. She greeted Susan, her roommate, and looked over the rest of the group with open curiosity. Their chaperone was a young woman who had the position of "Guidance Counselor" at Norton.

Harry was beginning to get nervous, now. There was no sign yet of a Malfoy, and only one more school to be introduced. Once more, the flames burned green, and Salem Academy apologized for being late and announced their readiness. The chaperone came first, a tall man with dark brown hair and grey eyes. He was exceedingly well dressed and moved with the sort of air that said he owned the place. Harry gulped. He'd seen eyes like that, and a demeanor like that, before. A girl with flyaway black hair followed him, holding a tank containing a snake under one arm and tugging at her trunk with the other. The chaperone reached down before Aispun could get there, and helped her move it out of the way before the third member of the party came through. Obviously the son of the chaperone, wearing tan pants and a navy jacket with the insignia of the Salem Academy on the pocket, the boy was tall and slim, with wavy chestnut hair. And distinctive Malfoy eyes. Little Deer introduced Anna Gillespie to Mandy, and finally, "This is Bart Malfoy. Mr. Potter, if you would? Thank you."

Awkwardly, Harry stepped forward. He felt terribly underdressed and shabby compared to the other boy's immaculate grooming. He saw the grey

eyes flick to his forehead, then take in his messy hair and school robe, and readied himself for a cutting comment. Instead, the boy held out his hand for a casual shake.

"Bart Malfoy. Glad to meet you."

"Harry Potter." Harry shook his hand as quickly as possible.

Before they had a chance to say much more, however, Little Deer was calling for everyone's attention again. She went through the introductions of the Clan Heads again for the benefit of the newcomers, and this time explained a little bit more about the Clan system. "The native people of this area had a complex clan system; originally there were either five or seven clans, depending on who you ask, but they split until now there are more than twenty. For purposes of grouping our students, we have gone back to the original five. They are the Great Fish Clan, the Loon Clan, the Marten Clan, the Deer Clan, and the Bear Clan. Upon arriving at our school for the first time, each student reaches into a gourd that contains tokens for each clan, and withdraws one. That token will be your clan badge, and is worn to give access to the Clan lodge, including the Dining Hall, as well as to all school facilities. The gourd is charmed so that each student will remove the token of the Clan to which he or she is most suited. The Great Fish Clan are teachers, scholars, solvers of disputes. To them is entrusted the future of the people. The Loon Clan are chiefs and warriors. To them is entrusted the protection of the people. The Marten Clan are hunters, food gatherers, planners and strategists. To them is entrusted the strength of the people. The Deer Clan are artists, poets, keepers of hearth and home. To them is entrusted the peace of the people. And the Bear Clan are keepers of the peace among the people, and also the healers. To them is entrusted the health of the people. Are there any questions?"

Harry raised his hand, tentatively. "Are there any rules about associating with people from other Clans? I mean, at Hogwarts we have a House system where it's assumed you're going to be closest with your Housemates, take most of your classes together, and generally don't associate much with other Houses. Is it like that?"

"We don't have rules of that sort," said Aispun. "We try to have as few rules as possible, as a matter of fact. Just what's necessary to keep order. Your classes will all be mixed, since placement is determined by individual ability and knowledge. You've all been placed based on your school records, by the way, but we'll make adjustments if necessary. The school recreation and study facilities are, of course, open to all the Clans, and you can invite people from other Clans into your Clan Lodge as guests. However, there are discussion groups, house meetings, parties, and so forth held by specific Clans to promote Clan unity as well. Your Clan brothers and sisters are likely to have similar interests to yours, so you'll associate naturally in activities suited to your particular Clan, which a member of another Clan may not enjoy as much. Clan members can be as close as brothers and sisters; therefore people often date outside their Clan."

"Each Clan has special gifts, but no clan is any more essential or important than the others. All are necessary to the welfare of the people, and all must work together for the survival of the tribe," said Little Deer, firmly.

Professors TwoBears and Rivenbank had carried a very large gourd, painted and polished, into the Lodge with them. Now they brought it forward, and the students could see that there was a large hole cut in it. "I will call you in alphabetical order," said Little Deer, "and you will reach into the gourd and remove your token. It should be obvious from the token itself what the Clan is, but if you're not sure, just ask one of us. The chaperones will choose Clans, too. There's a staff table in each Lodge where you can join the teachers, or you can sit with the students if you prefer. Are we ready?" One by one, she called their names, and they reached into the gourd and pulled out tokens. They were little round badges with pins on the back, and the students pinned them on as soon as they drew them.

Harry had been trying to guess how the Clans might correspond to Houses. Obviously the Great Fish Clan was pretty close to Ravenclaw, and he wasn't surprised when both Mandy and Michael pulled tokens with stylized fish on them, but it was surprising that Daphne pulled one as well. So did the green-haired girl from Norton. Professor Broomfield-Hill also went into Great Fish, and her husband (who was quite pleased to be Sorted just like the Mages) found himself in Deer Clan. Hufflepuff seemed kind of similar to the Deer Clan, but while Justin pulled a token with a deer's hoofprint on it, Susan drew one with a bear paw mark. Lavender found herself in the Marten Clan. Harry kept an eye on the Malfoys, and was surprised when Bart Malfoy drew a token with a Loon feather on it – the mark of chiefs and warriors – while his father pulled a Bear token. That was interesting. Sanya Ogunfowora drew a Marten token, and then it was Harry's turn.

He reached into the hole with some trepidation. The gourd contained a large number of round tokens, and he groped for one, feeling some of them actively slide away from him, until he came across one that almost seemed to leap into his hand and stick to his fingertips. He pulled it out and turned it over. A feather. Loon Clan. Blaise was the last, and he fumbled around in the gourd for a bit until he, too, drew out a feather-marked token.

Little Deer clapped her hands. "The choosing is completed. May you all be happy in your new Clans. Now, I would like to ask you all to go to your rooms and change into casual clothing. You will go with your heads of Clans to your Clan Lodges for a brief orientation, then return here. Aispun will take over from there and show you the rest of the facilities and inform you of the safety rules and such. You will have him exclusively for the rest of the day, since the Heads of Clans and I will be welcoming the first years and sorting them this afternoon. Tomorrow is a holiday, so there will be a school picnic, and I hope everyone will get to know one another. The last of the students come in Tuesday, and classes start on Wednesday."

The Hogwarts students lead their new roommates off to the boys' and girls' sides of the Lodge, where they found that their rooms were now marked with their clan symbols.

Bart Malfoy followed Harry to their room and looked around curiously. His luggage was at the foot of his bed; he had only one suitcase, surprisingly. Harry perched himself on the edge of his own bed. "I guess you get that dresser and desk. Half the closet. Bathroom's through there; we're sharing with Blaise Zabini and Ixval ... Ix ... the twins," he said, giving up on pronouncing the unfamiliar syllables.

The American boy looked into the bathroom. "Hm. One bathroom, five of us. Should make mornings interesting." He returned to his bedside, shrugging off his jacket and taking off the Clan badge. "Casual clothes, he said? Is that casual, for your school?"

Nope. But I've got casuals on underneath," said Harry, unbuttoning his robe to reveal his jeans and t-shirt. "I'll wait outside while you change."

Bart grinned. "Don't bother. After five years dorming, I've got no modesty left." He hoisted his suitcase up onto the bed and drew a short, crystal-tipped wand from a sheath up his sleeve. Opening the suitcase, he removed several small stacks of cloth in various colors, then flicked his wand at them. The stacks obligingly enlarged into piles of folded clothing. Bart selected casual wear from them and started changing. "I'll unpack later, I guess. Have you gotten unpacked yet?"

"Don't really need to," said Harry. He flicked his own wand casually at his trunk; the lid popped up and the wardrobe section rose up and unfolded. He hung his robe back up, since he hadn't really gotten it dirty, and the wardrobe folded away.

Bart whistled. "Now that's a handy piece of luggage. Not very convenient going through airline check-on with that thing, though, was it?"

"No, it wasn't. But trunks are kind of a tradition. It didn't really occur to me to get anything else."

"Hey, tradition's good. Nothing wrong with that," said Bart with a tone of approval.

A moment of silence passed while Bart changed.

"So."

"So."

"Kind of awkward, isn't it?"

"Kind of."

"You play sports?"

"Quidditch. Seeker."

"Never tried Quidditch myself. I'm an aerial lacrosse midfielder. On the ground, I play skirmish and duel. You?"

"We don't have a formal dueling program, but I've done some informal dueling." *And fought for my life a time or two – does that count?* "I was thinking about checking out the Dueling Club or whatever it was they call it here."

"It's fun. I was champion on the junior circuit last year. Gave up the team for this year, of course, but there's always next year."

Harry groaned inwardly. *Of course Malfoy would be a champion. And he's probably best at everything else, too. He has that air of competence to him.*

"I had to give up the Quidditch team for this, too. So did Daphne." Harry decided to omit the messy business of the ban which would have made playing this year doubtful anyway.

"You have girls' Quidditch teams?"

"No, the teams are mixed."

"Mixed locker rooms?"

"Unfortunately, no."

"Pity. That might have made it worthwhile transferring to your school." Bart wiggled his eyebrows suggestively. Almost against his will, Harry laughed. "Okay, I think I'm all ready," said Bart, pinning on his Clan badge. "Let's see about this Clan orientation thing. That Two Bears looks like a piece of work."

They weren't the first back in the Common Room, but neither were they the last. Since both Harry and Bart were in the same Clan, they went to meet their Clan Head together, and Blaise joined them a few minutes later. The Laveau chaperone, Fola Ogunfowara, had also chosen Loon Clan, and seemed less than happy to be separated from her daughter. The tall, muscular Indian looked over the boys, making Harry feel extremely self-conscious, and shook hands firmly with Mrs. Ogunfowara. As they were the first group to have all its members together, Professor Two Bears lead them to the entrance of the Common Room. There was a map posted on the wall, and he passed out paper copies to them all. "The first thing you need to realize is that our campus is large. Nokomis is the newest of the major schools, and when the site was selected, they took advantage of the space available. We're about twice the area of Laveau, and three times Hogwarts or Salem. Magic use is to be confined exclusively to the Inner Campus. Most of your classes, and all of the Lodges, are located in this section, as are the library and the stadia for flying sporting events. Your Mundane classes, and Mundane sports and recreational facilities, are located in the Outer Campus. There are areas of the Outer Campus which are open to the general public, so we are very strict about observing the ban on magic there." He gave them all a chance to look over their maps. "Once you get your class schedules, you will realize that there is no way in Hell you're going to get to every class in the time allotted if you go on foot. Depending on your personal preferences, you may use brooms, carpets, or Apparation once you've got the points memorized. Yes?"

Blaise had raised his hand. "Sir, I thought we couldn't Apparate until seventeen?"

"Zabini, isn't it? Good question. That's in England. Different rules here. No age limit. Children who live in places where things are widely spread often learn to Apparate as early as possible. If you don't know how already, there's a training program on campus, and many of our students take advantage of that; you're certainly welcome to if you can fit it in your schedule. Then you can qualify for your British license as soon as

you turn seventeen. For those that can't Apparate or prefer not to for whatever reason, we have a campus-wide transportation system, keyed to your Clan badges. The section of the floor on which you are standing is a Flash Platform. You'll observe it's a different color from the rest of the floor. The Flash system is similar to Floo, but doesn't require a fire to start with. In order to activate it, you touch your Clan Badge to the map image of the building where you want to go, and you will be taken there. Once you're there, please step off the Platform immediately, since nobody else can use it in either direction while you're standing on it. I'll take you to the Lodge for the Loon Clan now."

He unhooked his badge from his shirt and touched it to the shape of a building on the north edge of the campus, and a purple flame shot up around all of them; when it died away, they were in an entirely different building. Everybody very carefully stepped away from the Flash Platform before looking around. Professor Two Bears lead them on a brisk tour of the building, showing them the Common Room, the Dining Hall, and meeting rooms. Finally, he took them out the back entrance of the building. The woods, a mixture of coniferous and deciduous trees, stood close by. "The woods from here to the west, by the Marten Lodge, are often used for skirmish games since our Clans are the ones most involved in that sport. Vision Quest activities will also be held in this area. There's nothing north of here for about a hundred miles but trees, so magical practice and games are fine here. If you happen to get your directions mixed up and can't find your way back to the campus, your Clan badge will act as a pointer." He held his own badge flat on his palm. "Point me to Nokomis!" he said, and a red arrow floated above the badge for a moment, pointing to the center of the campus. "The arrow points to the Medicine Circle at the center of the Inner Campus. As long as you have your badge, you can always find your way home."

"Lady and gentlemen, you have entered a Clan with a tradition of strength and honor. We are the smallest of the Clans, but our gift of leadership gives us an impact out of proportion to our numbers. Many of us achieve positions of power and authority, but with that often comes the need to make sacrifices for our people. That is our gift, and that is the price we pay for it. We hold ourselves to the highest standards of physical and mental fitness, for we can never be sure when we will be needed. We hold ourselves to the highest standards of trustworthiness, for our people must always be willing to turn to us. We back each other up, and we also clean up after our own messes when necessary. Are we clear on that?"

"Yes, sir," said Harry. Blaise and Bart both nodded vigorously.

"Good." He led them back into the building. "There are sign-up sheets for special activities on the bulletin board in the Common Room. There's also a notice about my office hours if you need to talk about something. I know most of my kids pretty well already. I don't know you three, but I already know you're exceptional or you wouldn't be here, either at this school or in my Clan's Lodge. I'd like to talk to each of you over the next week or so. I'd like to help you maximize the experience, and in order to do that, I need to know what your individual needs are. Once you've had a chance to settle in, find your way around, work out your class and activity schedules, we'll talk one-on-one. For now, we'll go back to the Guest Lodge. I'll be with the sixth-graders – the first years – this afternoon and evening, but I look forward to seeing all of you at the picnic tomorrow. Now I want you to use the Flash to go back to the Guest Lodge, one at a time. I'll follow to make sure you haven't gotten lost or misplaced any parts or anything." The boys gave him horrified looks, and a quick grin flickered across his normally stony face. "Kidding. It takes real effort to lose anything on a Flash Platform. You can't even overshoot like you can with Floo. Now go on."

Mrs. Ogunfowara went first, then Bart, Harry and Blaise. No parts were lost, and shortly they were all back at the Guest Lodge, the first to return as they had been first to leave. Aispun involved the boys in a discussion of various broom sports until all the groups had returned, then took them all on a Flash Platform tour of various buildings in the Inner Campus, finishing with the Deer Clan dining hall, where they all had lunch.

Following lunch was a leisurely hike down the main road toward the Outer Campus. The trip apparently could be made by Flash, but Aispun said he saw no point to wasting such a beautiful day, so they walked. Eventually they came to a wooden fence with a gate across the road. A small building stood next to it. "This is the boundary between the Inner and Outer Campuses. The Outer Campus includes facilities which are open to the general public – that means Mundanes, and that means no magic beyond this point. There's a Flash Platform in that building," he said, pointing at the small log structure, "and also broom and carpet lockers." He went into the building and emerged carrying a broom. "Anybody willing to volunteer to look stupid for a sec?"

Bart Malfoy grinned and raised his hand.

"You're a midfielder, I think you said? So you know how to take a fall?"

"Of course."

"Take this broom and try to cross that fence."

Bart mounted the broom, backed off a bit to get a little speed, and flew toward the fence. As he passed over it, a flash went off, and he and the broom parted company, with the broom ending up on the inside of the fence and Bart face-first in a patch of wildflowers outside it. He spit out a daisy as he climbed to his feet.

"Anybody think you can do better? Harry?" Aispun asked, seeing Harry's smirk at Bart's failure.

Harry gulped and picked up the broom. He circled around the group once to get a feel for it (it was a school broom and therefore off balance by definition), took a good lead and went for the fence at speed. The flash was brighter, and he sailed quite a distance beyond the fence, rolling out of the fall and landing on his back.

"Okay, anybody think they've figured out how to get across? Miss Baumann? Meg, isn't it? Let's see what you've got."

The green-haired girl casually sauntered up to the broom and picked it up gingerly. She put it over her shoulder, walked through the gate in the fence, and then mounted the broom in a graceful sidesaddle seat on the other side.

"Well, that shows why she's a Great Fish and we're just Loons," said Bart, walking over to Harry and giving him a hand up. "Why don't we just ask her to solve the problem next time before we go at it headfirst?"

"I've got a friend just like her at home," said Harry as he brushed leaves out of his hair. "They probably make sure there's one in every school just to keep the rest of us from getting cocky."

With a grin, Meg passed the broom back to Aispun, and the group continued their tour.



## Harry Potter and the Junior Year Abroad Letters From Home

Chapter Seventeen

Letters From Home

1 September

Dear Harry,

I thought I might try this correspondence book thing right off to make sure it works. I'm writing from the Hogwarts Express, as if you couldn't tell by my handwriting being all over the place. You don't realize how bumpy the ride is until you try using a quill during the trip. *\*splat\** There, see? Wish I'd nicked one of your ballpoint pen things now – bet they wouldn't go splat so much. Maybe I can borrow one from Rob.

There, that should be better. Weird not having to dip it every few letters. And the ink is blue, that looks strange, too. Hope it works with this journal so you won't find just this big blank space instead of my letter. I figure if you do find a big blank space you'll let me know.

It was kind of strange watching you go off alone yesterday. Okay, I know you weren't alone, exactly, but you know, alone without us. There's something just not right about that. Hermione and Ginny both waved until we couldn't see the bus anymore and then ran upstairs to have a good cry. What is it with girls and crying, anyway? Mum looked a little weepy, too. I asked Dad, and he says if I ever find out I should tell him.

By the time they came downstairs again, F & G and I had a second breakfast, and Mum said I could spend the morning with them at their shop. It's still not ready to open yet – they were hoping to get it open before the Express left, but they had to spend extra time getting explosion wards put up on the workshop. Apparently the owners of the shops on either side insisted. So I spent yesterday morning doing fetch and carry work and helping put up shelves and stuff, and they paid me for it! Just a couple of galleons, but it's the first I ever really made for myself. So of course I blew most of it by taking the girls and Mum out for ice cream after lunch. It felt good, tho.

Mid-afternoon, the bus was back, with the American exchange students. Boy, they looked like they'd been round the rugged rocks and back again. Hope your trip wasn't that rough. Looked like they all wanted just to go to sleep, but their chaperones dosed them with Pepper-Up potion so they'd stay awake for a while and then sleep all night. So since we were the only ones there, and Dad being with the Ministry and all, we sort of got to be their escorts for the afternoon. Ginny and Hermione took the girls over to Madame Malkin's and they all came back giggling madly. (There's another thing about girls – what is it with them and clothes?) Since they're all from different schools they're all wearing different robes – Ginny says she wants to start a petition to change to colored open-front robes next year 'cos she thinks they're pretty.

I took the guys over to Quality Quidditch Supplies and we talked brooms for a while. Those Americans really know their brooms! They've got all different models, of course, and it took us a bit to get the terms straightened out, but all four of them are flyers. None of them plays Quidditch, but they were telling me about something called lacrosse that sounds kind of like it. You might want to look into it. And it turns out Rob (Watson, he's from San Francisco, he's the one that loaned me the pen) has a little one-person flying carpet! He says he can do stunts on it and everything, and he promised to show me when we have space at school. I told him that flying carpets were illegal and he didn't believe me until I had Dad tell him, but Dad said if he didn't go off the school grounds with it and didn't do anything dangerous, it would be okay for him to use it. I think Dad is still interested in getting the carpet ban lifted, because he said he'd like to see the stunts if he had a chance.

Hermione is looking over my shoulder and telling me I should tell you who the guys are. I think she'll do the girls. We have Rob from San Francisco and Jonathan Andrews from Boston and Taylor When from New Orleans and I know I'm not spelling his name right because his parents are from Vietnam and he's the first wizard in his family ever to go to school instead of apprenticing, so he's very proud, and I think he's just like Hermione because he already read all the school books for the year. And we've got a real Red Indian, from the school where you are now, but he doesn't wear his hair in braids or with feathers or anything like that. He's just like a regular guy, except he only uses one name, which is Cheveyo, and he says he's from the Hopi people and he's in the Loon Clan at school. If you know what any of that is, please tell me. I got the feeling calling him a loon would not be a good idea.

Anyway, we had a good time talking to each other, even though they all have these weird accents, but I figure we'll get used to that soon enough. We had dinner together at the Leaky and it was funny watching them try to figure out what bangers and mash and shepherd's pie and pasties were. I guess you'll be telling us all about the strange food there, too. I never figured something like food could be different. They all went to bed early to catch up from travel, and Fred and George and I played Exploding Snap all night.

You should have seen their eyes pop out when they saw the Hogwarts Express at the platform! And all the crowds! They loved it! Well all the guys loved it, anyway. For once we weren't the last people on the train, so we got compartments all together, and Dad's riding up with us as an "official representative of the Ministry" and to talk to the chaperones about stuff, but I think it was really because he wanted to see Rob's stunts.

Lots of people have been coming by looking for you, Harry, mostly from the D.A., and they looked disappointed that you're not here, and I've practically gone hoarse explaining where you are. Most everybody is happy that you had a chance to go someplace fun, but I thought Malfoy was

going to explode! Purple is not a good color on him. *\*sketch of exploding Malfoy\** It should be even better when we go to the Prefect's Meeting and they explain about the exchange students. I think Dad's going to be giving the speech on that, and Malfoy had better behave himself.

*\*chocolate fingerprint\** Did you know they don't have Chocolate Frogs in America? Bet you've found out by now. If I can figure out how to send you some, I will. Taylor had some gooey worm-shaped candies, though, and we swapped. The worm things are okay, taste like fruit, and they kind of wiggle in your mouth until you swallow them. Hermione says they're disgusting. I think that's a point in their favor.

They'll be calling the Prefects any minute now, so I'm going to finish this up and send it. It'll be kind of busy for the next few days, but I'll write again as soon as I can. (Especially if there's any more chance of Malfoy exploding!)

Write soon and tell us all about America. What's the food like? Are the girls pretty? What was it like riding in an airplane? Waiting anxiously, I remain,

Your friend,

Ronald Bilius Weasley

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2 September, 1996

Dear Harry,

I hope this letter finds you settling in well in Minnesota. Have your classes started yet? How do they compare to the classes here at Hogwarts? How are the professors there?

Things here are progressing about as well as can be expected. We met the American exchange students on Saturday after you left, and introduced them to Diagon Alley and a bit of Muggle London. We split up into groups and Ron took the boys off somewhere while Ginny and I took the girls shopping, since several of them were not quite prepared for a winter in Scotland. I know it is only September, but the time to shop is before you need the things, a concept which seems quite beyond most boys. I'm sure that nice young man from New Orleans is going to be quite shocked when he tries to go on the first Hogsmeade weekend wearing short pants and sandals.

I know Ron told you in his letter about the male students, but I'm sure he didn't mention the girls. Ginny and I squeezed into a compartment with the four of them, and we had a wonderful talk on the way to school.

Ingrid Johansen is from Minnesota, although her grandparents came from Sweden, I believe she said, and she is really good at Charms and Transfiguration, and is planning on going on to work in new spell research when she finishes school. I'm looking forward to seeing if they do things any differently in the United States; perhaps we can exchange tips.

The girl from Boston is Maria Pereira, and she likes Potions best. She seems a little flighty, so we'll see if her enthusiasm survives her first session of Double Potions with Professor Snape.

The girl from San Francisco is Allysia Kirkland; she says her family are descended from the old wizarding family of Donovans in Ireland and there are eleven relatives of hers studying at Norton right now, including her twin brother and a pair of younger twin sisters, and every one of them has one pureblooded parent and one Muggle parent but is really strong magically. I think that is quite curious, don't you? She is interested in studying with Hagrid as she wants to be a cryptozoologist when she finishes University; apparently our Hagrid's reputation for finding new and unusual creatures has reached even California.

I think the girl from New Orleans, Therese Mayeaux, may have the biggest adjustment to make. She came from Haiti to study at the Laveau Institute, and she didn't even use a wand there! She's been doing some sort of specialist studies program. We had to buy her a wand in Diagon Alley. You should have seen her at Ollivander's. You know how he can get, he likes to spook Muggles and the Muggle-raised, at least he did me and my parents although Ron and Ginny said he's quite a nice fellow. Therese walked into the shop, and Mr. Ollivander came sliding up on that ladder of his and got all mystical, and reached out a hand for a box, and she looked at him and said, "No. The next one over. Ten inches, willow, rather flexible, with a unicorn tail hair. Thank you." And she swished the wand and sparks flew out, she paid him and left! And he just stood there, with this silly smile on his face!

The trip up on the Express was quite uneventful, except for Malfoy's face turning quite an unbecoming shade when he found out you weren't on the train. He seemed quite put out that he hadn't been chosen, or even notified that the exchange program existed. As if anyone needs to tell him anything! He was even more put out when he took count of "his" Slytherins and discovered that Blaise Zabini and Daphne Greengrass were missing. I don't know how well his long-distance curse casting works, but you might want to warn them to watch out for any unusual spots or other effects.

At the Welcome Feast, the Headmaster explained about the exchange program and introduced the American students, and they were sorted first, before the first-years. They seemed to find it amusing, at least until they saw how seriously we all took it.

The Sorting Hat seemed to be a little confused, as it didn't put them evenly into our Houses. Gryffindor got three: Maria, Allysia, and Rob Watson. Ron was really happy about that because he likes Rob. Ravenclaw also got three: Ingrid, Therese, and Taylor Nguyen went there. Jonathan Andrews went into Hufflepuff, and Cheveyo went into Slytherin. I wish you could have seen the looks on their faces! Malfoy didn't know whether to shake his hand or not – you know, not sure if he was pureblood or not, and it certainly wasn't English blood anyway, but Snape glared at him and he shook hands and did the pretty to introduce everybody. I told Ron he should sort of keep an eye on Cheveyo since he doesn't know how the Slytherins can be. Ron grumbled that he was a Slytherin himself now and could probably look after himself, but I eventually got him to agree. I got on well with Ingrid and she's from the same school, so maybe I can keep tabs on him that way too.

Oh, and each school sent a chaperone, and each chaperone was a teacher, and they have all agreed to teach a new class called World Magical Studies, which will replace Muggle Studies for the year since Professor Broomfield-Hill is off with your lot. Between the four of them, they can cover enough class periods so that everyone can get to take it! Isn't that exciting? I don't know when was the last time a new subject was added, although I'm sure it's in Hogwarts: A History, and I shall look it up when I'm finished writing this.

Have you noticed that every class since Ginny's has gotten bigger? There were tons more first-years in this class than ours. Sorting took forever this time, and the tables are longer. Usually it's the fifth-year Prefects that take watch over the first-years, but this time there were so many we had to have the sixth-year Prefects help out as well. Ron's cousin Gerry got sorted into Gryffindor, of course – you remember the one you met at the tree ceremony? Ron and Ginny were very proud to have someone to continue the Weasley tradition in school once they've left. I saw Professor Snape wince when Gerry was Sorted, though.

We have a new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher, as if that were surprising. She's not even English, she's an Italian witch (only she calls it *strega*) and she's a specialist in countering and removing hexes and curses. Her full name is Alexandra de Palatis, and she says we are to call her "Donna Alexandra" instead of "Professor". (That's "doh-nah" as a title, not like the name Donna.) We also have an assistant professor working with her, and you'll never guess! It's Mrs. Figg! She's going to be giving us classes in how to defend yourself when you *can't* use magic, like if you're in a crowd of Muggles or something. It sounds fascinating, and I'll take good notes and send them to you. So it looks like we're going to have a really good year, although anything would be good after Professor Umbridge.

And guess what! They've put on extra teachers for some of the classes, I think mostly for the lower year classes, since they're all getting too big for one person to handle – without a Time Turner, anyway. Filch was complaining about spending his summer cleaning up the old unused classrooms on the third and fourth floors. The experienced teachers get the advanced students, of course, so we're still stuck with Professor Snape for Advanced Potions. We don't have our first class of that until Thursday.

That's all for now, since I need to get a jump on the homework and I promised to meet Ingrid, Maria, Therese and Allysia in the library and introduce them to Madam Pince and show them around. Ginny said she would be writing to you as well, so you will probably have a note from her tonight or tomorrow.

I hope you are enjoying yourself with no Malfoy!

Sincerely,

Hermione Jane Granger

P.S. The last time a new class was added was Muggle Studies, which was added in 1920. (I suppose contemporary events had finally convinced "certain parties" that the Muggles were worthy of note!) The last one before that was in 1744, when Arithmancy and Ancient Runes were split into two separate classes. Isn't that interesting? H.J.G.

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September 3, 1996

Dear Harry,

Well, I know Ron and Hermione have already written to you so now it's my turn! Did you know they made me fifth-year prefect for Gryffindor? There were eight girls to get settled in the firstie dorms and all of them were so excited from the boat ride and the sorting and the feast that you can imagine they all took forever to go to sleep! Hermione and I made them all drink warm milk with vanilla in it (and maybe just the tiniest drop of a sleeping draught, but don't tell anyone I did that – especially not Hermione).

You know, I hadn't realized it until the Welcome Feast, but Cho Chang lost both you *and* Michael Corner, who she was going out with at the end of last year, to this American trip. She was just furious! I wonder who she's going to pick next? She's the only seventh-year Seeker on any of the Quidditch teams this year, so with you gone, she's considered the one to beat. I know you'd rather be playing yourself, but since you can't, I'm going to give it my best shot and kick her in the tail for you! Malfoy's no competition, and Hufflepuff is going to be holding tryouts, but I'm not worried about anyone they might field. Except maybe for that American, he's an unknown quantity but Ron says he knows flying. I don't know if he'll try out or not since he's never played Quidditch, but then you had never played either before you got drafted for the team. We'll have to see. Maybe Ron can threaten him a little bit.

I had my first DADA class with the new teacher today, and it was really interesting. Donna Alexandra started teaching us how to set wards today, starting with a simple one that doesn't stop anything but lets you know when something crosses it. She says she wants us to always practice casting our wards around our beds at night because you never know when something might be sneaking up on you, and I think she's going to be sneaking up on us from time to time to test us. It's weird, she looks like a female Snape, same nose and everything only hers isn't quite as big, and I wonder if they're related somehow, but she's so much nicer. I like her a lot.

I think the announcement about the new D.A. will be made next week because the Headmaster said he wanted to talk to Ron and Hermione about it this weekend. If it's going to be a regular school program, that means we'll have to let Slytherins in, but that's OK because it means I might get to hex Malfoy. I caught him giving directions to some of my Gryffindor firsties that would have got them lost all the way across the castle from where their class was, and I got five points taken off for being late to Charms when I took them to their class, but McGonagall gave me back the five points because I was doing my Prefect job and said she'd talk to Snape about Malfoy. You know and I know nothing will happen to him, so I'd really like a chance to Stun him silly and get away with it.

They said at the Welcome Feast that we'd be having Hogsmeade visits like always, but we're to travel in groups of no less than four at a time and to stay to the main street because some of those little alleys off to the side are dodgy. Of course this means the Prefects will be spending the

entire day getting people out of those little alleys. Why don't they just say everyone should go there, and then nobody will?

I talked to Luna after History of Magic today and she said the woods of Minnesota were just *crawling* with sasquatches at this time of year, so if you happen to find some of their hair on bushes or something, could you bring some home for her? A picture would be great, too. You could use that camera Ron gave you for your birthday. Her father could print it in the Quibbler and you'd get a by-line and everything. I said I'd ask. So keep your eyes peeled for sasquatches.

That got me thinking, though, that maybe the Quibbler or one of the other magazines might be interested in articles about your trip, you know? I know people would read it, mostly just because of the Boy-Who-Lived tie-in which I know you hate, but lots of other people might read it because it's about interesting places and things. None of us have ever been anywhere interesting, except Malfoy, who says he's been all over Wizarding Europe, but who believes him? Oh and there was the time we went to Egypt, but nobody wants to hear about us. But they might be interested in hearing about you in the United States. What do you think?

Hermione and I went up to visit Hedwig in the owlery last night after dinner and took her a treat, but I think she's moping. Is it OK if I use her to send letters to Mum and Dad instead of borrowing Pigwidgeon from Ron? I think it will be good for Hedwig to have something to do.

I've got to run, lunch is almost over. Neville and Seamus and Dean and everybody says Hi and we all miss you. Write back soon!

Yours,

Ginny

(Ginevra Molly Weasley)

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4 September, 1996

Dear Hermione, Ginny, and Ron,

Sorry I haven't written back sooner, but classes only just started here today. It's not that we haven't been busy though. They've pretty much kept us on the run since we got here. This will probably be a pretty long letter, but don't worry, I'm not writing it all out three times – my handwriting would probably look like Hermione's Ancient Runes by the time I got done with the third copy. I learned a good copy spell from Vijay (exchange student from Norton, nice fellow) so I'm going to write it once and then copy it into all your books, then make personal notes as PSES. I hope that's OK.

The plane trip was fine, but very long. You wouldn't think that doing nothing but sitting for so long could be tiring, but it is. Professor Broomfield-Hill made us sit all mixed up instead of by Houses, so we started to get to know each other some. Blaise and I had a little misunderstanding at first, but we got it cleared up. He's not a bad fellow, even if he is a Slytherin. I learned that there's a lot of stuff I don't know even after living in a school full of wizards for five years – about Family Grimoires and things like that. Ron, Ginny, you'll know what I'm talking about – but Hermione probably doesn't. And about Wizard's Oaths. I didn't realize how dangerous they were. Can you explain it to her, please? I think she really needs to know.

We also learned about how pureblood families (they call them Heritage Mages here) should be trying to get married to Muggle-borns (who they call Natural Mages – it's very confusing at first) to keep their lines strong because they'll die out if they don't. And about how we should all have lots of kids because the whole community is too small. Maybe there are some books in the library on this that Hermione can find, because I'm not sure I got it all – the guy I was talking to about it (who isn't even a teacher, but he knows all this stuff!) was using terms like "gene pool" and "genetic drift" and "founder's effect". I think that's Muggle science, not magic, but maybe she can find out about it. Or maybe you can ask the Brains about it, Ron. It's got to be in there somewhere.

All that was pretty deep, especially for the first few days, but it hasn't all been like that. The day we got here, we pretty much just slept. I don't think we even had dinner on Saturday. Sunday the other exchange students came in, and most of them are nice. There's even a girl who's just like you, Hermione – except her hair is green. Really. It's green. I'll send a picture if I can figure out the camera. And get this – my roommate is a Malfoy. You heard me right, Malfoy. Seems I can't get rid of them after all. His father is stuck-up, and keeps looking at the lodges and everybody like they're beneath him, but Bart seems like a reasonable sort so far. At least he hasn't gone out of his way to be nasty or anything, and he doesn't get upset if something happens that makes him look foolish. Not like our Malfoy. He's got the same eyes, though, and I can't help but wonder if it's a front and he'll turn out to be a git after all.

We all got Sorted on Sunday – they have five different Houses here, which they call Clans, and Lavender and I got sorted into different ones – she's a "Marten" which is kind of a weasel, and I'm a "Loon" and don't you dare say anything, Ron! Blaise and Bart both got sorted into Loon Clan, too – we're warriors and chiefs, so nobody messes with the Loon Clan! All three of us signed up for the Vision Quest program, and so did Justin and even Susan. That hasn't started yet, though, but the first meeting is this weekend, and then we get to find out what we're in for. Our Clan Head was very happy we all signed up since he teaches the thing.

Then we had a long trip all over the campus, including the Outer Campus where they have a separate school for Squibs and Muggle relatives of people who attend and work at Nokomis. (They're called "Mundanes" here) They also have a museum and a living village where tourists come to see how the Native peoples in Minnesota used to live, so that's a lot of Mundanes! We're going to be taking some classes in Muggle subjects at their school on Fridays; the rest of the week is all magical classes. The Outer Campus also has a Recreation Center where they have televisions and video games and show movies on the weekends. There's also a stable if we want to learn how to ride a horse. I wouldn't mind that, but there's just too many other things to do, between the Duelling Club and the Vision Quest. And I haven't found out yet who here might be able to teach me Occlumency. It will probably turn out to be Mr. TwoBears; he runs all the Loon Clan warrior stuff so I wouldn't be surprised if he was a Legilimens as well.

Monday was a bank holiday here. They call it Labour Day, and apparently picnics are the traditional way to celebrate it. The staff set up big tables outside on one of the athletic fields, and everybody took turns cooking so no one person would get stuck doing all the work. We did our turn in the kitchens before things really got started. We were cutting up vegetables and things so they could make the salads and soups with them. They don't have house elves here, by the way, just real people doing real work to get things done. The picnic food was very different from what we have at Hogwarts. There were sandwich things, of course, but we also had hamburgers and hot dogs and fried chicken and maize cooked still on the ear so you could eat it with butter and salt and pepper on it. It was messy, but quite good. And since there are so many Indians as staff and students, there was all different kinds of their food, too – so I tried fry bread and succotash, which is maize and beans and squash mixed, and even some buffalo meat grilled on skewers.

In between eating, there were games and races, some of them organized, some not. Bart went off with some people to play "softball", a students vs. staff game. I got involved in a broom obstacle race – flying in between trees and under bridges and things - and got a third prize. They were surprised that I did that well since I'd never done that kind of racing before. The closest I've come was second year when Malfoy and I got down under the stands during the Quidditch match when Dobby sicced the bludger on me. Ron, you might want to get the team practicing under conditions like that (well, maybe not with the killer bludger) – it really puts you on your toes! And maybe some aerial work for the D.A.? It's an idea, anyway.

Then when it got dark, they lit fires in pits and we toasted marshmallows on sticks over the flames. I burned three of them up before I figured out how to do it right. A bunch of the Indians got out drums, and Transfigured their normal clothes into traditional wear – beads and buckskins and the whole works! – and they did songs and dances. Aispun, who is our liaison and who will be travelling with us, got in a dance competition with Mr. TwoBears. I think they come from two different nations or something and there is a traditional rivalry there. So they both danced around the fire and made shapes rise up out of the flames, and their shapes fought each other and they tried to take command of the fire. Eventually Mr. TwoBears won when he made a bear that ate Aispun's salmon, but then the two of them danced the fire together and it was even better that way. They gave all of us a lesson in it, and most of us couldn't do much more than get sparks to shoot up, but Susan managed to get a bird to fly out and turn silver, and she was very pleased with herself. Bathelus, who is from Laveau, did very well, too, but it turns out he's a specialist in Fire magic so that wasn't surprising. We were all pretty tired by then, so we went to bed, but we could still hear the drums "talking" to each other long after we left.

The next day was free, so we mostly spent that learning our way around the school on our own. They have a fireless Floo system called Flash Platforms that even I can't get lost in, for if you don't have time to get all the way across campus for a class or if it's raining or snowing, or you can walk between buildings if it's convenient. In the afternoon, Professor Broomfield-Hill had to take Blaise in to town to get him Muggle clothes – sorry, I mean "Mundane" clothes – and those of us taking the Vision Quest program needed to get working knives so we went too. And all the girls wanted to look at the clothes in the stores, too. Aispun took us into town on the bus. They drive on the wrong side of the road here, and it took a while before I got used to looking the correct way when crossing the streets. The town has a lot of places catering to the tourists, but also there's a magical trade all mixed in. There are symbols they put on their signs so you know where it's safe to talk about magical stuff to the shopkeepers and what's a "real" magical tool and what's a toy for the tourists. Some stuff is both, which makes it really confusing. The tourists buy things like sage bundles and special wands called talking sticks and dreamcatcher webs and have no idea what they really are or how to use them. They just think they look cool. (I asked Aispun about the dreamcatchers and told him I get nightmares sometimes, so he said he'd show me how to make one that would work better than the tourist ones.)

So now Blaise is all kitted out, and we have our knives for Vision Quest, which will start Saturday.

We're still all getting to know each other. I've hardly even talked to Val and Vo, who are twins and are Blaise's roommates. He talked to them more, of course, and says they were born in Mexico actually connected to each other, and their mother died and their father sold them to a travelling carnival show where they spent the first few years of their lives. Then they were "rescued" and sent to the United States where they got surgery to separate them, and they were adopted by a magical family, but they still stay together always. I suppose when I get to feeling sorry for myself I should remember that there is always someone worse off – I can't imagine actually being sold to a carnival!

Today was our first day of classes. In Herbology we're going to be learning how to start with plant materials and make essences and things that can be used in Potions. The professor says it's good to be able to make your own things when you have to, and this way we'll have more respect for where our potions ingredients come from. Today mostly we spent out in the field – literally – starting journals with samples of all the different plants we could find, and we're supposed to identify them and write down what they're used for and how to prepare them. Good thing I know a thing or two about weeds. The American schools are really big on journaling – most classes have journals that we're supposed to keep independently and they'll be graded at the end of the year. Then we keep them as references for when we make personal Grimoires. Our Herbology journals should turn out really interesting since we'll be visiting four different areas of the country.

Charms is taught pretty much like it is at home. We're learning how the various Charms are grouped and what the similarities are, so that we can learn how to modify them if necessary (like that "*Mobiliarbus*" spell you invented, Hermione).

The most unusual class so far has been the Practicum. Today we spent on wand maintenance. I didn't know that a wand develops memory for the spells you cast with it to get better with that class of spell. We learned how to "clear" the memory of a wand, and why you might not want to do that – and why you might. Clearing it would defeat a *priori incantatem*, for example, if you'd used an Unforgivable or something you didn't want someone to know about. Some Americans have more than one wand for different kinds of spells, and Professor Rivenbank says their Aurors carry special wands for combat because a regular wand might break under combat conditions. Next week we start to learn how to use the tools used to make the wand shaft, and we're supposed to start reading about the different woods and crystals and core materials so we can pick out what we want our wands to do.

Tomorrow is Transfiguration and Magical Zoology and Potions, and Friday is the Mundane classes in History, Chemistry, Literature, and Ethics. I've probably forgotten something, but it's pretty late. I'll keep you posted.

Sincerely,

P.S. Ron, the ballpoint pen came through just fine. No big empty space. Nice sketch of Malfoy. I'm trying to put together a Quidditch team out of us and the American exchangers, but if I can't manage that, I'll try this lacrosse thing. I've seen several flying carpets here. They are used mostly for hauling cargo or for large families. Let me know about the stunts this Rob does.

And yes, the girls are pretty, and since they don't wear robes here for the most part, you can see a lot more of them. We're told that will change quite soon because it gets very cold very fast in the fall, but for now we're enjoying the scenery. Ahem. I thought Blaise's brains were going to squirt out his ears the first time he saw a girl in shorts and a cropped top walking across the picnic grounds. Daphne was, shall we say, less than pleased?

Oh, yeah. Lavender. Shorts. Wow.

P.S. Hermione, I know you're friends with some of the Ravenclaw girls. Some of them may be friends with a girl in Slytherin named Tracey Davis. Could you kind of ask them to keep an eye on her? She's friends with Blaise and Daphne, but with them gone it means she's isolated against Malfoy's crew. Daphne says she's quite smart and you might like her. (I think we may have made a mistake to not pay attention to the politics over in Slytherin – some of them are definitely not Death Nibblers.) Keep an eye on Cheveyo, too – He may be in for a rude shock with the Slytherins.

Oh, and thanks for the book.

P.S. Ginny, I'll see about that sasquatch hair for Luna – we'll be doing a unit on them in a couple of weeks. There's a small village of them near here and we get to go visit them. There's even one that travels as a mascot for the Vancouver Quodpot team – The Fighting Sasquatch. Do you really think there might be an interest in travel articles? Because if there is, maybe the entire group could contribute. I don't really have time to do the entire thing by myself. Feel free to use Hedwig whenever you need her. I'd hate for her to start to moult or something because she's bored.

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Harry sighed, put down his pen, and closed all three books. Off in Scotland right now, the script on the covers of the books would be flashing to let his friends know they had received messages. It would be almost time for breakfast there, and his friends would be getting ready to begin their day. It was almost midnight here, and way past time for bed. The Lodge Common Room was deserted, everyone else having gone to sleep (or to their rooms, at least), long since. He took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes, then collected all his things and trudged off to his room, trying to be as silent as possible so as not to wake Bart.

## Harry Potter and the Junior Year Abroad Meanwhile, Back at the Castle

Ginny Weasley was every bit as much an early bird as her brother was a night owl. The time between dawn and breakfast was her time. During the school year, she took advantage of it to finish her homework in an empty common room, but now, at the beginning of the year, she had free time. Carefully, so as not to awaken the other girls, she dressed and slipped out of the fifth-year dorm, taking her books for the morning classes with her. Once the door was closed behind her, she was free to walk without having to tiptoe, and bounced down the stairs to the common room. Crookshanks and a young kitten one of the second-years had brought were waiting for her in the common room, Crookshanks looking on with amused tolerance while the kitten played pouncing games on the tassels of the rug before the fireplace. As soon as Ginny arrived, however, the ginger tomcat leaped down from the ottoman where he had been curled, and walked over to the portrait door. The kitten followed after him. Ginny opened the door and let both of them out into the hall, and cats and girl made their way to an entrance on the south side of the castle, where the doors were standing slightly open, as they always did in the morning when the weather was good.

Out on the south lawn, long shadows danced about as the castle's cats pranced and played. Whenever the weather permitted, the cats could be found outside at sunrise and sunset. There were a surprising number of them, more every year, as they were a popular pet and familiar animal and, unlike toads and owls, were easy for children living between the Muggle and Wizarding worlds to acquire and explain. The undisputed queen of the cats was Mrs. Norris, who ranked both because of her seniority and her nasty temper. Every year she put some young upstart in her place and kept control of the Hogwarts clowder. Among the toms, Crookshanks and Millicent Bulstrode's big black tom, Balthazar, kept order. Ginny sat on the bottom step of the short flight leading to the south entrance, and enjoyed playing with the younger cats, swishing a long stem of grass or a twig back and forth for them to attack, while the older cats meowed more sedately at each other. She sometimes imagined the cats were having meetings, and wondered what they talked about. Maybe some day she'd get up the nerve to ask Professor McGonagall, since she'd seen the grey tabby with the distinctive markings joining the other cats on several occasions the previous year.

But Ginny's mornings were no longer private to her and the cats. A long two-legged shadow fell across the closely cropped grass, as a young man faced the sun rising over the Forbidden Forest and spread his arms wide in what appeared to be a greeting, chanting softly in an unknown tongue. Then he pulled a small pouch from inside his shirt and took a pinch of some kind of powder from inside it. He let the powder fall from his fingers, sprinkling it in the morning breeze. Then he bent to touch the ground with his fingers. His ritual done, he picked up the book bag lying near him on the ground, and turned to re-enter the castle. Only then did he become aware of his audience.

"Good morning!" said Ginny, waving as he approached the steps. "I don't usually see anyone else up this early."

"Good morning," responded the older boy. As he approached and was no longer silhouetted against the sun, Ginny could see that her morning companion was Cheveyo, one of the exchange students. They had been introduced when the American students first arrived, but hadn't had a chance to speak much. The Indian boy wore his black hair short and sort of spiky on top, and was dressed in blue jeans and a red t-shirt. There was a leather pouch, decorated with a beaded design, hanging from a thong around his neck, and his fingertips were stained yellow. "At home I rise to greet the sun each day. It's a little harder here. They put the rooms down in the basement for some reason and I missed the dawn for the last two days. I had to charm an alarm clock to wake me before sunrise."

"I hope you don't mind that I was watching when you did ... whatever it was you did."

"I've gotten used to it at school. There are a lot more people there than at home. Then again, many of them are doing the same thing. Greeting the sun is a fairly common ritual among us."

"Is it a Muggle-born thing?" she asked, curious.

His lip twisted slightly. "It's a *tribal* thing. Both Mundanes and Mageborn among us do it – those that keep to the old ways, anyway. Not everyone follows tradition."

"Oh. Well, if it bothers you, I'll find someplace else to sit in the mornings."

"Not on my account, please. I am only a guest here; it would be impolite of me to ask you to interrupt your own ritual."

"This isn't a ritual," Ginny said, as she swished a stick for the crowd of kittens that had gathered at her feet.

"It isn't? You come here often and it gives you peace; that's enough. I think the lawn is big enough for both of us," he said, gesturing at the wide expanse of grass.

"And the winter will chase us both indoors soon enough anyway. You can't do – whatever it was you were doing, when you're hip deep in snow."

"It gets that bad here? I was hoping it would be different from Minnesota." He sighed. "Where my family lives, we don't get much snow at all, and I've never really gotten used to the stuff."

They spent a companionable hour playing with the kittens and talking about the differences between Arizona, Minnesota and Scotland, and between Quidditch and Quodpot, until it was time to go in for breakfast. Cheveyo was a fan of the Tuba City Thunderbirds, an all-Indian Quodpot team that consistently placed in the bottom third of the league, but he had hopes that they'd show better this season. "You sound like my brother," said Ginny, laughing. "He roots for the Chudley Cannons and swears every year they're going to make the playoffs, and every year they finish in the dungeon."

"I'm surprised Ron hasn't spoken to me since classes started," said Cheveyo. "We have several classes together. He was friendly enough on the train."

"It's probably because you were Sorted into Slytherin. Ron's kind of funny about Slytherins in general. He'll come around eventually," assured Ginny. *And if he doesn't, I'll wallop him one*, she promised herself. Cheveyo seemed quite nice. "So how are you getting along down in the dungeons anyway?"

Cheveyo shrugged. "I don't think they've exactly figured out how to treat me so far. Malfoy spent most of the first evening trying to interrogate me about my family lines, but gave up when we couldn't agree on terminology. The two behemoths that follow him around answer everything in monosyllables and we're not in any of the same classes. Nott keeps trying to make conversation about curry. He obviously thinks I'm the other kind of Indian, but at least he's being polite. That's better than the seniors, anyway. That Pucey fellow called me a half-breed."

Ginny gasped. "Half-breed? Or half-*blood*?"

"Does it matter? It's an insult either way. He had to have half his teeth replaced when I got done with him. I gather he's not well-liked. Malfoy said that was already his fourth set. Then the next night he woke up to find I'd left a feather token on his pillow, and now he's afraid to look at me. I don't know whether it's because he's afraid I'll curse him, or because I was able to get past his warding spells and sneak into his dorm in the middle of the night. I don't particularly care, as long as he keeps his mouth shut."

By this time, they had made it around to the entry hall that connected to the Great Hall. It was crowded with students, all of whom were trying to get in to breakfast first. "Ginny! *Ginny!*" Hermione called, squeezing through the mob. Ron followed behind her. Hermione waved her brown-covered book excitedly. The letters spelling out "Messages To Hermione" were flashing gold on the cover. "He wrote! He wrote! Do you have yours?" Ginny squealed and dove into her book bag. "No, no! Not here! In the Great Hall!"

Pushing and jostling, they made it into the Hall, and Ginny realized that Cheveyo was shielding her from the worst of it the same way Ron was shielding Hermione. They made it all the way to the Gryffindor table before Ron realized the Slytherin was with them. "Hey! What's he doing here?" he said indignantly.

"Keeping your sister from getting squashed," replied the dark-skinned boy coolly. "And now I'll take my leave. Ginny, perhaps we'll meet again some morning soon?"

"I'll look forward to it," she replied with a smile. With a grin and a wave, Cheveyo disappeared into the crowd again, this time to fight his way toward the Slytherin table.

"What do you mean, you'll look forward to it?"

"I said I'll look forward to it. He's very nice."

"*Nice*?! He's a Slytherin!"

"Ronald Weasley! Stop being such a prat! You thought he was a good fellow yourself when you first met him!" Hermione interjected.

"That was before he was a Slytherin!"

"But nothing's really changed about him. You only don't like him because he's got a green badge now," put in Ginny. "And look, he's getting just as much trouble for associating with us. He told me he already had to punch Pucey once. He may have to again."

Ron and Hermione looked over to the Slytherin table, where Pucey and Cheveyo were nose-to-nose glaring at each other until Malfoy and a Slytherin seventh-year whose name they did not know broke the two up. Cheveyo sat down next to Malfoy, while Pucey made a dramatic show of leaving the Great Hall rather than eat with the American boy.

Ron grumbled as he allowed Hermione and Ginny to talk him down from his rant, then when breakfast appeared on the table, he seemed to forget all about it. Hermione put her brown message book next to her plate. "Now, shall we see what Harry wrote?" Ron pulled his own out of his bag, the gold "Messages To Ron" legend flashing.

Ginny's bright pink book attracted more attention; Parvati was sitting next to her and grabbed her hand so she could see the title better.

"Messages To My Love"? Oooh, I guess we just found out who Harry's sweet on!" Despite Ginny's blushes and protestations that her book was only that way because it was an afterthought, Parvati refused to believe it. By the end of breakfast, the new titbit of gossip was all up and down the Gryffindor table, and by lunch, Ginny knew, it would be all over the school.

The three read their letters eagerly; the letters they had written to Harry were probably the longest they had ever written before, and they found that his was just as long and chatty. All three of them found their neighbours at table leaning over to try to get glimpses of their letters. "Hey, gerroff!" said Ron, elbowing away a fifth-year boy on his left who was becoming excessively chummy. "We'll read some of it in the common room tonight, okay? None of the personal bits, mind you." The fifth-year complained that if they hadn't wanted people to see, they shouldn't have brought the books down, but moved away so that Ron could eat in peace. The three swapped their books around so they could see each of the postscripts, but there was neither time nor privacy to discuss anything right now.



They compared schedules, but during the one period that Hermione and Ginny were free, Ron had an appointment with Professor McGonagall. "The first week? What did you do?" asked Ginny in surprise.

"I didn't *do* anything that I know of," said Ron grumpily. "She said she had some things she wanted to talk to me about before things really got started for the year. Dunno what it's about, really. I'll be able to tell you later, I guess. We could meet in that half-hour break before dinner."

"Myrtle's bathroom?" suggested Hermione.

"Do we have to? That place is really creepy," Ron complained.

"It's still one of the only places in the school to get privacy," said Hermione sensibly. "Unless it bothers Ginny," she said, suddenly realizing that the younger girl might have problems with a place so closely connected with the difficulties of her first year.

"I don't really remember it all that clearly," said the redheaded girl. "Let's meet there and if it bothers me we can go somewhere else, okay?"

"Good. Ron, you're going to be late for Potions if you don't leave now. It may be General Potions, but Snape probably isn't going to be any nicer than he is for the Advanced."

Rolling his eyes, Ron joined the crowd leaving the Hall for their first classes.

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Ron straightened his robes nervously as he waited for the exact moment of his appointment with Professor McGonagall. It was the first personal meeting he'd had with the stern Transfiguration professor, aside from the career counselling meeting, which didn't count since everybody had one in fifth year. With a touch of trepidation, he knocked on the oaken door. For one brief second he hoped that she might not be there, but then the door opened and she welcomed him in.

"Thank you for coming, Mr. Weasley. There are several things I wanted to see you about."

"Um, if it's about my grades, I can promise you I'll be doing better this year, Professor."

"No, it's not about your grades. They are adequate for a Prefect, and more than adequate for the Quidditch Captain," she said, smiling slightly as she passed the silver badge to the stunned redhead.

"Quidditch Captain? Me?" he stammered. "But I've only been on the team one year. Shouldn't it be Katie?"

"Most of the rest of the team are also short-timers. Miss Bell is the only player who is senior to you, and she didn't want to be Captain this year because of N.E.W.T.s. She isn't dropping the team, mind you, but she didn't feel that she could dedicate herself to being Captain and maintaining her study load. She spoke highly of your Quidditch knowledge, however, and believes that now you are past the initial nervousness of being on the team, you will do well. You should speak to Madam Hooch about arranging tryout and practice times as soon as possible, of course. I've grown accustomed to having that Cup in my office, Mr. Weasley. Do try not to disappoint me."

"I'll do my best, Professor."

"That is all I can ask. Now, about your Prefect duties, I feel it is only fair to warn you that you are being placed on probation there. Not because of your grades, but because of the way you performed – or rather, didn't perform – your duties last year. You displayed a notable tendency to shrink from disciplinary matters and delegated most of those to Ms. Granger. Now that the possibility of having to discipline your older brothers is past – and yes, I know that was a large part of the difficulty – I trust that you will be able to shoulder your share of the responsibilities. Being a Prefect is a leadership position, and the privileges granted to Prefects must be balanced by actions performed. This is especially important in this time of crisis. If there is an emergency, the students will look to their Prefects for direction and for aid, and you must be ready to take charge if the Professors are busy elsewhere. Are you prepared to do that?"

Ron gulped and nodded. If his mother heard he lost his Prefect badge, he could expect Howlers every morning for a week, and he would do almost anything – including honest work – to avoid that.

"Good. I realize that due to the strains of last year's events, I was not able to give you as much supervision as I should have. This year that shall be rectified, as I will be holding weekly meetings with all six Prefects of my House in order to organize routine duties as well as emergency procedures. There will also be monthly meetings with the Prefects of all the other Houses to deal with inter-House matters."

Ron began to think he might actually be grateful to Hermione for insisting that he get, and use, a schedule book this year.

"And finally, Mr. Weasley, I was wondering ... would you care to join me in a game of chess?"

"What?" he croaked.

"Chess. I'm assured you've heard of the game before. Indeed, your reputation is such that I believe you're one of the few people in this school who can give me a good game."

"You play?"

"Really, Mr. Weasley. Who do you think set up the game you played first year? That was my chess set you played then. Literally, since I simply enlarged my personal set. It's learned how to challenge me when playing solitaire over the years, and to my knowledge at that time there was only

one other person in the school who could have passed it – and it wasn't Professor Quirrell. You were a welcome surprise, and I find I'd like to play you again."

The Professor rose from behind her desk and stepped over to a small table with two chairs flanking it, and a chess set ready to play on the top. In Ron's agitation about the meeting, he hadn't even noticed it when he entered the office. Now he changed chairs gratefully. He felt much more confident when there was a chess set involved.

"Since you are my guest, you may take white," said McGonagall. Ron poked at one of the pawns and was surprised when all it did was fall over. "This is a Muggle chess set, Mr. Weasley. It will be a more competitive game without the pieces suggesting tactics, don't you think?"

"Especially since the pieces are usually wrong," Ron muttered, making his first move.

"They are, aren't they?" McGonagall chuckled. "Some of them bloodthirsty, some of them timid, and all giving conflicting advice. Sometimes it's calming to just play the Muggle way." She made black's first move, and the game was joined in earnest.

Some time later, a soft chime sounded to alert the intent players that it was almost time for dinner. The rapid exchange of moves by this time had slowed down as the game advanced, and still neither player had a clear advantage.

"Let's continue this game another time, shall we?" said the Professor, conjuring a domed glass cover to protect the board. "It's almost time for dinner, and there are still a few items I want to talk to you about. Would be interested in entering the Muggle chess community? There are many more good players in the Muggle world than in ours, and I think you would benefit from it. You might even be able to get a ranking and compete in tournaments. Did you know that some Muggles can even play chess for a living?"

Ron just gaped at her; he'd never heard of such a thing.

"Indeed," she confirmed. "Some are quite famous for it. I don't know if you could reach that level, but you won't know unless you try, do you?"

"How ... how would I ..."

I participated in a chess club in Edinburgh some years ago, before I came here as a teacher, and I'm still in correspondence with friends I made then. I could introduce you to them, bring you to a few of their events, and you could see if you liked it. Perhaps you could represent the school in one of their student tournaments. I'd advise you to ask one of the Muggle-born students to bring you up to speed on basic Muggle technology, though, so you won't seem too out of place. What do you think?"

"I think ... yes! It sounds wonderful!" Ron was overwhelmed by it all.

"Excellent. I'll get a formal permission from your parents, of course, and I'll write to my friend about you. I'll let you know as soon as I hear anything. Now, one last thing and I'll let you head off to dinner. It relates specifically to my class. I know you're not an unintelligent boy, nor untalented, and yet I've been watching you struggle with Transfiguration for five years now. You did manage to earn an E on your OWL, although I suspect that was mainly due to Miss Granger's influence in forcing you to study, am I correct?"

Ron nodded, slightly shamefacedly.

"Do you have any idea why you find this subject so difficult?"

"Well, it's just ... it's all the steps and levels and correspondences and things that you have to remember. Some of them just don't seem to make sense, and I can't keep them all straight in my head. Hermione can, and she can get them to stick with me just long enough, but when she's not around I get all confused again."

McGonagall cocked her head and steepled her fingers. "Perhaps you should try looking at Transfiguration in a different way."

"What do you mean?"

"I teach the subject the way I do because most students can achieve at least some level of skill with it. I have always been aware, however, that others learn in different ways. Miss Granger is excellent with anything that requires rote learning, memorization, and so on, but has a little difficulty with forming original concepts. Your friend Mr. Potter's father, on the other hand, couldn't remember a correspondence chart if his life depended on it, but had an intuitive grasp of transformative steps that I have rarely seen. His superlative results on practical exams got him past many a dubious grade on theory. As for you, I think handling Transfiguration as a series of chess problems may be helpful. Try thinking of the differences between the starting point and the goal point as opposing chess pieces. With every move you make from the starting point, you will change one aspect to match the goal point. The idea is to do it in the fewest number of moves possible. Do you understand?"

She watched as Ron considered it, staying silent so as not to interrupt his train of thought. Finally his eyes widened. "Yes, I think it does work. If I just ... and then ..."

His hand started twitching in a way that resembled making chess moves in the air.

"Let us see, then." McGonagall took a small stuffed animal off a shelf where it was tucked in between two books. It was a simple dog shape, made of blue and white checked fabric with shoebottom eyes. "Gingham dog to calico cat, Mr. Weasley."

Ron drew his wand and looked uncertainly at the toy for a moment, then started drawing the tip of the wand through a jerky movement that didn't resemble any of the standard wand movements at all. With each jerk, the dog changed, first changing color, then pattern, the smooth cotton changing to a shaggier furry fabric, then losing dog characteristics and becoming more catlike, then with the final step, changing from a stuffed cat to a living one.

"That is quite a spectacular morph change, Mr. Weasley. Every step was complete and correct." The cat looked up at her and barked rather

sharply. "Well, perhaps there are a few steps yet to include. But all the rest will be practice, and I believe eventually you will be able to do it fast enough that the intervening stages aren't visible." With a flourish of her own wand, she reverted the cat one step, back to being a toy, and handed it to Ron. "Over the weekend, I want you to practice with the dog-to-cat sequence. Stuffed toy dog to living cat, both ways, find the minimum number of changes and be prepared to demonstrate to the class. This supersedes the homework I gave yesterday."

"You mean I don't have to do that essay?" His eyes lit up.

"I believe this work will be more beneficial to you in the long run. Don't worry, there will be essays enough in the future. Now if you would care to walk with me to the Great Hall, dinner awaits." Ron walked along at Professor McGonagall's side. He'd wound up missing talking to Hermione and Ginny after all, but – clutching the stuffed cat – he thought it would be worth it.

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To say that Severus Snape was not happy was, perhaps, the understatement of the year. For years now, he had been grooming his Slytherins to dominate in Potions classes. He'd given them encouragement, advance warning of test material, even private tutoring, in some cases for years, and what did he have to show for it? This particular Friday, it meant he had a sixth-year class that was larger than ever before, but only had one Slytherin in it. He hadn't expected Crabbe, Goyle, or Parkinson to make it into the Advanced class, not by any stretch of the imagination. Teaching those three had been as painful as teaching Longbottom; perhaps more so since he hadn't been able to yell at them as they deserved. But the OWLs for this group had surprised him. Zabini, Greengrass, and Davis – the students to whom he had devoted the least attention – had all earned O's, but then Zabini and Greengrass had promptly run off to America on this stupid plan of the Headmaster's to coddle Potter by providing him with the equivalent of the Grand Tour. Bulstrode and Nott had pulled A's and were now taking the General Potions course, with its much less demanding curriculum. But Malfoy, his star pupil, had disappointed him terribly by testing only at the E level – and a low E, at that. He had been prepared for the Headmaster to ask him for the favour of placing Potter in the Advanced class, in return for which favour he would have placed Malfoy there as well, but then the Potter brat had the gall to receive an O and earn his way in fairly - how that happened, he had no idea – and then added insult to injury by going away for a year. So Malfoy was now also labouring in the Gulag of the General Potions class, much to his chagrin. The one American student who had been Sorted into Slytherin had opted not to take Advanced Potions, although he was qualified, deciding to take an Introductory Healing Techniques seminar Madam Pomfrey was offering instead. The net result was that Tracey Davis, a perfectly unexceptional girl of perfectly unexceptional background, was the sole Slytherin in the sixth-year Advanced class.

Countering this was the usual gaggle of Ravenclaws, enhanced by the Americans sorted into that House, a couple of Hufflepuffs, and no less than *five* Gryffindors! Granger he'd resigned himself to, and Potter was off on his little holiday trip, but somehow Dean Thomas had turned up on the list of students earning an O on his OWLs. This was completely unexpected, but Snape could see in retrospect that he had spent so much time trying to rein in Granger and keep the Terrible Trio of Longbottom, Potter and Weasley from destroying the classroom that he'd never even noticed the Thomas boy working quietly away at one of the back tables, getting decent test grades and turning in excellent potions. In addition, he had all three of the Gryffindor exchange students.

There must be gods somewhere, and they must hate him. That was the only explanation.

He was not, however, going to let this little setback throw him off his stride, and so he swept into the classroom with his usual style and glared at the assembled students. His Hogwarts students seemed suitably cowed; the rest – well, the rest would learn. As expected, everyone had clumped together in groups by House, resulting in Miss Davis standing alone at a work table at the far right of the room. "I want everyone to choose a lab partner for the rest of the year. I don't want anyone working with someone from your own House, and I want each American student to have a Hogwarts partner." There was a bit of disorder as people scrambled about to try to pair up in appropriate combinations while he looked on impatiently, but soon enough they got straightened out. There was one group of three, and somehow Davis had become partnered with Granger while he wasn't looking. He couldn't think of a reason to break that pairing up, so let it stand. If anything, it would guarantee Davis a passing grade. He couldn't figure out why Granger looked so smug, though. It was almost like he'd played into her hand, and that made him exceedingly uneasy.

He dismissed the feeling, and moved on to the next step in his routine. It was Snape's custom to start the first sixth-year class by asking each student questions which could be expected to appear on the N.E.W.T. exams, intended to demonstrate how much they still had to learn. Some students got them, but most didn't; in either case, it tended to put them on their toes for the first few lessons. This worked quite well, as usual – until he hit the Americans. "Miss Pereira – what would I get if I added asphodel to a tincture of wormwood?"

The olive-skinned girl didn't even hesitate. "Assuming you were using a silver cauldron, you would have the second stage additive to the Draught of Living Death. Any other kind of cauldron and you've got a Mundane intoxicant with long-term neurotoxic qualities. Sir."

Snape blinked. "Very good, Miss Pereira. Miss Johanson, what is the difference between aconite and wolfsbane?"

"They are both the same plant, sir, also known as monk's hood, genus *aconitum*, species *napellus*, and the active element for the Wolfsbane potion."

"Miss Mayeux, where would I look to find a bezoar?"

"In that cabinet, third shelf, on the left in the wicker basket," said the black girl, pointing at the smaller of the supply cabinets.

"I meant in its *natural* state, Miss Mayeux," Snape said with gritted teeth.

"You should have said so," the girl responded with the same slightly absent tone that the Lovegood girl used when she was at her most aggravating. "You'd find it in the stomach of an ibex or goat, of course. Or in the stomach of a sheep, but the quality isn't nearly as good."

Snape was fairly sure Rob Watson was Muggle-born, so didn't expect him to be able to get the next question. "Mr. Watson, during what phase of the moon should knotweed be picked for use in the Polyjuice potion?" He could see Granger's eyes widen as she realized the trick in the question,

but she managed to refrain from trying to volunteer the answer.

Watson was leaning back in his chair casually. "You'd pick it during the full ... no, wait a minute, you don't use knotweed in Polyjuice. You use fluxweed, picked during the full moon."

He'd been putting off the second American boy as long as possible, as he was unsure of the pronunciation of the alien name. "Mister ... Eng ... Enguyen," he said, pronouncing it as spelled on the roll sheet, "Why are most healing potions brewed from a flobberworm base?"

The boy seemed almost bored as he answered. "Healing potions for internal use require a neutral protein to bind the active substance to the patient's cellular structure, and flobberworm protein is the only one that has not been shown to promote anaphylaxis in any known individual. And my surname is pronounced 'When', sir," he added helpfully.

"If it's pronounced 'When', why don't they spell it 'When'?" muttered Snape irritably as he made a note on his list.

"My grandda said that English spellings of foreign words were a plot to get people to give them up," said Allysia Kirkland. "Given how my great-grandma Siobhan's name was spelled, I think he's probably right."

"I am not interested in your grandda's linguistic theories, Miss Kirkland!" Snape snapped.

"I'm sorry, it was my turn and I thought that was my question."

"It was most certainly not your question. However, given your interest in translations, Miss Kirkland, would you care to translate Mr. Nguyen's answer into plain English for us?"

"Sure. Nobody's allergic to flobberworms, so everybody can use a flobberworm potion."

Taylor glanced at her with what seemed to be mild reproach. He had answered the question quite precisely, he thought.

"Of course. Thank you. I brought up the subject of flobberworms because we will be spending the next several weeks learning how to brew various healing potions, and will require large quantities of flobberworm base. Rather than waste time brewing it fresh each week, each of you will make one large cauldron of it now, and we will preserve it to be used in smaller quantities in coming weeks." With a flick of his wand, the directions appeared on the board, and two large crates of live, exceedingly healthy flobberworms appeared at the front of the room. They were, in fact, the same flobberworms that the previous year's third-year students had spent several months nurturing to full size.

Sally-Anne Perks, one of the Hufflepuff students, blanched. "Those are *live* flobberworms, sir."

"Yes, Miss Perks, they are. The fresher the better with flobberworms, and you don't get much fresher than this." He picked up a wriggling worm. "Many potions ingredients come from animals, Miss Perks, and you can't always count on being able to use powdered parts that won't offend your delicate sensibilities. You will need to be able to kill and prepare them properly yourself. If you can't do that, perhaps you should rethink your class selections." With a practised pinching movement, he removed the head of the flobberworm with his fingers and flicked it to land on the worktable in front of Miss Perks, who flinched away from it. He tossed the flobberworm's body to land next to Miss Davis's cauldron. "You'll need at least ten flobberworms apiece. Proceed."

Snape always found it useful to observe sixth-year students as the realities of where potions ingredients came from sank in. Until this point in the curriculum, ingredients were either in pre-processed form such as dried or powdered, or, in some cases, fresh but processed by students on detention. In sixth year he started teaching the students how to process their own ingredients. Which included killing things. He almost always lost two or three girls at this point, and this year was no exception. Miss Perks managed to last through beheading three flobberworms before she turned green and fled from the classroom; he doubted she'd be back. Two of the Ravenclaws were also quite disgusted by the process. They should consider themselves lucky he hadn't started the year with dissecting something cute and fuzzy instead of the inherently unlovable flobberworms. That would come later in the term.

About half of the Hogwarts students opted for knives to behead the worms instead of using their fingers. The American students, with the exception of Kirkland and Watson, used their fingers to pinch off the heads, and it looked like they had done it before. Perhaps this lesson was taught earlier in the American curriculum? He'd have to check. Kirkland and Watson both pulled short wooden sticks out of their potions kits and systematically pithed each flobberworm before removing the heads. Then all the students set about opening the worms to remove the contents of the digestive tract – he lost one of the Ravenclaws at this point – and prepared to stew the remainder of the body.

From here on, everything progressed as expected, until it was time to put the completed cauldrons of potion base on the stasis shelf. Flobberworm base tended to degenerate rapidly, so the shelf was the best way to keep large amounts of it stable until it was needed. To his surprise, all of the Americans pulled small vials of a greyish-brown powder out of their kits and sprinkled a small amount into their cauldrons.

"What was that? I didn't tell you to add anything else!" He snatched the vial away from Pereira, who had the misfortune of being at a front-row table. He sniffed suspiciously at the powder, then shook a small bit of it out into the palm of his hand to take a closer look at it.

"It's just the standard stabilizer," said Pereira, puzzled by his actions. "Equal parts of jet and amber, reduced to fine powder."

"Standard?"

"Yes, it was discovered about five years ago, and is now standard for use with flobberworm and other animal protein potion bases in the United States. It keeps them from going bad for extended periods of time, and the ingredients are neutral so it doesn't interfere with any later steps in the brewing process."

It was written up in the American Journal of Alchemy and Thaumaturgy," put in Johanson helpfully.

"I'm sure you read that regularly," Snape sneered. He'd allowed his own subscription to lapse several years ago, preferring to follow the less experimental European journals. He returned the vial to the American girl. "Very well. Those of you who used this stabilizer, place your cauldrons on the regular storage shelf. The rest of you, put your cauldrons on the stasis shelf. We will compare results next week. For the future, however, I do not, repeat, *do not*, want any of you to add anything to potions unless I clear it first, is that understood?" On receiving their assurances, he dismissed the class.

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"Where are my slippers? They're supposed to be right *here*, and they're not!"

It was Saturday morning, and Parvati was making sure all the girls in the dorm were up, as she dangled off the edge of her bed to search beneath it for something that was obviously not where she wanted it to be.

"Where did you see them last?" asked Hermione with a yawn.

"I was wearing them in the Common Room last night."

"Somebody miss Last Call?" asked Allysia, poking her head out from between the curtains of what had been Lavender's bed.

"I think you left them under the sofa down there," said Maria, giving up on the effort to stay asleep.

"The house elves are supposed to bring things like that up," whined Parvati.

"I'll go get them for you," said Hermione, more to shut Parvati up than anything else, and she opened the door to the stairwell.

"Hey, Hermione, forget you're a Mage?" Allysia called, and flourished her wand in the general direction of the door. "*Accio* Parvati's slippers!" Despite the difference in pronunciation – the Americans pronounced the Summoning Charm 'ack-see-oh' instead of 'ah-shee-oh' – a pair of fuzzy slippers obligingly flew into the room to land on Allysia's bed, and she tossed them casually to Parvati.

"Thank you!" Parvati chirped, putting on her slippers and bathrobe before heading out to the girls' showers.

A short time later, Allysia found Hermione in the Common Room, looking for her own favourite quill. "Definitely no Last Call. *Accio* – "

"I'll do it myself," snapped Hermione. "*Accio* quill." The missing item flew out of the crack between cushions in the sofa. "What's this Last Call, anyway?"

"We don't have house elves to straighten things up, so last thing in the evening, somebody does a spell which returns everybody's items that they didn't put away properly. Mostly the older students take turns doing it. It teaches the younger students to clean up after themselves."

"By returning their stuff? Seems to me like they'd come to depend on it."

"Well, not when it dumps your missing shoes, books, crumpled bits of notepaper, and candy wrappers into the middle of your bed. It doesn't take too long to learn to pick things up, usually." She waved at the mess that was the Common Room after only one week. "Looks like your house elves may need a little help here. You're a Prefect – why don't I teach you the spell and then you can teach the other Prefects and take turns with it until everybody gets the idea?"

"That sounds great, I'd appreciate it," said Hermione. Judging from the shape of the Common Room, the house elves needed all the help they could get.

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On Monday morning, when the post was delivered, a seriously overburdened owl flew laboriously into the Great Hall. Ginny nudged Ron, drawing his attention to it. "Looks like somebody didn't pay enough for postage. Wonder whose it is ... whoops, there it goes!" Package and owl parted company in midair, and the bundle split open on impact with the stone floor in front of the teacher's table. A number of purple-and-green covered journals bearing the initials AJAT spilled out. Professor Snape jumped up from his seat and hurried around the end of the table to gather up the journals, while the owl swooped down at him and pecked him with annoyance. Snape ignored the angry bird and swept out of the Hall, his arms full of books. The owl flew over to his place at the table and made off with what was left of Snape's breakfast sausage, to the general laughter of the students.

## Harry Potter and the Junior Year Abroad The Potions Master and Other Terrors

Chapter Nineteen

### *The Potions Master and Other Terrors*

The one class Harry was dreading was Potions. *Five years of Snape was enough to make anyone dread it*, he thought. Thursday morning was all Potions, a lecture followed by lab work, and he bolted an early breakfast so as to make sure he was there on time, much to his roommate's amusement. Bart didn't seem to be very concerned about Potions, but then he was a Malfoy, Harry thought darkly. His parents probably read him Potions texts instead of fairy tales when he was little. The rest of the Hogwarts Team, as they had started thinking of themselves, seemed to share Harry's reservations about Potions and were also at the classroom early. Harry was moderately surprised that they were all there, since they had been broken up in other classes. The American students, with the exception of Ellen Smith and the twins, had also been assigned to this section.

Potions had its own building, somewhat away from the rest of the campus. It consisted of two wings, one built of the standard log construction, with plenty of windows to let the sun into the lecture halls, and the other of stone, with smaller windows which could be covered to prevent sunlight from getting in, where the labs were located.

"Are you as nervous about this as I am?" Justin asked Harry, sliding into a seat alongside him. "I did well enough on my O.W.L.s, but Snape always favors the Ravenclaws in class."

"I was wondering how it worked in your classes. Does he let them actually sabotage your potions?" asked Harry. Justin shook his head, wide-eyed. "Then you've probably had it better than I have. I couldn't tell you how many of my potions have wound up on the floor. I got tired of getting zeros, so I always bottle two samples, now, before I bring one up to his desk. In unbreakable bottles. Just in case."

"No, nobody ever sabotaged anything of mine. Didn't have to. Somehow I was just never able to get it quite right. I was happy to get an A on the O.W.L.s. But I hear Longbottom was the worst. Did he actually manage to explode a cauldron once?"

"More than once," Harry replied, chuckling. "If he hadn't got points docked from Gryffindor every time he did it, it would have been funny. One time he even managed to explode a cauldron full of nothing but water, can you believe it?"

"A person who does so is a person of great power and talent, but needs special training," cut in a new voice. Professor Rozendal had entered the classroom from a rear entrance and come up on them silently. "I trust this person was taken into a focused Potions study where his potential could be realized?" Hearing him speak for the first time, Harry realized the professor had a vaguely European accent, similar to Victor Krum's, but not as strong.

"Err. No, sir, I believe he was failed out."

Professor Rozendal pursed his lips. "Pity." The portly professor moved up to the lecture desk and called the roll. "Now then. Welcome to Grade 11 Potions. I am Dr. Ivo Rozendal – Herr Doktor Professor Rozendal where I was trained, you may use either Doctor or Professor, but not both. I wanted all of you together – well, except for the students who have already been in my classes for years, they're in their proper groups – so that I could focus on you and give you my fullest attention for the brief time you are here. We must make the most of it, yes? Accordingly, we will start with a quiz."

There were groans from various parts of the classroom.

"Don't worry, this will not be part of your grade. It is a necessary evaluation of your knowledge. The lab portion of the class will be a similar evaluation of your brewing technique. With these evaluations in hand, I will be able to attend to the special needs both of the class as a whole and its individual members. Now, you will notice a great many questions on this quiz," he said, passing out test booklets. "It would be advisable for you to read all the questions before beginning to answer any of them. Please be aware that I do not expect any of you to finish them all. Answers should be kept brief. Don't get so involved answering one question that you neglect the others. If you are not sure of an answer, put your best guess, and if you have no idea, skip ahead to the next question. You may begin."

*It's bezoars and wolfsbane all over again*, Harry thought. *At least this time, I have a hope of knowing some of the answers*. As advised, he read through all the test questions before he started to write anything. Some of the questions would be easy to answer but others required some thought, and some made no sense. *What is the result of combining comfrey, arnica and powdered camelian?* was an easy question, but *When mixing these ingredients in an ointment base, in which direction do you stir, howmany times, and why?* was trickier. He thought it was clockwise, but for the rest of it, it had always been "because Snape says so." He didn't think Professor Rozendal would accept that for an answer.

Sighing quietly to himself, he set to work. The first question was, *Why is the Potions building so far away from everything else?* "Because it might blow up," he wrote, and moved on.

An hour later, Professor Rozendal called time while Harry was pondering the question, *Why do Potions Masters move silently?* He didn't think "so they can sneak up on their students and scare them into dropping things into their cauldrons" would be a good thing to write down. Neither would "so they can spy on evil Dark Lords." And "because they are vampires" was right out.

"You may take a ten-minute break," said the teacher. "Then we shall gather in Lab Three." He gathered up the test booklets and left. Moving silently.

"Thank Merlin for these pens," said Blaise, putting down his ballpoint pen and trying to wring the cramp out of his hands. "I can't imagine writing that fast with a quill. What did you make of that test, Harry? I thought it was pretty easy, but there was a lot of it."

"Easy?" cut in Justin. "That was murder! How should we know why curative potions are stirred anti-clockwise?"

Blaise goggled at him. "But that's simple! It's because you're banishing the illness, and you always stir widdershins for banishing. Everyone knows that."

"Well, I didn't," said Justin. "So I got that one wrong. What did you make of the last one, though?" he asked with a grin.

"That one made no sense at all," Blaise complained. "*What is the answer to life, the universe, and everything?*"

Blaise and Harry both jumped when Justin, Lavender, Michael, Bart and Anna all shouted in unison, "Forty-two!" and then started laughing.

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?" asked Blaise.

"It means the BBC has it all over the WWN," said Justin, smugly. "And it would probably take the rest of the year to explain it properly. Let's go find Lab Three."

Professor Rozendal was already there when the students trooped in noisily. He directed each one to take a stone-topped lab table, each with two flame rings, small cauldrons and cutting and mixing surfaces. "Ordinarily I would have you work in pairs, but since today's purpose is to see what you are capable of individually, you will work alone. Please don't speak to or assist any of the other students, but if you have a question, come to me, or check the reference books in the cases to your right. You will observe that you have two cauldrons at your table. You will be making two fairly simple potions today, and you should be able to complete both in two hours. Ingredients are in the cabinets at the back of the room and directions are on the board – so." He waved his wand at the white board at the head of the room and it filled with precise writing, showing the recipes for a calming draught and a burn salve. "You may begin."

The first step was, of course, accurately copying the recipes and instructions into their journals. Reviewing the brewing times, Harry realized that if he did them in sequence, there wouldn't be enough time to do them both. He juggled the steps in his head, and then figured out that if he treated it like cooking a meal, something he had plenty of experience with, it could be done. He could start one, get it brewing, start the second, go back to the first, and so on. Both of them should be finished about the same time. *It's ironic that I can thank Aunt Petunia for a good Potions grade.* He scribbled out the order of the things he'd have to do in order to make it work out, then took his list of ingredients to the supply cabinets.

That was when he ran into the next hurdle. The list of ingredients for the burn salve included Chinese pistachio, but it didn't say what part of the plant to use. There were three containers, one of dried leaf, one of shelled nuts, and one of powdered bark. *Okay, think. You can do this.* Whatever part of the plant was used was to be ground into a paste and mixed with several oils to form a paste. Nuts had fats and oils in them, that he knew. So they'd probably mix with the oils well. He scooped out a healthy amount of the nuts, glanced sideways to where Daphne was measuring out powdered bark, and hoped he'd guessed right. She was obviously hoping the same thing. To his left, Lavender was looking dubiously at the container of dried leaves and trying to make up her mind.

Harry took his loot back to his table, then went back for a second supply run for the things needed in the calming draught. *Hops, passionflower, skullcap, anise, valerian root ...* he was holding his nose against the rancid sweat-sock odor of the valerian when it hit him where he'd seen this formulation before. It was on the back of a very suspicious pill bottle. This wasn't just a calming draught. He checked the rest of the ingredient list. *Ayahuasca? What the heck is that?* The recipe only called for a little, but he had not the foggiest idea what it was. He picked up the little jar of powder and noticed the bright red edge on the label. There was very tiny lettering under the name on the lettering; Harry had to take his glasses off and hold the label practically up to his nose in order to read it. *Psychotropic, hallucinogenic ... increases suggestibility ...* In shock, he looked back towards Professor Rozendal and noticed that the man was now leaning over Harry's desk looking at his preparation notes. As if he sensed Harry's gaze, the professor glanced up over the top of his reading glasses. His expression was inscrutable.

Harry whirled back to face the little bowls of herbs he'd measured out, breathing fast. He still had the ayahuasca jar in his hand, and carefully replaced it on the shelf. *This must be part of the test. Figure out what really isn't needed in the recipe. Okay, assuming this is really supposed to be a calming draught, how do I make it weak enough?* Carefully, he put back about half of each herb, and replaced the valerian entirely, substituting an equal part of chamomile. His new version should do the job of calming, and it wouldn't taste vile, either. He selected an extremely pink rose quartz stone from a bin of tumbled stones, and returned to his table. Vijay Kumar was consulting with the professor about something, and most of the other students were still busy with the supplies, but Bart Malfoy was checking something in one of the reference books, frowning and chewing on his lower lip. *I bet he's not happy with the ayahuasca either,* Harry thought, and then he got down to work.

Without the need to keep an eye out for Professor Snape, Malfoy, or Neville, Harry was able to concentrate on getting his ingredients prepared. Soon the cauldron with the ointment base was warming as he bruised the fresh herbs, being sure to catch the juice from the rhubarb and the gardenia petals. As he added the herbs one by one, the ointment changed from a translucent white to a rather violent red shade. Leaving that to brew, he put the rose quartz in the bottom of a cauldron of fresh water and brought it to a boil while he prepared the herbs for the calming draught, making notes on the revised potion as well as what he thought the unrevised version would actually do. Working this way was a lot easier, he realized, and wondered if there was a way to do Potions as an independent study.

The addition of beeswax to the ointment base made the orange shade he was used to, and he carefully poured it into clean tins and labeled it, putting his initials and the date on it. Then he bottled up the calming draught, which was a soothing pink, the same color as the quartz he'd used. At the next table, Bart was bottling up his potion, which was a clear green.

"You left out the ayahuasca too?" Bart asked.

"I looked at the warning label. That didn't belong in a calming potion. What stone did you use?" Harry asked curiously.

"Aventurine. You used rose quartz?"

Harry nodded.

"That works, too. Slightly different resonances, but ... oh, you used chamomile instead of valerian, right? That explains it, then."

Harry looked around at the other tables. Blaise and Daphne were glumly bottling up supposed "calming draughts" which were pitch black. Vijay was comparing his deep blue draught against Meg's opalescent white one – the two were schoolmates and obviously used to checking against each other. Lavender's healing salve was pale peach instead of orange, and Mandy apparently hadn't checked the brewing times and had done her potions sequentially, with the result that her burn salve was done but she was only half way through with the calming draught. Panicking, she was making a classic first-year mistake in superheating the water in the hope that it would brew faster.

Professor Rozendal had noticed Mandy's difficulty as well, and was making his way rapidly towards her. "Miss Brocklehurst, stop what you are doing immed..." As Harry watched in horror, she touched the surface of the water with the tip of her wand and the brew flashed to steam and went up. Hot liquid splashed everywhere and Mandy screamed and clutched her hand. Professor Rozendal grabbed her by the arms and hustled her over to a sink, where he ran cold water over her hand and forearm. "Ah, that's not too bad. And fortunately we have plenty of burn salve. Let's put a little salve on the worst of it, and Miss Gillespie, would you take Miss Brocklehurst over to the infirmary, please? It's the building with the large red cross on the Flash map. Thank you. And Mr. Corner, would you bottle up whatever is left in the bottom of Miss Brocklehurst's cauldron? Very good."

While Anna led Mandy from the room and the rest of the students finished bottling their potions and cleaned up their work stations, Professor Rozendal evaluated the products. "Now, then. I have finished checking your test papers and observed your independent work. You all noted that there were deliberate errors in the recipes I provided. I will try to avoid such things in the future, but as you are aware, many of the older sources fail to give correct names and proportions, so we must sometimes make the educated guess, yes? The burn salve was a simple problem. The recipe did not state which of several forms of a crucial plant material to use. In fact, all were correct. However, the leaf was the least potent part of the plant, which is why Miss Brown's salve was weaker than the others. She should have increased the amount of leaf she used in order to achieve the desired result. Those of you who used the bark will have noted a more mottled effect to the ointment once set, but that is a purely cosmetic difference. The bark of the plant being equivalent to the skin of the human, the correspondences are right and the salve will work properly. And for those of you who used the nut, you ground it fine and mixed it into the oily base; these will be the strongest of the salves. Mr. Potter, I noticed you carefully picking through your nuts before you ground them. What were you looking for?"

"The plumpest ones, sir. I didn't think a shriveled nut would have the same amount of oil."

"Of course, that is correct. May I ask what you did with the extra nuts?"

"I, um. I ate them. I didn't think they'd be usable for anything else."

"Waste not, want not, Mr. Potter? I trust you'll not use that method of disposing of other unwanted ingredients?" Professor Rozendal's small smile removed any possible sting from his words, even as some of the girls giggled.

"Only the tasty ones, sir," replied Harry, blushing.

"The calming draught was, of course, a much more complex problem. The proportions given produced something much stronger than was desired, and the addition of an unfamiliar ingredient produced something completely different from the desired result. Half of you worked from the stated recipe and produced completely successful potions," he said, gesturing at the row of black bottles, "but they are not calming draught. What we have here is something that will stimulate visions – true ones – while keeping the body in a sleeping state so that the vision will not be interrupted. Those of you who are taking Mr. TwoBears' Vision Quest program will become quite familiar with this potion." Harry swallowed nervously at that.

"The rest of you left out the hallucinogen. Some of you further modified the brew, resulting in draughts with a range of efficacies, from one that will keep someone asleep for twelve hours," Professor Rozendal said, displaying a bottle of Vijay's blue potion, "to ones that leave someone calm and functional, although with slightly different emotional loads," he finished, showing Harry and Meg's. "The only non-functional potion was Miss Brocklehurst's, and that was solely because of the superheating."

"Between observation and your test answers, I have noted some interesting patterns here. I already knew that Mr. Kumar and Miss Ogunfowara are from different cultural backgrounds. Miss Ogunfowara is used to an entirely different style of potion brewing, am I correct? Your technique is sound, but you are less than familiar with the ingredients, and this results in an inability to make changes on the fly – though I believe you would be able to do so given base materials from your own culture's pharmacopeia. On the other hand, you did recognize the ayahuasca and left it out of your draught. May I ask why?"

"I recognize the smell. It is bitter like poison, dark like nightmares. It does not belong in calming potion."

"Quite right. The bitterness is a common trait of alkaloids, and the darkness is the drug's magical signature. Mr. Kumar appears to be more familiar with the standard Eurasian ingredients, though you would prefer Vedic proportioning, am I correct?" Vijay nodded without comment. "As for you British students, all of you show good knowledge of materials. However, of the eight of you, six did not question the bogus calming draught



recipe and prepared it as written. Of the six psychoactive potions, one was ruined by Miss Brocklehurst's incident with the cauldron. The two of you who did successfully modify the potion, however, are also the ones who showed the poorest knowledge of fundamental theory and technique, which I find quite puzzling. Some of your answers were quite entertaining, but theoretically you two should have been least able to modify the potion. Mr. Finch-Fletchley and Mr. Potter, what can you tell me that might explain this?"

Justin and Harry exchanged uncertain glances. There was really only one thing the two of them had in common. "It might be that neither of us had any exposure to the magical community when we were growing up," said Harry. "Justin's Mu- I mean, he's a Natural Mage, and I might as well be. My guardians hated magic and didn't even tell me I was a wizard until my Hogwarts letter came, when I was eleven."

Bart muttered "Fundies" under his breath, and Harry thought he saw a touch of pity run across his face.

"Anyway, we've only really started to realize how much we don't know and haven't been taught, simply because it's second nature to everyone else. So that's why our technique might be bad. For the rest," Harry said, shrugging, "Our Potions Professor discourages questions. If he tells you to do something a certain way, that's the way it's done. Nobody dares modify anything. But coming from one world into another, I learned a long time ago not to take things at face value, or else you get pranked. I'd say Justin learned the same."

"So. This is good, very good," said Rozendal. "Basic information, technique, this can be taught. If you had come to me when you were eleven, all this would have been fixed then. But late is better than never. I will work on this intensively with you, and the teachers in the other schools you will visit will be informed of the situation. What they do about it, of course, is up to them. You do know how to think for yourselves, and that is most important. I am more concerned about the other six of you. Honestly, how many of you knew or guessed that that was not a standard calmative?" Four hands hesitantly went up. Only Lavender had not had doubts about the recipe, but Potions had never been her best subject anyway. "Did it occur to any of you to modify it? Or to ask me about it? The worst part of it," said Professor Rozendal, picking up one of the bottles, "is that three of the four of you simply labeled it 'Calming Draught.' At least one of you had the sense to put a question mark on it, indicating that there might be some doubt about it. Had this potion actually been given to a person in need of a calmative agent, severe damage could have been done to the patient's psyche before it could be counteracted. You could drive someone insane with this. And the responsibility for such damage would be solely on your head." He put the bottle down with a distinct 'click' against the stone tabletop, and Blaise winced. Professor Rozendal was lecturing much more sternly now. "Whenever you make something, you must be sure that it is what it says it is. Check your references. If you see something unfamiliar, look it up. If there's something that looks like a mistake in a recipe I give you, ask me about it. Potions Masters are human, too. Sometimes we make copying mistakes. The older the recipe, the more likely it is to contain errors. So you cannot follow along blindly, preparing potions by rote. The six of you also did not make guesses on your test papers. Either you knew or you didn't. You didn't try to figure out what you did not know. Even though some of your Mundane-raised classmates' answers were wrong, at least they showed that they were trying to think their way through problems. The rest of you need to work on that."

He looked at the clock above the lab door. "I think that is more than enough for one day. Most of you have quite a lot to think about. Mr. Finch-Fletchley, Mr. Potter, if you will come to my office with me, I will provide you with books on the basic theory and technique that you seem to have missed, and we will schedule some supplemental lessons and lab work. We will be preparing a large quantity of flobberworm potion base for the next class; I want all of you to review the preparation procedures thoroughly before then and familiarize yourself with the types of potions that can be made with that base. Class dismissed."

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Friday was Mundane classes, and the students left their robes behind in favor of Muggle clothes. Blaise was obviously still uncomfortable in a T-shirt and jeans, but he'd fallen in love with "athletic shoes" – what trainers were called here – and claimed he was going to wear them even when he got back to Hogwarts. They were so much more comfortable than boots. All of the group felt a little uncomfortable without their wands, but they had decided as a group that it would be better for them to avoid temptation completely than to risk using magic out of habit in the Outer Campus. For these classes, all seventeen of them were together.

The school in the Outer Campus was a single large building with a gymnasium attached, and between classes its halls were crowded with laughing, running students, most of whom toted huge backpacks which seemed to contain every book they owned.

Their first class was English, though Daphne grumbled that they shouldn't have to take classes in a language that they already knew. They found when they arrived, though, that it wasn't a language class at all. What it turned out to be was a class in acculturation. The teacher, Marilyn Goodman, welcomed them warmly and explained that she was going to be helping them learn how to adjust to the Mundanes by showing them how the Mundanes thought of magic, as reflected in their literature. This would be done through intensive reading in the classics as well as modern science fiction and fantasy writings. There would be short works with essays assigned for each week, together with a longer report based on a single longer work, contrasting the imaginary magical system with real magic and analyzing the differences, and class discussions. Harry discovered that one of the books he had already planned to read, *Stranger in a Strange Land*, was on the list for the long report, and took that. Blaise selected *The Return of the King* and was rather disgusted to learn that that was the third book in a series and he had to read the other two as well. Justin, however, had apparently read it before and volunteered to help him with it, mainly by telling him which parts to skip.

After five years of Binns' classes, Harry thought he was well enough versed in Magical History, but soon discovered his error. The Americans put absolutely no emphasis on the Goblin Rebellions, except possibly to explain why the Goblins had been perfectly justified in rebelling. At Nokomis, they would study the development of shamanism worldwide into the various forms of sorcery that in turn became classical magic, and then look into the development of specific Native American magical forms, followed by the effects of the conflict between the Natives and European sorcery during the colonial period. That was quite a large amount of ground to cover in a period of only two months.

Chemistry was totally new to all of them, although the Americans and the Muggle-raised had a better grasp on the concepts of elements and compounds and such. The hard part was going to be getting used to the metric system, which was alien to the British students who were used to the archaic measurements used in Potions. The Americans had to shift from their own system of measurements to metric as well. Here, Harry, Justin, Michael and Lavender had the advantage, having grown up using metric measurements. The Chemistry Professor was a Mundane, but was used to dealing with Mage students and was very patient, so everything went smoothly.

Mathematics was a disaster. The teacher soon discovered that beyond basic calculation skills, absolutely no math skills had been taught at Hogwarts except to those students taking the specialized class of Arithmancy, and magical number theory bore no resemblance to algebra in any event. Before the end of the class period, the difficulty was obvious, and the teacher called in Mrs. Cobby, who regretfully split the class. The American students would be taking trigonometry, while the British students, much to their annoyance, were placed with a teacher who normally taught twelve-year-olds the basics of algebra. At least they got a separate class session; actually having to share a class with what Harry thought of as second-years would have been incredibly embarrassing.

The final class of the day was Ethics. At first, when they entered the classroom, they thought they were in the wrong room. Instead of desks and chairs, there were comfortable sofas and armchairs, along with a couple of ottomans and some large overstuffed pillows on the floor. There was a table along one side of the room with a supply of snacks and soft drinks. The teacher was Professor Rivenbank; he welcomed them all warmly and instructed them to help themselves to the snacks and sit wherever they felt comfortable, before sinking into a huge denim beanbag chair himself. The class would be mostly discussion, they found, with supplementary reading to be done during the week.

It was in the comfort of an overstuffed armchair, with a handful of chocolate-chip cookies and a glass of birch beer, that Harry received some of his greatest shocks so far.

"What do you *mean* Dark magic isn't illegal?" Blaise squeaked. He'd asked for a list of which spells were legal and which were illegal to use, and Professor Rivenbank had dropped that little bombshell.

"Well, that would require two things – a definitive description as to what is 'Dark' and a government with authority to declare things legal or illegal. Neither of those conditions apply here."

"Everybody knows what Dark magic is!" Daphne said at the same time Harry blurted, "You have no Ministry?" In that second, he decided that he wanted to move to the United States some day.

"Let's take these subjects separately," Professor Rivenbank said. "They're both complex enough that we might spend days discussing them in detail, but let's have a cursory go at them today. First let's talk about the government issue. We don't have one. At least, not one separate from the Mundanes. They have more than enough government for everybody."

"But don't you need a government?"

"Can you tell me what the purposes of a government are, so we can tell if we need one?"

"Protecting us from You-Know-Who?" volunteered Lavender immediately.

Harry snorted in response. "You mean spending a year ignoring his return in the hope he'll go away again."

"Excuse me. 'You-Know-Who'?" asked the professor.

"Voldemort. Particularly pesky Dark Lord we're dealing with right now." Harry waved his hand dismissively, even as half the Hogwarts contingent shuddered. "Makes up a scary name and then tries to make it even scarier by punishing people who say it. They've been calling him You-Know-Who and He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named and other ridiculous things for years now."

"But you don't."

"Fear of the name only increases fear of the thing itself. Besides, it isn't even his real name. His real name's Tom. Not very scary, is it?"

"I think we can work in a session on the psychology of Dark Lords a couple of weeks from now," said Professor Rivenbank, making a note in his journal. "But let's get back to something even scarier. Governments. We were listing what they're good for."

"Providing Aurors to defend us?" Mandy put in hesitantly.

"They haven't hired any new ones for four years now. Training them would take another three. A quarter of the existing force has been diverted to providing personal protection for the Minister. And given their response times, they don't show up until the action's over, or almost over, anyway." Harry was glad he'd listened to Tonks and Kingsley and Moody having bitch sessions at Grimmauld Place and at the Burrow.

"They catch criminals."

"They arrest students for using magic in self-defense."

"Sending Death Eaters to Azkaban."

"Sending innocent people to Azkaban without trial because they 'have to be seen doing something'," said Harry, making the "quotes" signal in the air with his fingers.

"I don't believe they would-" said Lavender, before Harry interrupted her.

"That was a direct quote from his Ministership himself, Ron, Professor Dumbledore and I heard him say it, and you all know the person it happened to," said Harry.

"Collecting taxes?"

And collecting bribes from Death Eaters." By now it was all of the Hogwarts students making suggestions and everybody waiting to see how Harry would respond. Professor Rivenbank smiled; the whole point of these classes was to get the students working things out for themselves, and he'd been worried that it might take some time for the British students to get into it.

"Controlling dangerous Dark creatures?"

"Making sure werewolves can't get jobs, thereby forcing them to live whatever way they can. Remember what happened to Professor Lupin?"

"How about creatures that actually attack people?"

"How about when the people provoke the creature, and then the creature is executed?"

"Protecting non-humans."

"Permitting the routine abuse of house-elves."

"Keeping us separate from the Muggles."

"Coming this close," Harry said, holding his finger and thumb almost touching, "to declaring Muggles Beasts that can be hunted."

"Protecting us from Muggle influence?" This, unbelievably, was Blaise, obviously grasping at straws.

Harry just pointed at the shoes on Blaise's feet.

"Keeping the economy going," said Michael.

"People who spend money do that; the government doesn't have anything to do with it."

"Providing us with an education?" Lavender made another try

"Come on, Lavender!" Harry replied. "You know the Ministry doesn't control Hogwarts. When they tried to take over, we got Umbridge! Not a great recommendation, you know?"

"Providing medical care!" said Justin with a little satisfaction, sure that Harry wouldn't have an answer to this.

"St. Mungo's isn't part of the NHS, Justin," Harry reminded him. "They charge fees and have to solicit donations." The other boy's face fell. He still tended to think like a Muggle sometimes.

"Public safety?"

"Regulating cauldron bottom thicknesses!" laughed Harry.

"Okay, I think we're beginning to get the picture," said Professor Rivenbank. "Harry, I gather you're not a big fan of your Ministry?"

"The Ministry's not a big fan of me; I'm just returning the favor," said Harry. "It's never done anything for me."

"However, we do have a large number of functions which have been suggested. I'm surprised nobody mentioned the post office, that's one that usually gets mentioned."

"Most of us use private owls in Britain," said Blaise.

"Ah, right. Britain is quite small compared to the U.S. Owls aren't practical for anything but local mail here. Most of what you've suggested are various services that a government would provide for its citizens, and which are paid for by the citizens through taxes. Of course, the government itself says what it's charging and what it will deign to provide – the difference being skimmed off as salaries for the ever-increasing layers of managers required."

"I'd say you're not very fond of the Ministry, either," said Harry.

"Well, no, I'm not, really," said Professor Rivenbank. "Or I wouldn't be very fond of the Ministry if we had one. Most of us came here from other countries in an effort to escape the governments thereof – and while we look at the Mundane government here as something we can't avoid, we have refrained from adding our own layer of bureaucracy to it or forcing people to pay for something they may not particularly want. Most of what you've listed as functions of a government can be handled privately anyway."

"Even Aurors?" asked Blaise with some surprise.

"We call them Justicars here, and most of them work for private security organizations. Some freelance. There are some that work best for preventing crimes – doing patrols, alarm services for homes and communities, that sort of thing – and some that are experts in forensics for tracking down perpetrators once a crime has happened."

"What about courts and prisons and things like that?"

"Any person capable of reason can act as a judge or juror. Parties to the action choose a neutral person to be the judge, and away you go. Once a verdict is made, the judge and jury decide what restitution a criminal has to make to the victim, what other penalty may be necessary, and the whole thing is enforced with Wizard's Oaths."

"What about murder?"

"We don't have many murders, actually. No Mage is ever really unarmed, and in most cases can defend themselves adequately or apparate to safety. When they do occur, we handle them on a case-by-case basis, according to the local community's standards and the circumstances of the crime. Sometimes we do have to execute a killer – it's no different than putting down a rabid dog. Sometimes the person goes to prison, and yes, we do have a prison. One. The fact that Alcatraz alone can serve this entire country says something, don't you think? And sometimes it's even agreed that the victim needed killing, and there's no punishment at all. It all depends. We don't work as fast as your Ministry does, but we also don't work as slowly as the Mundane justice system does, and we make fewer mistakes than either."

"Beyond providing services, the other purpose of a government is to tell people what they can and can't do, and to provide for enforcement and penalties. We've chosen to take another route, and don't have much by way of laws. We figure most people know what right and wrong are, and will act accordingly without someone breathing down their necks. We pretty much leave it up to the individual to behave in a rational manner and for the most part people live up to that."

"But how does that prevent Dark Lords?" asked Harry. "They're about the most irrational people going."

"True. They tend not to find much support, though. The last Dark Lord wannabe we had was, oh, about ten years ago. Fellow from Hong Kong tried to take over Chinatown in San Francisco, figuring he could move out to the rest of the West Coast from there. He lasted, oh, about a week before the locals realized he was serious and took him down. I think he killed himself rather than be sent to Alcatraz."

Now that the students were into the swing of things, Professor Rivenbank passed around a set of booklets with plain grey covers. "These booklets contain the basic rules of conduct in our society. There are only about ten of them, and then there are some short essays discussing them. I'd appreciate it if you'd read through these booklets by next week and make notes about where you have questions, and then we can start talking about them in class."

Harry opened the booklet to its first page. There was a simple list of short paragraphs, under the heading, "Precepts of the Grey Council".

- 1. Don't Mess with the Mundanes.*
- 2. You have the right to enjoy your life, body, possessions and liberty without interference.*
- 3. You have the right to defend your life, body, possessions and liberty when necessary.*
- 4. You have the right to appropriate recompense if your life, body, possessions or liberty are violated.*
- 5. You do not have the right to interfere with others' lives, bodies, possessions and liberty, and will be expected to make recompense if you do.*
- 6. You are responsible for the results of your actions. Clean up your own mess.*
- 7. Your only entitlement is to your freedom, and that must be defended. Everything else must be earned by you or given freely by others.*
- 8. If you choose to be part of a community, you should at least try to follow its standards of behavior.*
- 9. Some rules are necessary for your own safety, and parents, teachers, and other experts should be listened to unless there are specific reasons otherwise.*
- 10. Don't allow others to do your thinking for you.*

The next page started with "Don't Mess with the Mundanes", followed by a list of pithy aphorisms and then an essay on the International Secrecy Statutes and reasons why they were a good idea. Harry assumed each of the ten Precepts would be handled in similar fashion, and returned his attention to the class.

"Who are the Grey Council?" asked Daphne.

"To the extent that we have a government, that's them. The Grey Council is a group of respected advisors, judges, and teachers. The original Council formed centuries ago when it became apparent that no one group of mages in this country could dominate over the others, and that there needed to be some kind of guiding body. Today, the Council consists of over a hundred members representing many different groups in our culture. As individuals and as a group, they carry tremendous influence, and their rulings and opinions are greatly sought. For that reason, they rarely make them."

"So this Council decides what's Dark magic and what isn't?" Blaise returned to his original question.

"Okay, let's try the definitions game again. What exactly constitutes Dark Magic?"

"Using the Unforgiveable Curses."

"Using Dark spells that hurt or kill other people."

"Blood rituals."

"Necromancy."

The suggestions flew thick and fast, from both the British and the American students, and finally it devolved into a battle of opposing quotations.

"Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live," quoted Ellen Smith with a grim little smile; she was followed by Meg's "An it harm none, do what you will" and Vijay's "Stray not from the right-hand path."

Harry didn't say anything, until Professor Rivenbank turned to him. "Mr. Potter, you had quite a lot to say on the subject of the Ministry and Dark Lords. Do you have an opinion on this?"

"I've been thinking about it for a while, ever since two wizards on opposing sides both told me basically the same thing. One said, 'There is no light or dark, only power and those too weak to use it.'" Blaise and Daphne both gasped in surprise, but Harry ignored them and continued. "The other said, 'It is our choices that show what we truly are, far more than our abilities.' So ... it all comes down to intent, doesn't it? It's not the magic that's Dark or Light. It's us."

Professor Rivenbank nodded in approval. "We can compare magic itself to a natural force, like electricity. On its own, electricity does what it does. In small amounts, it keeps the body and brain going. In large amounts, lightning blows apart trees and kills people it strikes. Magic's the same way. Wild magic, uncontrolled magic, does odd things like make storms that rain fishes or cause people to step around a corner and vanish forever. Both electricity and magic, though, can be harnessed and controlled by human beings. Mundane technology uses electricity to light homes, cook food, keep people alive, and generally make life more comfortable. But it can also use electricity to torment and kill. Mages use magic to light homes, cook food, and so on, but we can also use it to torment and kill. Neither the electricity nor the magic are responsible for the uses to which they are put."

"But aren't some spells just inherently Evil?" asked Lavender, unwilling to give up. "The Unforgiveable Curses are called that for a reason."

"Are they? Okay, what are these Unforgiveable Curses?" asked Professor Rivenbank, and he wrote them down on a whiteboard as Lavender recited them. "The Killing Curse, the Cruciatus, and the Imperius. Well, you're right, they're certainly some nasty curses. But as things go, I can think of nastier ones. The Killing Curse, for example, causes a sudden but apparently painless death. There are any number of curses which cause a much longer, more painful and degrading death, and yet those are not called Unforgiveable. Personally, I'd call a curse that slowly dissolves one's innards, but leaves the nervous system intact to feel it, much more Unforgiveable. But it isn't on your short list. I wonder why?"

"Because you can stop it with the right countercurse," said Lavender, with that 'isn't it obvious?' tone. "There's no way to stop a Killing Curse."

"Ah, but it can be stopped. It can be blocked by simple physical means. Get enough mass in between you and it, and the mass will take the hit. This means a simple Transfiguration or Conjuring spell can be used as a defense, like this." Professor Rivenbank flicked his wand, and a stone wall shot up out of the floor in front of him. "You see?" He made the wall disappear again. "A Summoning Charm or Levitation to put something in between you and it works, too. You can also dodge it. Running like hell constitutes a valid defense against the majority of the single-combat spells."

"But there's no magical defense."

"There has to be one, even if we don't know what it is, because, well," Professor Rivenbank glanced apologetically over at Harry, who was attempting to sink into his armchair. "If it's happened even once, even accidentally, there has to be a way to make it happen again. And once it's found out why, the Killing Curse will lose most of its terror. As for your other Unforgiveables, the Cruciatus is supposed to cause the most pain imaginable, but it requires the constant attention of the caster to keep it up, it can be resisted, and at least in the short term, it's not permanently damaging. The Imperius is the most insidious of the three, but it's also the easiest to fight. We spoke of intent earlier. I will put it to you that there are reasons why all three of these spells, which you consider the Darkest of the Dark, could be used for purposes that are at least neutral, if not Lightside. And spells that are usually considered Light, such as, oh, a Cheering Charm, a healing spell, or even a Patronus, could be used for purposes which could be considered Dark. We're getting close to the end of the class, so I'll leave that with you for homework. For next week, I want you to list as many Lightside purposes for your supposedly Dark spells as you can, and also Dark ways to use Light spells. We'll discuss them in depth next Friday."

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On the way back to the Inner Campus, Harry listened to Lavender complain about the Ethics class. She apparently firmly believed in the Ministry and what it said about Dark spells. Finally Harry had enough.

"Lavender, do you even listen to yourself sometimes? You and Parvati are the biggest gossips at Hogwarts – do you really believe everything you pass on?"

"Well, if there wasn't some truth in things ..."

"Hello, remember the Heir of Slytherin crap you were bleating a few years ago? And all that junk last year? There wasn't a word of truth to any of it, but because people were repeating it, you assumed that it had to be true. And it made my life miserable as a result. Now you're repeating the Ministry line again, even though you know the Ministry was wrong last year and is likely wrong about a lot of other things. I hope being pretty is enough for you to get by on, because you obviously don't have a brain in your head!"

Lavender looked at him with a bright smile on her face. "You think I'm pretty?"

Dismayed that this was the only thing she'd picked up out of his whole rant, and knowing she'd now be following him around for at least a month, Harry groaned and dropped back to talk to Bart and Meg.

## Harry Potter and the Junior Year Abroad Professor TwoBears

Chapter Twenty

### *Professor TwoBears*

Harry, Blaise and Bart left breakfast early to get ready for the Vision Quest meeting on Saturday, but even so, they were not the first to get to the Student Center, which was the designated meeting area. Two boys a little younger than them, both Natives, were already there, and others joined them shortly afterward, including Justin. The group was mostly boys, but there were a couple of girls as well. To Harry's surprise, Michael Corner had signed up at the last minute, making it a clean sweep of all Hogwarts' boys, and Lavender had joined Susan in the girls' contingent. "Can't have a Hufflepuff going where a Gryffindor fears to tread," she said, winking at Harry. Harry rolled his eyes; Lavender had apparently absorbed nothing from yesterday's rant except his comment that she was pretty, and seemed to have started a campaign to become his girlfriend. He resolved to keep as many people between her and himself as possible.

By the time Professor TwoBears arrived, accompanied by a short, round Native American woman, there were about two dozen students waiting.

"Let's take advantage of the weather and go out back," said the muscular teacher, and he led them out to a wide lawn that spread out behind the building. "Pull up some grass and let's get started. Let me introduce myself. For those of you who aren't in my Clan or any of my classes, I'm Napayshni Greg TwoBears. You can call me Greg or 'Mr. TwoBears' if you absolutely must be formal. I'll be calling you by first names, no offense intended, that's the way I work. I teach Native traditional magic, lead this seminar twice a year, and I'm also the leader of the Dueling Club and coach both the junior and senior teams. I spent fifteen years in the United States Marines and I'm a fully trained shaman of the Lakota Nation – what most people call the Sioux. I also have emergency medical training in both the Mundane and Magical traditions. This is my wife, Wakanda. No last name, just Wakanda. She teaches Magical Zoology for the lower grades, and is the co-leader of the Vision Quest program. There are some aspects which are divided by gender, so she's the group leader for the girls." Wakanda waved merrily in greeting to the group.

Harry boggled slightly. He'd never thought of professors as having marriages or lives outside of school. He'd always supposed all the Hogwarts professors were single. Well, except for Professor Broomfield-Hill, but he'd never even met her before this trip; being Muggle-raised, he had had no interest in taking Muggle Studies. Most of the Professors were so old. The youngest was Snape, and he ... the idea of *Snape* being married to *anybody* brought him up short. That was not a train of thought he wanted to follow. He forcibly brought his attention back to Professor ... to *Mister* TwoBears.

"There are a lot of ways to screw up on a Vision Quest," the teacher was saying, "and over the years I've seen them all. Committed one or two myself. Stick with me and pay attention, and we'll make sure everyone gets through this in one piece."

While Mr. TwoBears spoke, he walked – no, he *prowled* around the circle, thoroughly looking over each student. "This program will be physically demanding. You'll be learning how to survive in the wilderness, not long-term, but for a few days, including finding water and making your own shelter. You'll be going without food, a bed, or clean clothes for several days. You will become intimately acquainted with dirt. You will be dealing with insects, critters and whatever creepy-crawlies live out in the woods in October. Your preparation will include sweat lodges; these are physically taxing and require nudity before members of your own gender, although we will be having separate lodges for male and female. There will be a Warrior's Circle, which tests your ability to withstand pain. Finally, the vision itself will be induced with magically enhanced psychotropic herbs, at least one of which is illegal in most of this country except in programs like this one. I can practically guarantee that every one of you will shed blood before this is over. I have not had a year where somebody didn't break something, and somebody didn't have to be rescued. We're on the very northern edge of the timber rattlesnake's range, so we don't get many, but as hot as it is, if there are any around, they'll be active now. They'll be in hibernation by the time of the Vision Quest weekend itself. While it's still warm, you'll have to be careful, or I'll wind up treating a snake bite as well. I've never yet lost anybody, but there's always a first time."

Harry flicked a glance around at the faces of the other students. Some were pale and wide-eyed, a couple of the others had that *Yeah, you're just trying to scare us* expression – the one he'd seen on Malfoy's face before the hippogriff proved him wrong.

"This is not a graded seminar. The only thing that will show up on your transcript is whether you completed it or not. There's no shame in dropping out; if anything, it shows that you know your limitations, and that's always a good thing to be aware of. You can back out now, or at any point in the program up until you start the Medicine. Once you take that, you're committed to the Quest."

Harry found himself wondering just how much Dumbledore actually knew about this program if he thought it "highly regarded"; it sounded "highly insane" to him.

"However, for those of you who see this through, there are tremendous benefits. You will have learned emergency survival techniques – not enough to be an expert, but enough to see you through in most circumstances. You will have learned some of your physical and magical limitations, and you may very well learn that you're capable of a lot more than you think. Those of you who are not familiar now with the magical techniques of Native peoples will gain cultural insights. And you'll all learn several new spells which may or may not be useful to you in later life. But the most important thing of all is that those of you who are successful have a chance to acquire a Spirit Guide. Who can tell me what that is?" Seemingly finished with

prowling, Mr. TwoBears settled on a boulder.

Bart raised his hand, and the teacher nodded to acknowledge him. "According to Andrews, it's a spirit entity in the form of an animal which appears to help a person achieve a goal or learn a lesson. It can give advice but never tell the person what they should actually do. But Cameron indicates that it's an actual physical creature, and Meadows uses the term interchangeably with an 'animal totem', which I had thought was something different entirely."

"This is the problem with books," replied Mr. TwoBears. "Particularly books which are written by someone not fully conversant with a tradition. All of these are right, in their own way. But none is complete. To the Native, there is no break between the material world and the world of the spirit. Any individual creature around us is part of the Spirit of that creature. A rabbit is both that flesh-and-blood creature, and also part of the greater Spirit that is Rabbit." Somehow he managed to pronounce the capital letter. "To the older shamans, for whom the Vision Quest was an actual physical journey, any creature seen multiple times was obviously the physical manifestation of the Spiritual Guide, for most animals can successfully avoid being seen if they don't want to be. At least in forested areas like this. It's a little different out on the Great Plains. Since you'll be going on an inner Quest and not journeying physically, what you will be experiencing is the spirit form of your guide coming to you, and communication may take place in several ways; I'm not going to tell you how, exactly, because every person's experience is different. Once the Quest is over, if you see your Guide animal, particularly in unusual circumstances, you should pay attention to it; it's usually trying to get a message across. Your Guide may also appear in dreams."

"So is it the same as a Totem."

"No. A Totem is a Spirit which is with you permanently, a Guide is temporary. You can only have one Totem, but several Guides. A Totem Spirit is one to which you feel an affinity, usually from a very young age. It gives you power, sometimes in exchange for taboos. A common taboo, for instance, says that you must never eat the meat of your Totem animal. Another taboo is that you must *only* eat the meat of your totem animal. It is the fact of the taboo itself as a contract between you and the spirit, and your adherence to that contract, which is the empowering factor, not the specifics of the taboo."

"What sort of power can it give?" asked Blaise, curiously. Anything which could give additional power interested the Slytherin.

"If you go down to the stables, ask for Mark Edgewater, and he can tell you about it first-hand. He's not Native, but the Horse Spirit has been with him since he was old enough to get on a rocking horse. He's a Horse Whisperer, and the best rider I've ever seen. Horses take instruction from him easily, and he's more at home with them than with some people. If he ever took an animagus form, it would be a horse. The language ability to communicate with your Totem animal species is a common indication that you might have caught the interest of a Totem Spirit. Sometimes you get the ability to see visions, or a boost in magical power. They can teach you special spells which are unique to that Totem Spirit; often these must be kept secret, but sometimes they're intended to be taught to others. An example of this is the Jingle Dance ritual that started to be taught as a healing spell a generation or so ago. You can actually ask Totem Spirits for direct help in an emergency, but if this is done, be aware that there is always a price for the help a Totem gives."

Harry raised his hand hesitantly. "Does ... does having a gift ... like a language ... automatically mean that's a Totem?"

"You mean did Mark's Horse Whispering automatically mean he had a Horse Totem? No, and having the Totem doesn't mean you automatically get the language, either. But if someone does have a language gift, *and* is strongly drawn to that creature, there's a good chance it's a Totem. If there's a question about it, the Vision Quest will sort it out."

"Just to confuse the matter," continued Mr. TwoBears, "it is quite possible for the same Spirit to appear as a Guide for a specific matter, and as a Totem for a lifetime. Additionally, because we are what we are, magical creatures unknown to Mundanes can appear both as Totems and as Spirit Guides."

"Is there any way to predict what animal a Guide will be?" asked Lavender.

Mr. TwoBears' lips twitched. "Somebody always asks that. Everybody tries to guess. Some people get it, some don't. If you want, the group of you can make a list of who thinks they'll get what Guide, and then compare it with what actually comes. Usually the ones that do get it are the ones who are clearest about what sort of guidance they need. Some people try to 'demand' a particular creature because they think it's 'cool' or think one kind of animal is 'better' than another. That doesn't work. It's best to just keep yourself open to possibilities and take what comes. The Spirits know what we need better than we do ourselves."

"Is one kind of animal better than another?" That was from a Bear Clan student Harry didn't know.

"Nope. Every sort of animal is necessary to the ordering of the world, and there is no good or evil, better or worse, to them. A Beetle Spirit Guide is as powerful as a Bear to the one who needs it." Mr. TwoBears rose from the rock he'd been sitting on. "Now that you've got something to chew on mentally, I'm going to give you something to work on physically. If you'll come with me, we'll go over to the Loon Clan Lodge and into the woods from there. We'll start with teaching you how to find water, both with spells and the Mundane way, and how to build a shelter. These are the most basic survival skills you'll need anywhere."

Three hours later, Harry knew two new spells and had learned how to make a divining rod to find water. He also knew three kinds of trees that indicated water was nearby, two kinds of animals to follow to find water, and where to dig for water if a stream or riverbed was dry. Mr. TwoBears obviously expected his students to retain this without the aid of writing it down, and Harry knew that he, at least, would be hitting his journals as soon as the session was over so that he could record as much as he could while it was still fresh in his mind.

He and Bart were cutting saplings with which to build a lean-to shelter, when he heard a buzzing noise and a thin, hissing voice from the brush. "*Get away! Get away from my sunning spot!*"

Bart had apparently noticed nothing, whistling as he trimmed branches from a sapling he'd cut. A branch fell and Harry noticed movement in the bushes just behind it. Something serpentine, swaying, coiled to strike ... "Bart," he said in a conversational tone.

"What?"

"Don't move for a second, okay? At all? Particularly not your left foot?"

Bart froze.

Harry automatically slipped into Parseltongue. *"Hsssst. Friend snake. Would you mind terribly not striking my companion?"*

*"He is dropping branches on my sunning spot."*

*"I will get him to stop. I will move the branches if you don't strike."*

"Harry, what's going on?" Bart stayed frozen where he was, hearing only hissing from behind him. Mr. TwoBears, noticing his unnatural rigidity, started over towards them. Harry held up one hand to stop him, and was surprised when he did stop immediately.

"Snake," he said. "I'm having a word with it. Bart, it's in the bushes about eighteen inches from your left foot. You're dropping branches on its sunning spot and it's upset. I'm trying to talk to it, so don't move." The shift back to Parseltongue was effortless. *"Friend snake. He will stop."*

The snake came to a decision. *"I will not strike."*

"Bart, move your foot away from the bushes. He won't strike." Bart complied very carefully. "Good. A little farther away now. Don't drop any more of your sticks. Okay, you're out of range." Relaxing now, he spoke to the snake again. *"I will move the branches now."*

"Sssssss" said the snake in agreement, relaxing its position a little. Harry slowly reached forward and grabbed the cut ends of the branches and pulled them away from the sunny flat spot the snake claimed for its own.

*"See. The sunning spot is yours again."* The snake slithered forward just enough to see, and could now be clearly seen in turn. Bart turned pale as he took in the size of the timber rattler. "I think if we just go away from this area for a bit, the snake will calm down," said Harry. "Are you all right?"

"I just, um, yeah, I'm all right," Bart managed. He walked backwards a few feet, bumped directly into Mr. TwoBears' chest, gave a startled yelp and spun around. He would have fallen if the teacher hadn't grabbed his arms to steady him.

"Did it bite you, Bart?"

"No, no, it didn't, did it?" Showing all the signs of delayed panic, Bart looked down at his feet to make sure he didn't have a snake hanging off his ankle. "No," he said again, more firmly.

"Harry. You okay over there?"

Harry was backing away slowly from the snake, though he was now more than a safe distance away. "I think we'll be okay, sir, as long as we don't bother it any more." He turned and realized that there was now quite an audience, and flushed to his hairline.

TwoBears turned and shooed away the students who had gathered, attracted by the "show". "Get back to work there. And be careful where you put your feet." The work moved, by general agreement, to the far side of the site. Mr. TwoBears pulled Bart and Harry aside. "Bart, you need to sit down for a while. You're on an adrenaline rush and you're about to crash."

Bart obediently sat on the ground under a tree, hypervigilantly if belatedly checking all about himself for snakes. He was already beginning to feel shaky.

"Harry, that was a good play there. You have good instincts. I take it that wasn't your first encounter with a venomous snake?"

"No, sir."

"I didn't think you had those in Britain."

"We don't, much. Someone cast a *serpensortia* during a dueling lesson and summoned a cobra from God knows where. I had to keep it from biting a spectator. It was pretty angry."

"I imagine it would have been. Animals generally don't like being summoned. It confuses them. It's good to know there's a Parselmouth around. There aren't nearly enough of you."

Harry was surprised that the man sounded approving. "Excuse me? I mean, enough of ... I'm sorry, I don't know what I mean. Sir." Flustered, he completely lost control of his sentence and let it stutter to a halt.

"Well, I see eloquence in English is not your strong point. I'm glad you are more effective in Snake. I think both of you are pretty badly shaken up. I want you two to stay put here for a few minutes. When you're feeling a little better, Bart, go back up to the Lodge, and Harry, you go with him and keep an eye on him. Try to relax a little bit yourself, you're wound up tight. We'll be breaking for lunch soon, and I want to see you both in my office then." The tall teacher turned and strode back towards the other students' worksites, to explain to Lavender and Susan why their entire lean-to had just come down on their heads.



Bart was still wobbly when they got up to the lodge, and collapsed on one of the sofas. Harry fed a few coins into the vending machine in the corner and got him a ginger beer, claiming a birch beer for himself (neither was as good as butterbeer, but they were better than nothing).

"Thanks," said Bart, accepting the spicy beverage. "I think that was enough excitement for the next month, how about you?"

"More than enough."

"Lucky thing, huh? You speaking Parseltongue, I mean?"

"Lucky for you." Harry shrugged. "Can't say it's done much but get me in trouble." Bart looked at him quizzically. "Parselmouths aren't regarded with much favor in Britain," Harry explained. "Most of the Dark Wizards we've had have been associated with snakes one way or another, and the only other Parselmouth known to be alive right now is the Darkest of the lot. So people assume ..."

"And you're assuming yourself," said Bart, "if you're distrusting your own gift because of it. Most of us would give our eyeteeth for a talent like that. But if you're really concerned about it, why don't you talk to Anna about it? Gillespie, I mean, my counterpart from the witches' side at Salem. She's a Parselmouth too. Wears that snake familiar of hers like a necklace most of the time and carries on conversations with it. It was a little disconcerting at first, but after five years, everybody's used to it. I'll introduce you if you want."

"Yeah. Yeah, that would be nice, I think. Thank you." Harry didn't for a minute believe it was that simple. He distrusted the Parseltongue ability for good reason, given where it came from. Still, it might be useful to talk to someone else about it.

They sat and nursed their drinks in silence for a bit. The silence was beginning to become oppressive when Mr. TwoBears led the rest of the Vision Quest group into the lodge. "How are you doing now, Bart? A little bit less shaky?"

"Yes, sir. I'm fine now."

"Glad to hear it. Harry, you okay?"

"I'm fine, sir."

Mr. TwoBears turned to face the rest of the students. "You heard? They're both fine. Now all you ghouls can knock off and go have lunch and do whatever else you were going to do this afternoon. I don't want to hear about anyone pestering Harry or Bart about this morning. If either of them wants to talk about it, they will. If they don't, they don't. Now scram!" He shooed them out of the Lodge. Lavender made a concerted effort to stay, but Susan took her by one arm and Justin by the other, and they gently escorted her over to the Flash platform.

Mr. TwoBars turned back to Harry and Bart. "Okay, now that the requisite macho posturing is out of the way, how are you doing really?"

"I meant it, I'm fine. Maybe a little tired now, is all."

"I'm not surprised. You weren't injured, but your body was all ready to deal with a crisis. Now the crisis is over, it needs some rest. I'd advise a light lunch and then no exertion for the rest of the day. Take a nap if you feel you need it. You may find side effects of the experience popping up for a while. I'm concerned about nightmares in particular. If you need to, you can get something to help you sleep for the next few nights from the infirmary."

"I have some tea I brought from home that's good for nightmares," said Harry. "You can try some of that if you like. Tastes like lemon; better than potions. And it doesn't leave you feeling all logy in the morning."

"Yeah, but does it work?" asked Bart with a smile.

"I haven't waked you up in the middle of the night, have I?" replied Harry. "It works."

Mr. TwoBears frowned. "If you're been taking an herbal preparation or potion on a regular basis, the infirmary should be informed, Harry. There can be interactions and it should be on your medical records. It would be a good idea for you to take a sample of your tea over there so their Potions people can check it out before Bart tries it."

"That makes sense. I'll do that later," said Harry, now wishing he'd not said anything in the first place.

"Good. I've been wanting to talk to both of you at some point, you know. Since I've got you both here, would you mind?"

The boys glanced at each other, then warily agreed.

"Harry, you can wait here while I talk to Bart in my office, and then it will be your turn. It shouldn't take too long."

Left to his own devices for the moment, Harry prowled the common room of the Lodge looking for something interesting to do, since having a staring contest with the antelope head mounted over the door held no appeal. There were several bookcases stuffed with both Wizarding leather-bound books and Muggle paperbacks on a variety of subjects, most of which he knew nothing about. So he decided to pick a book at random, playing one of those playground counting games that children use to choose up sides for sports (but always leaving out that weird kid with the glasses and baggy clothes, of course), choosing first the bookcase, then the shelf, then the book from the shelf, and found himself perusing a work for young readers about famous players of baseball. He'd finished his birch beer and still didn't understand the rules of the game, but thought he was beginning to understand Lou Gehrig, when the door to Mr. TwoBears' office opened and Bart came back out.

"Your turn," he said. "I'm going to go grab some lunch. Want something?" Harry's rumbling stomach reminded him that everybody else had gone

off to eat at the Clan Lodges or the guest lodge; he could hear the laughter of the other Loon Clan students echoing down the hall that connected the common room and the dining room.

"No, I'll get something when I'm done, thanks."

Bart nodded. "I'll bring my sandwich back here and wait for you." His tone told Harry that there was no point in arguing this; Bart would wait, and that was all there was to it.

Harry reshelfed his book and trudged into the office. Mr. TwoBears was standing at a filing cabinet, pulling a green folder out of it. "Have a seat, Harry."

Like Agatha Stone's office, there was a choice of seating, ranging from a chair in front of Mr. TwoBears' desk to an armchair to a low, comfortable sofa that would seat two, or three if they were friendly. Harry took one end of the sofa, and Mr. TwoBears chose the armchair.

"I assume that's my transcript?" said Harry, nodding at the file.

"Yes, it is. Your school sent over transcripts for all of you when we were deciding whether or not to participate in this program. I reviewed it closely when you became part of my Clan. I'll admit I'm rather puzzled by some of the things it says – or, rather, doesn't say."

"Such as?" Harry asked. He was wondering just how badly his file had been edited.

Mr. TwoBears flipped through the pages in the file. "I have nothing here about your early education or family history – it's as if you sprang into being at the age of eleven. Your grade history is acceptable – better than average in those subjects that grab your attention, average in most, below average in those that don't grab your interest. The only odd element is that the dichotomy between your Potions grade and your standardized testing is rather extreme, but I assume Doctor Rozendal will be talking to you about that. Your disciplinary record is checkered – there's a fair number of minor infractions, a couple of major ones, but also some citations for excellence for what seem to be related events. Your participation in the Tri-Wizard Tournament you had over there is noted; there seems to have been some irregularity about your being school Champion? But the fact that you won speaks wonders for you. And you independently saw the need for, and headed up, a study group for your defense class last year. You also have citations from your first and second year, but the circumstances aren't in the file – just 'meritorious service to the school.' Your medical file was more complete, and you can expect some questions about it over at the infirmary – you had some major injuries around the dates of those 'meritorious services'. The fact that you are a Parselmouth was not on the records, for some reason. I was just checking to see if I'd missed it, but it's not there at all. There was a notation about the recent death of a family member under dubious circumstances, followed by adoption to a new family; that's bound to be stressful. Have you received any counseling about that?"

Harry shook his head. He didn't think he'd be able to answer safely.

"Idiots," said Mr. TwoBears, making his own note in the file. "I can help you with that if you like, or you can ask at the infirmary and they'll recommend a counselor for you. It's up to you, of course. You're more than old enough to make your own decisions." He closed the file. "I can make a copy of this for you if you want."

"You can do that?"

"Of course. They are, after all, your records and you're entitled to see them." He set the file aside. "And then, of course, there's the fact that you're who you are, a central figure in recent British events."

Harry made a face in disgust.

"And apparently not too happy with that distinction, I see. Unfortunately, it's something you're going to have to live with, and possibly that's another reason to get some counseling. I did some research on you when this program was proposed, and that's even more confusing than your scholastic record. The British Ministry is extremely secretive about its records – we know more about what's happening in Rwanda than in England these days. The scholarly works aren't much better. There has been a lot of speculation about the fall of Voldemort, but very little solid work in the historical or theoretical areas. Most of what's in the histories comes from the press – and if I went by what's in the press, I'd assume there are at least four different Harry Potters attending Hogwarts right now."

"I wish there were; maybe one of them could have taken History of Magic for me."

"I'm sure. The interview you gave last year for the Prophet is the only direct testimonial material we have. After you've had a chance to settle in, you can probably expect some discreet inquiries from historians wanting your perspective for the journals; you're the only primary source there is."

"I gave that interview for the Quibbler, really. It's published by the father of a friend of mine. The Prophet reprinted it a few months later and passed it off as an exclusive."

"You see, we didn't even know that; that statement alone will warrant footnotes. Your friends may also be contacted by people wanting their views as well. You may want to warn them about it." Harry put his face in his hands. He really didn't want to think about all this, but Mr. TwoBears was relentless. "Add to that the fact that your school seems to have selected students for this program who are compatible with you, rather than your best students – which makes me think Hogwarts may be in for a bit of a shock in dealing with our students. Cheveyo is one of my best, and your school may not be ready for him. Finally, throw in a note from your headmaster stating that you have 'special needs' and asking that we support you in any way possible, without specifying what those special needs are, and we have quite an enigma."

Harry looked up sharply. "And I suppose you people aren't going to rest until you've solved it."

"Nope. You're entitled to your privacy. You'll get the inquiries, but we do take 'no' for an answer. Be some disappointed history buffs, though. If you

want to talk to someone, or ask for help, you'll get it. But if you want to get up and leave this office right now and never say anything more to me about it, that's fine too."

"You would really...?"

"I would really. You're not an obvious danger to yourself or anyone else, so there's no reason for me to try to interfere in your life. Though I'd be happy to give you some unsolicited advice if you want."

"Go ahead."

"You've been placed in the Loon Clan for a reason. You're in a war situation at home, and you seem to be forced to take a prominent position no matter what you do. You have a choice of roles you can take at this point; you can be a Warrior or you can be a Chief. They both have advantages and disadvantages. As a Warrior you go where someone else says to go, do what they say to do, if necessary die where they tell you to die. You let someone else make the big decisions, and the only actions you take responsibility for are your own. As a Chief your physical risks are reduced, although you may still find yourself in the path of danger; you have to consider the larger picture and realize that sometimes other people are going to get hurt and even die. You can't save everyone. What you can do is keep the losses restricted as much as possible to those who have chosen to be Warriors alongside you and protect the noncombatants. It's a harder path, but ultimately satisfying."

"I think I've been a Warrior all my life. I keep falling into things and barely making it out with my skin intact, and I know, somehow, but I can never prove it, that I'm being steered into them. This year, this trip, was supposedly voluntary, but I was also given an assignment, and if I don't do it, if I'm not successful, it will hurt other people. Maybe my friends. It's my responsibility."

"One that weighs heavily on you, I can see. Whatever this assignment is, you believe it is yours alone, and you face it as a Warrior. But you might take a better look at it, and see if it really is a Warrior's job, or a Chief's. If it's a Chief's task, then a Warrior acting alone will fail where the Chief may succeed."

"And if it is a Chief's job?"

"Then you decide if you want to be a Chief. If you want to remain a Warrior, you hand that job right back to the person who gave it to you, but be aware that you will probably never be trusted with the responsibility of decision-making again. If you want to become a Chief, make the choice consciously and start assembling your warband."

"I don't know what kind of task it is. How can I tell?"

"You could ask for assistance."

Mr. TwoBears stretched his long legs out, crossing them at the ankle, and waited impassively. Harry had the feeling this man could outwait a mountain if he tried. He tried to marshal thoughts which were flitting around the inside of his head like birds. At one moment, he heard Hermione's voice, saying, "*Nothing in the Prophecy says you have to do it alone. You don't need to do it all alone. That's what friends are for.*" The next, he heard Dumbledore's grave words, "*If you go up against the Dark Lord with only your Hogwarts education, you are likely to lose,*" with their implication that it was he, and he alone, who would stand against Voldemort. But the more Harry envisioned what the final conflict might be like, he realized that he, and possibly Dumbledore, had forgotten something very important. The Death Eaters. Voldemort would not be coming alone to the fight; he would have support. Harry had no idea how many Death Eaters there actually were, but he was sure there were more than he'd be able to fight alone. If the Prophecy was true, they couldn't kill him, but he was sure they'd be able to capture him and then Voldemort himself could deal with him. Even if by some miracle he killed Voldemort, they could overpower him afterwards. He needed to do something about the Death Eaters.

"I can't do it alone. *He* won't do it alone. So I can't either. Not if I want to survive," Harry said, putting it together.

"He?"

"Voldemort." Harry sighed, making his decision. "Do you believe in Prophecies, sir?"

"There are enough in our history that I have to say I do, although I've never met someone who's been bedeviled with one."

"Until now," Harry said, grinning weakly. "I got stuck with one before I was even born, and now I'm the only one that has a chance of killing Voldemort. But there's just as much chance that he'll kill me. And he's at least sixty years older than me and has lots of followers who will probably be extremely angry with me if I do kill him. So I guess I can't be doing it all myself."

"Why would you ever think you needed to?" asked Mr. TwoBears with some surprise. "Dark Lords *always* take more than one person to bring down. A Chief and warband, King and knights, however it's organized, there's always a leader and some support. Or haven't you been paying attention in History of Magic?"

Harry tapped the folder with his records in it. "Not my best subject, remember, sir? But I'd have paid attention if we had been taught *anything* about Dark Lords. All we got is Goblin Wars, Giant Wars, Troll Wars, a couple of VampireSuppressions ... that sort of thing. Nothing useful. Nothing even in this century."

"Great Spirit, it's a wonder your whole country isn't speaking German right now," muttered Mr. TwoBears. He rose and went to the tall bookcase in one corner of the room, pulling down a green leather-covered book, which he handed to Harry.

The boy looked at the title, which was printed in gold lettering on the cover. *Rise and Fall: A History of The Dark Lords*, Bolek Fetter III, Ed. He flipped it open and looked at the table of contents. There was an extensive list of names, organized by historical period and geographical area, then by approximate dates of reign. The contents went on for several pages. "This book doesn't seem thick enough to have much information on

each of these," Harry said in a puzzled tone.

"This is the portable version. It has the table of contents and the index available at all times, and allows you to summon the rest at need. The full set of books would take up a full bookcase," said Mr. TwoBears. "Pick one you'd like to look at and tap it with your index finger or wand." Harry did so, and gasped as the book became much thicker and heavier. It now contained a lengthy treatise on the Dark Lady Morgan Le Fay. The text was in a rather antiquated mode, with an introductory summary and numerous footnotes. Some words or passages were printed in red ink. "The red type means there's more information available, usually as a sidebar article. Tap that and it pops up, tap it again and it disappears." The sidebar articles appeared to explain things in a more modern fashion, and Harry thought they would be more useful than the main text. "It will stay like this until you either select another heading, or tap the title on the front cover to return it to its original format. The index is easier to use if you're looking for specific information; that only brings up the relevant pages when you tap the entry, and then if you read beyond that point it will bring up the following pages as you go. The material is self-updating, so it always has the most current version."

"This is amazing. I've never seen a book that works like this before."

"Portable books are quite new; they became practical to produce only a few years ago. The basic idea came from a Mundane computer technology called hypertext. We expect it to revolutionize research."

"My friend Hermione would love these," said Harry. "Can you do any kind of book in one?"

"They're most practical for the huge multi-volume sets, encyclopedias, academic journals, and so forth," said the tall teacher. "I think I read about somebody trying to put his whole family library in one, but the time and cost are prohibitive for most people. Why don't you borrow that for a few days and look through it? You can familiarize yourself with some of the ways Dark Lords have been brought down in the past ... and some of the ways they haven't. You might find it particularly interesting to look at the last three entries in the Modern European section."

Harry shrank the book again to get rid of Morgan Le Fay, who was waving at him from a reproduction woodblock print, and then checked the table of contents. The last three volumes were headed *Grindelwald/Dumbledore (1936-1945)* , *I Voldemort/Dumbledore-Potter (1969-1981)* , and *II Voldemort/Dumbledore-Potter? (1995-?)* . The Grindelwald volume was thicker than both Voldemort sections combined, and all three together were thinner than the one on Morgan had been. "There's already a volume for him coming back?"

"It's kind of slim, as you've noticed. Sometime during his first reign, the British Ministry decided to control the amount of information made available to the public through the press and academics, in an effort to prevent panic. They thought highly enough of the results that they've continued suppressing information and isolating Britain from the international community. The result is that most of the information we have on the second reign is second-hand, or speculation. It's mostly based on news articles, so obviously that part will be changed drastically as things happen. We already know how unreliable the popular press is. As a matter of fact, I'm sure the editor will be one of the people begging you for an interview."

It was getting on toward afternoon, so Mr. TwoBears released Harry so he could go get some lunch, reminding him to take some of his tea mixture over to the Infirmary. Bart was now sprawled, sound asleep, on the common room sofa, the remains of his lunch on a plate on the floor beside him, and two younger students were debating the best means of getting him off the sofa so they could sit on part of it: wake him up and ask him to sit up, or levitate him and stick him to the ceiling. Harry solved their dilemma by waking Bart up and dragging him off, first to scavenge a sandwich from what was left of the lunch buffet, then getting them both onto the Flash platform to go back to the Guest Lodge.

By that time, of course, Bart was awake again, at least enough to participate in the inevitable question-and-answer period at the Lodge. At length, however, Harry found himself sitting on the sofa with Bart on his right, Blaise on his left, and Justin hanging over the back, showing them how the Dark Lords book worked.

"You know, I've always wondered how Dumbledore did defeat Grindelwald," said Blaise. "Everyone knows he did it, but nobody talks about how. Can we take a look at that?"

Harry obligingly called up that volume, and they looked at the summary, skimming until they found the information they needed. "Okay, it looks like he was part of a group, or rather two groups. The first broke through the outer defenses of Grindelwald's castle, and then a strike team went in to deal with Grindelwald himself." He tapped the heading about the team, and the picture of Dumbledore with his everpresent twinkle vanished from the left page, replaced by two photographs of groups of wizards in a mixture of combat robes and Muggle fatigues. Next to each picture was a list of names in the group. In the front of the second group stood Dumbledore, in knee-length grey robes over Muggle trousers and boots, his beard and hair both trimmed much shorter than Harry had ever seen them. His group looked grim, serious, and determined. There was a flicker of motion in the picture, and Harry saw a familiar profile of someone in the back rank. Harry tapped the image of Dumbledore on the chest, and it grudgingly moved out of the way, revealing a young man, clad in a similar robe/trousers combination and wearing a British-style combat helmet, sitting in the passenger seat of a Jeep. "Holy shit!" Harry breathed, allowing himself a rare expletive.

"Who is that, Harry?" asked Justin, since Harry's hand was currently blocking his view of the list of names.

"That, my friend, is the enemy himself." Harry moved his hand and tapped on a name, and the picture zoomed in for a closer look. The young wizard glared out at them icily. Even then, he had that "master of all I survey" attitude, Harry noted. "Take a look at one T.M. Riddle. The future Lord Voldemort."