

Title: Harry Potter – Slytherin: The Dark Lord Returns (aka: The Goblet of Fire)

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Summary: Harry Potter, sorted into Slytherin House, is not chosen by the Goblet of Fire.

Audience: PG

Category: Alternate Universe

Warnings: Magical Violence

Length: 84 pages

Harry Potter – Slytherin: The Dark Lord Returns

Chapter 1 – The Best Summer

Harry was living with Sirius and Lupin at number Twelve, Grimmauld Place.

It was a dream come true -- not living with the Dursley's. Harry had the whole summer to get to know his godfather and have fun with his friends. He could now be outside without restrictions, even at night.

Having a house-elf around all the time was a new experience. Kreacher, whom Sirius despised, had become very interested in Harry. Muttering under his breath as he constantly did, the ancient creature referred to Harry as "the proud Slytherin who defeated the Dark Lord *three* times." Whereas he referred to his Master, Sirius, as "his mother's disappointment" and to Lupin as "the accursed werewolf."

Kreacher clearly favored Harry over his Master and treated him with respect.

Sirius was aware of it, and it made him laugh, "At least now he has reason to clean the house..."

It was true. The house, which had been dreadfully neglected by Kreacher for years, was now kept spotless. And Kreacher was also preparing daily meals that rivaled the incredible feasts in the Great Hall at Hogwarts.

Harry especially loved dinner, not only for the excellent meals, but also for the stories Sirius and Remus told about their time at Hogwarts with his father and mother.

Harry learned the details of the near fatal trick Sirius played on Snape. Sirius now acknowledged it was irresponsible, but he would not drop the notion that Snape had somehow deserved it. It was obvious to Harry that Remus had not approved of many of Sirius' and his father's rule breaking escapades. But he had tolerated them because of the support they had given him in both hiding their knowledge of his affliction and in developing the means to suppress its worst affects by becoming Animagi.

The one person they would not talk about anymore was Peter Pettigrew and how he had destroyed everything that was good. They never even mentioned his name.

Sirius was excellent at potions and learned to make the Wolfsbane Potion for Remus. He also became a dog when Remus went through his cycle and remained locked with him in the attic.

Harry stayed with Draco at the Tonks' house during the cycle. While there, he went on his very first fishing trip with Draco and his Uncle Ted.

Harry visited Hermione too. Harry was surprised to find that her parents were somewhat old fashioned and did not want a boy in the house when they were not home. So, he was usually only at Hermione's home on weekends.

Harry, Draco and Hermione saw each other almost every day. She often stayed for dinner at number Twelve.

Kreacher was unsure about Hermione -- being a Muggle-born -- but he deferred to "Master Harry's affection" for her. Kreacher initially referred to her under his breath as the "Mudblood girlfriend." Harry asked him to stop saying Mudblood or Muggle-born, and he did, changing it to "Gryffindor girlfriend," which he must have considered nearly as bad. However, he would not stop saying '*girlfriend*' no matter how many times Harry asked him to. Hermione always smiled when she heard it.

If Kreacher's behavior towards Hermione was at least deferential, it was quite cool towards Draco. Kreacher resented that Draco had rejected his pure-blood family -- muttering "the betrayer" or "blood-traitor" under his breath. Still, he was a Slytherin and Master Harry's friend, which made him just barely tolerable.

Mr and Mrs Weasley seemed to think Ginny was seeing a little too much of Draco, so they only let her visit when accompanied by Fred and George. Of course, Fred and George almost always just dropped her off and went off to do other things.

Diagon Alley was their favorite haunt and the lot of them would usually spend a whole day there once a week.

But one of the best days they had was when Sirius and Remus took them on a romp in the countryside. It was a combination picnic, no-Snitch-four-on-four Quidditch match, and motocross -- with spectacular rides on Sirius' flying motorbike. Kreacher Apparated in with an amazing food spread, and even Hermione played Quidditch -- she was dreadful.

The most consequential event of the summer was Sirius agreeing to teach Harry how to become an Animagus. Remus did not think it was a good idea. But Harry wanted to be like his father. Sirius told Harry he must keep it a secret -- since it was illegal not to register with the Ministry.

Sirius said the process was extremely difficult. He again told Harry the backstory so he would understand why he did it. Harry soon understood that becoming an Animagus made learning to perform the Patronus charm seem trivial. It required intense commitment, complex potion making, and concentration.

Sirius began his story, "We decided early in our second year to try and become Animagi to help Lupin deal with his werewolf transformations. This was before the Wolfsbane Potion existed..."

Sirius said he and James eventually found a book about it in the Restricted Section of the library using James' invisibility cloak. The procedure seemed incredible and impossible to accomplish, especially for a student. It required:

Carrying a mandrake leaf in your mouth for a month -- full moon to full moon -- without swallowing it. During that time, exposing a small crystal phial to the pure rays of the moon. Then adding the saturated Mandrake leaf and a single hair to the phial. Also adding a silver teaspoonful of dew never exposed to sunlight or human foot traffic to the phial on seven consecutive days. Finally, adding the chrysalis of a Death's Head moth to the phial. Then hiding the completed phial undisturbed in darkness until the first lightning storm. Until the lightning storm, placing your wand tip over your heart at sunrise and sunset each day and saying '*Amato Animo Animato Animagus*' (you will eventually feel a second heartbeat).

At the first lightning storm, retrieve the phial and check that it now contains one mouthful of blood-red potion. Go to a safe place and place your wand tip over your heart and repeat the incantation while drinking the potion. You will feel a fiery pain and an intense double heartbeat. The shape of the creature will appear in your mind. You will transform. To return to human, clearly visualize yourself in your human form. From then on, visualize your Animagus form and you will transform. With practice, you will not need your wand to transform.

Sirius said he had wanted to give up the idea, but once James had it in his mind to do something, there was no stopping him. However, they wasted the entire year in fruitless attempts. They never got past the Mandrake leaf. The swallowing reflex was too strong, especially when hungry or sleeping. And the worst part was that Mandrake leaves turned out to be a very powerful laxative. Yuk.

At the start of their third year, they reexamined the book. Because the book had to be many hundreds of years old, Sirius suggested the process probably included a lot of unnecessary mysticism rather than *real* magic, so they decided to ‘amend’ the process to something they could manage and see if it worked.

They agreed that they would continue to use crystal phials and silver teaspoons; and why not? That was easy.

The first change they tried was keeping the Mandrake leaf in their mouth for only the first day and then transferring it to a small cup, and keeping it emersed in saliva for the lunar month. While it was stewing, they exposed their crystal phials to moonlight at the same time, by placing them on the windowsill of their dorm room at night.

Adding the fully saturated Mandrake leaf and single hair to the phial was simple. However, they wasted a lot of time on the dew requirement until Sirius realized that dew just meant natural condensation. They could easily collect it in the dungeons instead of the many timewasting clandestine trips into the Forbidden Forest in the early morning before sunrise.

Adding the chrysalis of a Death’s Head moth also turned out to be easy. The apothecary in Diagon Alley had jars full and delivered via Owl Post.

They just stuck their completed phials under their mattresses until the next lightning storm where they seemed to be safe, undisturbed, and in darkness.

The most difficult part turned out to be saying the incantation every sunrise and sunset -- given their progressively changing times and school schedule -- while waiting for a lightning storm. They needed to copy out ephemeris data every week and pay attention to what time it was. It often meant getting up very early as summer approached. They constantly failed in the process many times by missing the schedule.

Sirius also suggested the incantation could be made non-verbally, so you could, if necessary, do it in public without attracting attention. That helped but it was not enough. How could you know you had not missed the proper incantation time on any given day when weeks or months would pass without a lightning storm. They also wasted months on potion failures.

Near the end of their third year, they finally had an early lightning storm after a perfect record on incantations. But when they pulled out their phials, the contents were off -- nothing you would ever consider swallowing. Their disappointment was extreme. They gave up for the rest of the year but vowed to resume trying next school year.

Over the summer, Sirius had a brainstorm. Every potion he had ever prepared that included an incantation required the wizard to be *present*. Why would this one permit the wizard to be *anywhere*. So, perhaps the incantation schedule had nothing to do with preparing the potion. Maybe it just prepared the *wizard*, and the other steps prepared the *potion*.

This was a breakthrough. It enabled them to test many variations of the potion making procedures at the same time. They began as soon as they returned to school their fourth year. It took them all year, but they finally learned to make the potion -- one set of samples finally turned blood red after the last lightning storm of the school year. Of course, it had no effect, because they had not been wasting time preparing *themselves* until they knew they could make the potion. They quickly prepared another set of phials and started the incantation procedure, but there was not another storm before their fourth school year ended.

At this point, waiting for a lightning storm, most of which in Scotland occur during the summer, became their biggest problem. Sirius, who understood Muggle machinery, realized all they needed was something to generate electricity and create a good spark to ionize the air, but such Muggle machinery would not work at Hogwarts because of all the magical enchantments.

But again, Sirius had a brainstorm. Returning for their fifth year on the Hogwarts express, Sirius told James, Lupin, and Pettigrew he might have a solution for the lightning problem. They were skeptical.

Sirius winked at James. He opened his school trunk and withdrew a long black rod and what looked like an animal fur. Sirius said it was from a cat. He held the rod and rubbed it vigorously with the cat fur for about ten seconds. Then he had Pettigrew hold out his finger, Sirius moved one end of the rod toward Pettigrew's finger. When the rod came within inches off it, a great electric spark arced across the gap. Pettigrew screamed in pain, jerking his finger back and practically jumping out of his seat. Sirius and James howled with laughter; Lupin grimaced. Then Sirius explained how it worked. He had brought four sets of rods and furs -- enough to really charge the air in their dorm room, much more than any lightning storm would.

Within just over two months of returning to school, both James and Sirius had become Animagi. It took Pettigrew until right before Christmas. "We had almost given up on him, but I think when he realized he was no longer going to be one of the Marauders if he didn't succeed, he finally found the essential motivation. Of course, now, I wish we *had* given up on him..."

Sirius was wrapping up. "So, what worked? Foremost, you must *desperately* want to become an Animagus -- deep down in your *soul*. A casual or passing interest won't cut it -- even if you follow all the procedures. I think the difficulty of accomplishing this magic exists to cull those who don't truly want to make it happen."

"But technically, these are the final steps we followed:

"Keep a small mandrake leaf in your mouth for a full day, starting on the day of the full moon. Start exposing a small crystal phial to the moon the same day. Also start the personal preparation process performing the incantation twice a day at *approximately* sunrise and sunset -- you must *mean* it, not just mindlessly recite it. Let the mandrake leaf saturate in a sealed cup of your saliva until the next full moon. While you are waiting, collect condensation from the dungeons (or a cave) in an opaque sealable container so it won't see sunlight or evaporate. At the next full moon, put the saturated Mandrake leaf into the crystal phial along with one hair from your head. Add seven silver teaspoonfuls of the condensate water to the phial. Add the moth chrysalis. Stopper the phial and store it in a sealed box out of the way where it won't be disturbed but is reasonably accessible. Continue the daily incantations until the next lightning storm -- or better... make your *own* lightning to minimize the personal

preparation time once you first feel the second heartbeat. If you make your own lightning, get near the box storing the phial and create your lightning. Then retrieve the phial. The contents will now be blood-red. Perform the incantation while drinking the potion. And as the ancient text says, ‘You will feel a fiery pain and an intense double heartbeat. The shape of the creature will appear in your mind. You will transform.’”

Then Sirius concluded, “I personally believe that when you feel the double heartbeat the first time, it is the signal that you are *ready* to become an Animagus, and you could proceed if you had the potion. I also believe the more often you perform the incantation, not just twice a day, the sooner you will be ready. I wouldn’t be surprised if you *didn’t* need the potion at all. And you definitely don’t need to take it more than once. Pettigrew didn’t. We just convinced him to keep performing the incantation. It finally worked because he wanted it badly enough. That’s why I don’t think the potion is necessary. At its core, this is *Transfiguration*. We don’t use potions to transfigure animals into objects and vice versa. We don’t use potions to learn Apparation. Why should you need a potion for this? Of course, for me, it’s too late to try that experiment. You might think about trying it because the potion is a hassle and is *revolting*. Plus, it makes you feel like your insides are on fire.”

Harry liked the idea of attempting it without the potion... not being particularly good in Potions class without Hermione’s and Draco’s help.

Before they started, Sirius asked Harry again, “Are you only doing this because your father did it?”

“Well, not just that,” said Harry. “At first, yes, but now I think it could give me an edge against Voldemort, like it gave you against the Dementors. You survived because of it.”

“Now *that’s* what I call a good reason, Harry,” said Sirius fondly.

They practiced together almost every day and Harry practiced by himself before bed every night and before breakfast every morning. Sirius told him it could take a very long time. For him it had been more than two years before he felt the second heartbeat. Practicing the incantation gave Harry a headache. He asked Sirius about it. Sirius said that had never happened to him and he had no explanation for it.

Harry wondered how the first wizard ever learned how to become an Animagus. He told Sirius it would be like beating your head against the wall for a year hoping you would eventually be able to pass through it. Sirius just laughed and said, whoever it was must have *really* loved animals.

After almost constant pestering by the press since being found innocent, Sirius finally visited the Daily Prophet in Diagon Alley. He gave Barnabas Cuffe a written copy of his story but declined an interview. Sirius' account made the Ministry look very bad. He also wrote how Harry and his friends had exposed Pettigrew and Harry had saved his life from the Dementors.

The Ministry of Magic's official comment on the story was that Sirius' harsh treatment -- imprisonment without a trial -- had been at the hands of the previous Minister, Millicent Bagnold, who was now deceased. The current Minister, Cornelius Fudge, was sorry for the miscarriage of justice, saying it would have never happened under his authority.

Sirius was shortly thereafter contacted by Ludo Bagman, Head of the Department of Magical Games and Sports. He gave Sirius four top box tickets for the Four-Hundred and Thirty-Second Quidditch World Cup, to be held the last weekend in August. Sirius gave the four general admission tickets he had already bought to Tom, the landlord of the Leaky Cauldron.

It would be Harry, Draco, Hermione, and Sirius attending. Remus had early on declined to go because the moon would be full. He declared he would be fine alone with the Wolfsbane potion. In fact, he would not have gone anyway because his affliction still stigmatized him in the wizarding world, and the Daily Prophet article at the end of the previous school year had included his photograph.

At the end of July, Sirius hosted Harry's birthday party. In addition to Draco and Hermione, it included Hagrid and the Weasleys, though not Percy -- who was now working at the ministry -- or Ron, who declined. Mr Weasley told them he also gotten World Cup tickets for his family, minus the Mrs. Then they happily discovered they would all be sharing the top box. So, they agreed to travel together after first spending the day, having dinner, and staying overnight at the Burrow before the match. They would also camp out together at the site and share the two tents Mr Weasley had borrowed from a colleague at the Ministry.

Harry got lots of thoughtful birthday gifts from his friends. Sirius gave him an additional, secret present. It was a pocket mirror, one of a pair. Sirius had the other. They enabled the holders to communicate with each other surreptitiously. Sirius said he and James

used the mirrors at school to talk during detention. Sirius asked Harry to carry it with him whenever he left the house as a security precaution.

During August and prior to the World Cup, Harry and his friends had more daytime adventures all over England and Scotland, traveling via the Knight Bus. They also got their Hogwarts letters which, for the first time, required them to get a set of dress robes. They went to Madam Malkin's together. Harry saw Draco slip Ginny a handful of galleons so she could buy a brand-new set of very nice dress robes instead of used ones.

The Friday before the World Cup, they all arrived at the Burrow in the early afternoon. They met Ginny's oldest brothers, Charlie, and Bill, for the first time. Charlie was visiting from Romania and Bill had just returned from Egypt to take a job at Gringotts bank in Diagon Alley. They played games outside in the orchard and enjoyed Mrs Weasley's excellent home cooked meal in the garden. After dinner they listened to Celestina Warbeck on the radio.

Ron still clearly did not like Draco, but now Draco was completely indifferent. Draco ignored Ron, focused on Ginny and enjoyed everyone else's company.

Fred and George secretly told Harry, Draco, and Hermione about their idea to create *Weasley's Wizard Wheezes Skiving Snack Boxes*. Draco and Harry were very impressed with their initial test 'treats', Hermione not so much.

Percy prattled on pompously about a big secret having to do with Hogwarts that he learned about at work. Mr Weasley told them they would find out about it at school.

The following morning, the party hiked up Stoatshead Hill and took a Portkey to the Quidditch World Cup campgrounds. They set up the two small, borrowed tents and then marveled at their spacious, comfortable and well-furnished interiors. Magic!

They spent the afternoon touring the campsite, delighting in the thousands of fellow witches and wizards visiting from all over the world, and meeting up with school friends who had been able to get tickets. Sirius got the most attention. Everyone wanted to meet him and express their dismay at the injustice of his mistreatment.

They ran into Ludo Bagman again and he introduced them to Barty Crouch, the head of the Department of International Magical Cooperation. Sirius turned his back on Crouch and walked away without shaking his hand. Crouch looked very uncomfortable seeing Sirius. Sirius later told them that Crouch, when he was head of the Department of

Magical Law Enforcement, was the one who had persuaded the Minister for Magic to send him to Azkaban without a trial.

Bagman was taking bets on the match. He took one for very long odds from Fred and George. Draco nudged Harry and rolled his eyes when he heard it. Mr Weasley was not too happy about it, but only asked them not to tell their mother.

Mr Weasley asked Bagman about Bertha Jorkins, one of his employees who had been reported missing after failing to return from holiday. Only Hermione had read the article about it in the Daily Prophet. Harry and Draco had no interest in hearing about it. As they toured the campgrounds, Mr Weasley pointed out several other prominent Ministry officials, including Broderick Bode from the Department of Mysteries. Mr Weasley said Bode was an “Unspeakable” -- which apparently meant no one knew what he did.

They finally returned to their tents to rest before the match, but not before arming themselves with a variety of souvenirs from the dozens of vendors dotting the camp.

Chapter 2 – The Quidditch World Cup

When they arrived in the top box of the stadium before the match, Mr Weasley introduced them to various dignitaries.

There was a house-elf Harry mistook for Dobby sitting near the end of the row behind them. It wasn't Dobby after all, but another house-elf, named Winky, who was saving a seat for her master, Mr Crouch.

Just as they had taken their seats, Mr and Mrs Malfoy arrived. Lucius Malfoy took one look at his son with Sirius, Harry, Hermione, and the Weasleys and made a scene. Draco's parents expressed outrage at the company he was keeping -- particularly an escaped *criminal* from Azkaban.

Draco responded very loudly, “Why should *you* care, *Father?* You *disowned* me, remember? You can't *cane* me anymore.”

The look in his father's eyes was deadly, shouting, “HOW DARE YOU!”

Mrs Malfoy had to restrain her husband. She whispered something into his ear, and he gathered himself. He turned and took his wife's arm and walked out of the box just as Cornelius Fudge arrived with the Bulgarian Minister. Mr Malfoy stopped briefly to chide Fudge for allowing such “*disreputes*” to sit in the top box.

Fudge appeared baffled by Mr Malfoy's comments as he glanced around. He shrugged and then introduced the Bulgarian Minister to everyone -- explaining that his guest did not speak any English. However, the Bulgarian Minister clearly recognized Harry Potter's and Sirius Black's names and wanted to shake their hands.

Ludo Bagman arrived a few minutes later and called the match. It lasted less than two hours. Ireland completely dominated the Bulgarians. But just as Fred and George had wagered, Viktor Krum got the Snitch for Bulgaria despite losing to Ireland.

Back in the tent, Draco groused that he should have joined Fred's and George's bet. The twins were crowing about the killing they had made at Bagman's expense. They could not wait to collect.

"Just don't tell your mother, boys, whatever you do," pleaded Mr Weasley.

"If she hears about it, it won't be from us," said Fred. "We have *big* plans for the money," said George.

"What plans?" asked Mr Weasley suspiciously.

"Best not to ask, Dad," said Bill laughing.

"Good counsel from your oldest and wisest." "What you don't know won't hurt you," advised Fred and George.

They continued to celebrate and discuss the match until Mr Weasley called a halt and ordered everyone to bed. However, jubilant celebrations by the Irish continued to sound across the campground even as Harry was finally starting to fall asleep.

Suddenly, Mr Weasley and Sirius were yelling urgently for everyone to get up and get out. Something bad was happening.

As they gathered outside the tent, they saw other people yelling and running into the woods away from the campground.

By the light of the full moon, they could see a large group of dark hooded figures approaching from the field behind the campground. They were shouting, laughing and firing spells randomly. They were destroying tents in their path and setting others on fire. Harry could see the figures were masked. They were also torturing the Muggle

campground manager, his wife, and their children, whom they had levitated upside down above their heads and were pulling them along like kites on strings.

Mr Weasley ordered Fred and George to quickly take the other school-aged children into the woods and hide. He, Sirius, Bill, Charlie, and Percy went to fight.

“Who *were* those people?” asked Harry after they had caught their breath. They were now huddled together well inside the woods. It was quite dark beneath the trees even with the full moon. They had passed or been passed by many other small groups, but now seemed quite alone.

“Death Eaters and other supporters of the Dark Lord,” said Draco assuredly. “Just flexing their muscles where they think they have safety in numbers. They’ll run sooner than get caught, especially the Death Eaters.”

“What’s the difference,” asked Harry.

“*Real* Death Eaters have been anointed by the Dark Lord,” explained Draco. “They have a death’s head tattoo cursed onto their left forearm by the Dark Lord himself. The skull has a snake coming out of its mouth. It’s called the Dark Mark and allows them to communicate with their Master... My father told me; he showed me his. And I bet he’s out there now.”

No one said anything for some time after Draco’s revelation.

Finally, Ginny asked, “Is it OK if we have some light?”

“Why not? We haven’t heard anything for quite a while...” said Fred or George. Both twins illuminated their wands.

“Hey!” exclaimed Ron, “My wand’s gone!”

Everyone else lit their wands and searched the vicinity without results. Hermione tried to summon it, but it did not work. Ron said the last time he was sure he had it was when they were watching the World Cup.

“It could be anywhere,” said Fred.

“Dad’s gonna kill me,” moaned Ron.

“It’s worse, little bro,” said George. “Wait ’till *Mum* finds out.”

After an hour of waiting, they agreed to start back to the campground to find out what had happened.

They were passing through a clearing in the woods when the sky above them suddenly lit up with a bright green light. They all looked up and then they saw it -- the Dark Mark that Draco had described. Only it was huge -- a shimmering vaporous iridescent green image in the night sky. It looked to be at least a quarter mile distant.

“Only Death Eaters know that spell,” said Draco. “They use it to mark the place where they’ve *killed* someone.”

“How *horrible*,” said Hermione in disgust.

Just then, they heard a soft muffled cough. It repeated several times. It seemed to be coming from... Harry.

“Right!” exclaimed Harry. He reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a small mirror. He held it close to his face and said something, but you could not hear what he was saying. Harry spoke again but he was not making any sound. Then he put the mirror back in his pocket and said, “That was Sirius. He said to walk to the edge of the woods and wait ’til he finds us.”

“*Where* did you get that *mirror!*” exclaimed Fred.

“Yeah! Can we have a look?” asked George.

Everyone wanted to hear about it. Harry told them, and that it was supposed to be a secret, which he asked them to honor. He explained that Sirius had told him the pair of mirrors were an ancient Black family heirloom that he had pinched from his mother when he went to Hogwarts.

Sirius found them soon after they emerged from the woods. He told them that he, Mr Weasley and other Ministry officials had captured Orpheus Nott and... Lucius Malfoy.

“I’m sorry, Draco,” said Sirius.

“Thank you, Sirius, but I’m *glad* he got caught. I’m only sorry for my mother, because it exposes the lie she’s lived all these years,” said Draco.

Sirius also assured them that Mr Weasley and the elder Weasley brothers were all fine. He then led them back to their tents. However, Mr Weasley did not return until early morning. He was utterly exhausted and reported very alarming news. Mr Crouch and his house-elf, Winky, were found dead in the woods -- suspected of being murdered by the Death Eaters. It explained the Dark Mark everyone had seen.

Percy was devastated by the death of his boss.

There was nothing else to do but strike their tents and return to the Burrow. When they arrived, Mrs Weasley was overjoyed at seeing them all well. She had already read the Daily Prophet, which reported the Death Eater attack and an unspecified number of unnamed fatalities. She had been worried sick. She hugged and kissed every one of them and whipped up a huge breakfast with the help of the girls.

Mr Weasley and Percy decided they needed to go into work even though it was Sunday.

After breakfast, Sirius, Harry, Draco, and Hermione took the Floo Network to Diagon Alley and then walked to Grimmauld Place. They spent the morning discussing what happened. It had been the first suspected killing by Death Eaters since Voldemort’s downfall. Sirius declared it was a revenge killing, explaining that when Crouch had been the head of Law Enforcement, he had been brutal -- Sirius’ own treatment being an example. They agreed it was a one-off and nothing more.

Kreacher served up a delicious dinner, but the once festive mood of the World Cup was gone. Draco and Hermione went home -- Draco via the Knight Bus, Hermione via Muggle bus.

On the first of September, they all met at Kings Cross to ride the Hogwarts Express.

Chapter 3 – The Triwizard Tournament

After the Sorting Ceremony, Professor Moody was introduced as the new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher.

Even from a distance, Moody looked intimidating, perhaps even frightening.

Draco told Harry that “Mad Eye” Moody was a mentor of his cousin Tonks when she was studying to become an Auror, but he retired after she was certified.

After the feast, Professor Dumbledore astonished all the students by announcing that the historically famous Triwizard Tournament would be held at Hogwarts this year. It was the first time the tournament had been held since 1792 and was considered a great honor.

A prize of one-thousand galleons would be awarded to the winner. But because of the dangerous nature of the contests -- deaths being quite common during its heyday -- only students of-age -- seventeen or older at the start of the tournament -- would be able to enter. This rule was particularly unpopular with the students, whom Professor Dumbledore had to call to order before continuing.

However, even more unpopular was the Headmaster’s announcement that the inter-house competition for the Quidditch Cup was suspended for the year. Graham Montague almost had a heart attack. He had expected to be named Slytherin Quidditch Captain. He was incensed and outraged not only by that, but also the fact Slytherin would not have a chance to regain the Cup after losing to Gryffindor the previous year.

This announcement generated the greatest outcry of all. It was spontaneous, but seemed to be led by Montague, the other House team captains, and all the players. Chants of “Quidditch, Quidditch, Quidditch!” rose and became deafening.

Inexplicably, Professor Dumbledore, remained silent and calm and let the chanting continue. After about a minute, the students became embarrassingly self-conscious of it. The chanting then quickly died out of its own accord, and it became deathly quiet in the Great Hall.

Dumbledore punctuated the silence by simply saying, “Thank you and good evening,” before walking away.

Nobody said anything until they had left the Hall.

“I guess we went a little overboard,” Harry said to Draco on the way to their common room.

“A *bit*,” said Draco. “You don’t always have to be yelled at to be taught a lesson. Still... I don’t think it’s *right* for them to be cancelling Quidditch. But I guess there’s nothing we can do about it.”

In bed, Harry thought about what Draco had said, but then his mind shifted to the Triwizard Tournament. He imagined himself holding the Triwizard Trophy and Hermione looking on, glowing with admiration.

Draco was imagining the same thing, only with Ginny instead.

The next morning as they were getting dressed, Theodore Nott approached Draco to commiserate over the arrest of their fathers for the attack on the campground at the Quidditch World Cup.

“I’m sure they’ll be sentenced to Azkaban,” complained Nott. “Fudge will want to make an example of them because of all the others that got away.”

Draco sneered, “They got what they *deserved*, Theo. They’re *criminals*.”

Nott was outraged and accused Draco of being a blood-traitor.

Draco called Nott a pure-blood fanatic.

Nott threw the first punch and then they both went at it with a vengeance.

Harry jumped between them and broke up the fight.

Nott stalked off with a bloody lip, but not before accusing Harry of being a Mudblood lover.

“How many *more* like him?” asked Harry. He was shocked because Theo had been his first friend in Slytherin -- before Pansy Parkinson had wrapped him around her little finger.

“A couple of dozen,” said Draco, rubbing his busied jaw. “If Crabbe and Goyle hadn’t already gone to breakfast, it would have been five against one. Their fathers are Death Eaters too.”

“Five against one?” asked Harry looking puzzled.

“Thugs like them you count *twice*,” said Draco.

He was not laughing.

Chapter 4 – Mad-Eye Moody

Hagrid was teaching about Blast-Ended Skrewts in Care of Magical Creatures. No one had ever heard of them. After Hippogriffs, it was a big letdown. The Skrewts were nasty looking and dangerous creatures -- the blast ended part was literal. Fortunately, they were quite small -- only about six inches long.

Professor Moody was even scarier up close; his face was heavily scarred and mangled. And his magical eye intimidated everyone since it seemed to be able to see through things -- including the back of his own head! But after only their first lesson in Defense Against the Dark Arts, Draco declared that Mad-Eye Moody was even better than Professor Lupin had been. Harry had to admit he was right.

While Lupin had been laid back and easygoing, Moody was hard-nosed and maniacal. Still, all the students looked forward to his classes. The reason: Professor Moody was a retired Auror. And he taught them what they *really* needed to know to fight against the Dark Arts -- real-world *fighting* magic, even the *illegal* stuff.

Specifically, he taught them the *Unforgivable Curses*.

Of course, Hermione later pointed out that he actually only taught them *about* the Unforgivable Curses. Yes, he demonstrated them, but he did not let the students practice them. The closest thing to practicing the curses was having the students *resist* the Imperius Curse when Professor Moody performed it on each of them.

Harry was the best at it. He actually *broke* the curse on only his second attempt. Professor Moody was *very* impressed. After class, Moody suggested to Harry that he should consider a career as an Auror.

It was the first time Harry had ever thought about what he wanted to do with his life. The idea of being an Auror appealed to him. He thought of Tonks and how cool she was.

It also caused Harry to renew his efforts to become an Animagus. He practiced in the dorm room every morning before he got out of bed and every evening after dinner

before going to the library. To Draco, it looked like he was meditating, and Harry let him think that -- except that he was always red faced from concentrating when he finished. And he still always got a headache.

After their first Potions lesson, Professor Snape held Harry back and warned him about Sirius. He said Black was a bad influence and could not be trusted. Harry said he knew what happened between Snape, Sirius, Lupin, and his father at school.

Snape did not appreciate that Harry had heard about it from Black and Lupin. He declared that Harry's father had only acted to save his own skin. This made Harry angry, but he calmly responded that he agreed that what Sirius had done was wrong, but his father had acted because it was the *right thing* to do. He argued that his father could have easily pretended he did not know anything about it -- and let Snape die -- but he did not.

Snape was infuriated at being lectured and ordered Harry out of the classroom.

But Harry had one more thing to say, "Sir, when the object of your anger is dead, it's time to let it go. That's what Sirius said about Pettigrew, the man who set him up to die in Azkaban."

Harry expected to get detention, but Professor Snape did not respond at all. His face was completely blank. After a moment, he dismissed Harry with a wave of his hand.

Chapter 5 – The Goblet of Fire

On a particularly slow news day, the Daily Prophet reported that the missing Ministry Official, Bertha Jorkins, had turned up -- alive. The article made the bottom half of the front page. It said she woke up one morning and found herself visiting her aunt in Albania and could not remember how she had gotten there. She was now in St Mungo's receiving memory treatments.

The fourth-years were getting more homework than ever.

Draco and Harry depended on Hermione to get them through Ancient Runes. Professor Snape was focusing on emetics in Potions, Flitwick on Summoning Charms, and McGonagall on cross-species transfiguration. Hermione already knew how to do them all and helped Harry and Draco in their study time.

Finally, the day came when the students from the competing Triwizard schools -- Beauxbatons Academy of Magic in France, and Durmstrang Institute for Magical Learning, from a secret location believed to be in Northeastern Europe -- were due to arrive. The Hogwarts students were released from class early in the afternoon and assembled on the grounds to greet their guests.

The Beauxbatons and Durmstrang students arrived in impressive style and ceremony -- the Beauxbatons in a flying carriage the size of a house pulled by six enormous flying horses; and the Durmstrangs on an ancient ocean-going sailing ship that magically surfaced from underwater in the middle of the Black Lake.

The Beauxbatons were led by their Headmistress, Madam Maxime, who was *incredibly* tall -- rivalling Hagrid. The Durmstrangs were headed by Igor Karkaroff, a sinister looking man. Draco told them he was another Death Eater who, like many others, had pleaded being under the Imperius Curse. But he was the only one who had also testified against some of the Death Eaters who were sent to Azkaban.

But the most amazing thing about the Durmstrangs was that Viktor Krum, the world renowned Bulgarian National Quidditch Team's Seeker, was one of the *students*. But Draco, as well as most of the other boys, hardly noticed him as they were completely taken by one extremely attractive Beauxbatons girl.

Harry said she looked like one of the Vela that had cheered and danced for the Bulgarian team at the World Cup -- at least her beautiful long hair had the same incredible silvery sheen and liquid motion. Draco seemed to be in a trance.

The Beauxbatons students decided to sit with the Ravenclaws while Karkaroff directed the Durmstrangs to sit with the Slytherins in the Great Hall.

At the Triwizard Welcoming Feast, Professor Dumbledore gave a brief history of the Tournament. Then he unveiled and ignited the Goblet of Fire -- an impartial magical object -- which would select the Champion from each school. He also announced the rules. The thousand galleon prize again seemed to garner the greatest interest, until he announced there would be a dance on Christmas night in the Great Hall -- the Yule Ball. The girls screamed with delight, while the boys were nervously silent.

Ludo Bagman and Percy Weasley were present to represent the Ministry. Percy was temporarily taking the place of his murdered boss, Barty Crouch, until his replacement as Head of the Department of International Magical Cooperation was named.

After the feast, the Goblet of Fire was relocated to the center of the Entry Hall where eligible students desiring to enter the Tournament would write their name and school on a piece of parchment and place it into the cup. A circular ‘age line’ had been drawn around the cup on the stone floor to keep underage students from entering.

Those present enjoyed a great laugh when Fred and George Weasley were jinxed by a defensive spell Professor Dumbledore had placed on the age line. They had foolishly tried to cross the line and submit their names after taking an ageing potion. They had to go see Madam Pomfrey to remove the magnificent white beards and mustaches which had instantly sprouted after they were immediately and roughly ejected from the circle.

Harry, Hermione, Draco, and Ginny visited Hagrid at the first opportunity after the foreign students had arrived. It did not take them long to realize he was quite taken by Madam Maxime. He had obviously made an attempt to improve his personal appearance -- including combing and anointing his hair, moustache, and beard with something which looked like axel grease... and *even* cleaning his fingernails.

At the end of one week, the three champions were selected after another evening feast. The Goblet of Fire had expelled, in turn, three slips of parchment, with the name of the champion it had selected from each school, which Professor Dumbledore announced.

“Viktor Krum, from Durmstrang...”

“Fleur Delacour, from Beauxbatons... and...”

“Cedric Diggory, from Hogwarts, Hufflepuff House.”

Each of the champions received rousing applause from all the students.

Miss Delacour was the beautiful vella-like girl that had so attracted Draco and made Ginny quite jealous. Fortunately for Hermione (and Harry), Harry showed no particular interest in her -- other than acknowledging her beauty.

Even before the assembly was dismissed, Fred and George were taking bets.

Chapter 6 – Quidditch Forever

There was still one sore point about the Triwizard Tournament that Harry and Draco just could not abide -- cancellation of the House Quidditch Cup competition.

They were discussing it in the Gryffindor common room. The new practice of open-house common rooms had been started by Draco and Ginny during Easter break the previous year. It allowed students to visit friends in other house common rooms after dinner until curfew on weeknights and after breakfast until curfew on weekends.

“But what can we *do* about it?” asked Draco finally.

Harry suddenly had an inspiration. “Well, you and Ginny started common room visitation. So, why don’t *we* start an *intramural* Quidditch league?”

“You mean, not just for the house teams?” asked Draco.

“Exactly,” said Harry. “Let anyone who wants to play, play.”

“Brilliant!” exclaimed Draco.

“You mean we could have an all-girls league?” asked Ginny excitedly.

“Sure,” said Harry. “Or a first-years-only league, or a mixed-house-teams league, or a mixed-school-team league, or...”

“A students-afraid-of-flying league,” jested Draco, winking at Hermione, who could not help laughing.

“Right! *Any* grouping students want,” said Harry, adding, “And you could play in multiple leagues if you wanted to... And players on the House teams could still have a tournament -- unofficial of course -- so Montague could still have the chance to win the Quidditch Cup... And House team members could offer to referee games in the other leagues, if they wanted.”

They spent all the remaining time until curfew outlining their plan. Of course, Hermione took the initiative to write it all down.

The next day, Harry and Draco took the idea to Montague and craftily suggested he should be the Slytherin team captain. He was all for it, of course. Then the three went to the other House team captains. It did not take any convincing. They too were all for it and quickly spread the idea around the school.

The most important part of the plan was to *not* ask permission. They just set the start date for the next Saturday and posted notices -- made by Hermione -- in the common

rooms. The stated goal was to give every student, who wanted to, an opportunity to learn and play Quidditch on their own terms.

That weekend, the teachers were amazed to see almost the entire student population out on the grounds with broomsticks. The first-years had priority use of the school's brooms. Madam Hooch was an immediate enthusiastic supporter and conjured goal posts wherever needed.

It was organized chaos, but everyone had a fantastic time.

After that, it got more organized. There were matches every weekend, both Saturday and Sunday -- except when Triwizard events and Hogsmeade weekends were scheduled. Weekday evening practice was entirely optional -- the focus was to have fun.

House Quidditch team members did officiate some games, mostly for the 'serious' leagues. Matches were limited to sixty-minutes to allow more matches to be played. Matches were held all over the grounds using every available space. Most of the casual leagues dispensed with the Snitch. Some did not use Bludgers. Some had more or fewer than seven players or played with *two* Quaffles or just one goal at each end. In other words -- it was 'anything goes' regarding league rules.

One league with two teams of mostly Muggle-borns had a rule you could only *kick* the Quaffle, and they did not use a Snitch or Bludgers. They played by skimming just above the ground on their broomsticks and used a single goal on the ground at each end of the pitch consisting of a wide wooden frame and a net. Draco was fascinated by the idea, exclaiming, "Even *Muggles* could play Quidditch this way!" Harry and Hermione just looked at each other and grinned. The same league went further and spontaneously added a rule during one match that you always had to have an open Butterbeer in one hand and take a drink as you kicked the Quaffle. It was hilarious, and almost every other league called a timeout to watch.

Viktor Krum very generously held clinics on Seeker techniques and strategy. He and Harry became friends as a result.

The real measure of success was that Professor Dumbledore came out to watch every weekend. The intramural Quidditch leagues were so immensely popular, Dumbledore awarded Harry and Draco twenty points each for coming up with the idea.

Teams came up with very imaginative names. Unfortunately, some names raised eyebrows -- such as “Ass Kickers”, “Ball Busters” and others *much* ruder. Professor McGonagall imposed naming guidelines, though all the students continued to use the ‘banned’ team names anyway -- unofficially, of course. And some of the teams came up with incredibly imaginative uniforms. One girls team dressed like pink baby unicorns.

You could not find a student who said it was not the most fun at school they had ever had -- except perhaps for a handful of Gobstones fanatics.

Chapter 7 – The First Task

On the first Hogsmeade Weekend, Harry, Hermione, Draco, and Ginny went to the Three Broomsticks to enjoy some Butterbeer.

They were approached by a platinum blond witch in heavy makeup. She introduced herself as Rita Skeeter, freelance reporter for the Daily Prophet. She asked to informally interview Harry and his friends over drinks.

Little did they realize they were four fresh innocents, ripe for the picking.

On Sunday morning, the four visited Hagrid. He accidentally let slip that he had just seen Charlie Weasley.

“Here at Hogwarts?” asked Ginny. “Mum just wrote me, but she didn’t mention Charlie coming home again from Romania so soon after the World Cup.”

“It must have something to do with dragons,” declared Hermione, remembering their experience with Norbert, the dragon Hagrid had hatched from an egg their first year.

Hagrid stammered and stuttered trying to think of an explanation.

“Then it *is* about dragons!” exclaimed Draco. “Brilliant!”

“Hagrid, you’ve *got* to show us,” pleaded Harry.

After more haranguing, Hagrid agreed to show them that evening, but only if they wore Harry’s invisibility cloak.

“But four of us won’t fit,” explained Harry.

Hermione said she really did not want to see another dragon. So, only Harry, Draco and Ginny returned later. Hagrid was now wearing a ridiculous hairy suit instead of his usual heavy leather coat with its dozens of pockets. On the way to their destination, he made a detour and picked up Madam Maxime at the Beauxbatons' carriage.

As they followed discreetly behind under the invisibility cloak, Ginny whispered to Draco and Harry that Hagrid clearly fancied Madam Maxime.

“What a baby they'd make,” joked Draco, “It would be *enormous*.”

“Quiet,” hushed Ginny, giggling.

The dragon stockade was deep in the Forbidden Forest. Charlie was not happy that Hagrid had brought Madam Maxime along, but Hagrid just shrugged it off.

There were three dragons, obviously one for each of the Champions. And they were all nesting mothers. The dragons were huge, viscous and quite frightening. They made Norbert seem like a kitten.

They had soon seen enough. Hagrid's attention was focused on the Beauxbatons' Headmistress, so the three decided to return to the castle without trying to speak to him. Just as they left, they spied Igor Karkaroff sneaking after Hagrid and Maxime.

They returned to the library and told Hermione what they had seen.

“So, Krum and Delacour will know about the Dragons,” said Hermione. “That's cheating. We should tell Professor Dumbledore.”

“I don't think that's a good idea,” said Draco. “Professor Dumbledore can't go accusing them. It would be bad for international relations.”

“Right,” agreed Harry, “Draco and I will tell Diggory tomorrow. That will even it up.” And they did, right before breakfast. Cedric was extremely grateful for the tip.

When Owl Post arrived, Draco stopped eating to scan through the Daily Prophet as usual. He was on page three when he suddenly groaned and exclaimed, “I don't *believe* it!”

“What?” said Harry.

Draco folded the paper back and handed it to him saying, “Rita Skeeter...”

In her column, *‘Me, Myself, and I’*, she had written a ridiculous article about them.

ANGST AT HOGWARTS

The cast of characters: Famous Harry Potter -- recent savior and godson of Sirius Black, struggling to fit in as a Slytherin, his deceased parents having been Gryffindors. His best friend, Draco Malfoy -- cast out by his own family, suspected Death Eater father recently sent to Azkaban for Muggle-baiting at the Quidditch World Cup. Hermione Granger -- brilliant Muggle-born, first in her year, and the focus of a possible love triangle with her Slytherin classmates. And younger, pretty Ginny Weasley -- saved by Potter and Malfoy in the Chamber of Secrets, a dotting follower, forever in their debt...

The rest of the article was complete claptrap, total fiction. The four of them vowed never to talk to “that Skeeter woman” ever again.

The Skeeter article generated some buzz among the students, but it was soon forgotten given what was coming. The excitement in the school was building rapidly in anticipation of the First Task of the Triwizard Tournament on Saturday, only five days hence. It was hard to concentrate on classwork and homework, much less a silly newspaper article. All the Hogwarts students were rooting for Cedric Diggory.

Sirius called Harry via their talking mirrors and said he was coming to watch.

On the day of the First Task, Sirius met Harry, Draco, Hermione, and Ginny inside the Entrance Hall. They walked with the other students and guests to the specially built enclosure on the grounds where the task would take place and took their seats.

Sirius saw Karkaroff in the judges’ box. He was not happy and said Karkaroff was a Death Eater who got off by betraying several of his fellow henchmen. “Mad-Eye captured Karkaroff,” growled Sirius. “No doubt he’s keeping a close eye on him.”

The First Task was thrilling and genuinely dangerous. Each Champion had to retrieve a golden egg placed in the clutch of the mother dragon’s closely guarded eggs. Each Champion succeeded using different spells and strategies of their own determination. They were awarded points by the judges based on time, injuries, and damage to the clutch of dragon eggs.

At the end, Viktor Krum had the lead. Cedric was a close second and Fleur was a distant third.

As they left the event, they were approached by Rita Skeeter again. She had the temerity to ask Harry and Sirius for a joint interview.

Sirius was furious. He pointed his finger in her face. “I’m *warning* you, Skeeter. You stay *away* from my godson, especially after the *rubbish* you wrote this week. You don’t want to see *me*... ever again.”

Rita laughed it off and walked away. But Harry could tell she was intimidated by Sirius.

The three Champions were all congratulated by Professor Dumbledore at the evening feast. The Durmstrang students left at the end of the feast to continue celebrating on their ship in the black lake and were joined by the Beauxbatons as their special guests. It raised some eyebrows at the High Table, but the Hogwarts students didn’t care.

The Hogwarts students continued the celebration of Diggory’s close second place finish in the Hufflepuff common room. It seemed like half of the Hogwarts students were crammed inside, with the rest spilling out into the corridor.

The Hufflepuffs had amazingly great party food, which impressed everyone. But Fred told Hermione it was because they had an arrangement with the kitchens, which were just down the corridor.

“Is that where you and George come up with all the food for celebrations in the Gryffindor common room?” asked Hermione.

“Righto,” laughed Fred, “except for the Butterbeer... Hogsmeade for that, of course, and now you know *how*.” He gave Hermione a wink.

“So, where are the kitchens and how do you get in,” asked Hermine innocently.

Fred gave her the eye, but then smiled and said, “After all you’ve done for us, I *suppose* you can be trusted.”

Chapter 8 – Elf Troubles

Rita Skeeter showed up uninvited at Hagrid's Care of Magical Creatures class.

She could not help but see the students struggling with the Skrewts, which were now the size of small dogs -- ten times as big as they had been at the start of school -- because they had been cannibalizing each other. She sweet-talked Hagrid and he arranged to meet her in Hogsmeade for an interview.

Harry, Hermione and Draco tried to warn Hagrid about Skeeter, but he ignored them.

As they entered the castle after Hagrid's lesson, Hermione grabbed Harry and Draco and steered them toward the stairs to the basement, saying, "I have something to show you."

"Are we going to Hufflepuff?" asked Harry.

"Just wait and see," insisted Hermione.

She took them past the stack of barrels in the niche that hid the entrance to the Hufflepuff common room. They stopped farther down the corridor in front of a very large painting of a silver bowl full of fruit.

"Fred told me about this," said Hermione as she tickled the large green pear in the bowl. It immediately turned into a door handle. Hermione turned it and the painting swung open like a door.

"The Hogwarts kitchens..." she announced. They could see dozens and dozens of house-elves bustling about a huge room, laying out place settings on four long tables. The aromas of delicious cooking wafted into the corridor and had them salivating.

As soon as they entered, a house-elf dashed up to them, bowed and squeaked, "Is there anything the young Miss is requiring today?"

Hermione smiled. "Yes. Tea would be lovely, please."

The house-elf turned and snapped his fingers. In an instant, two more elves came forward carrying a silver tea service and a platter of pastries.

"Great service," said Draco.

The three elves smiled broadly. The first elf served them, and they chatted with him about the kitchen operations as they enjoyed tea.

Dinner preparations were underway. It was obvious that the long tables in the kitchen mirrored the tables in the Great Hall directly above and that, when ready, the place settings, food serving bowls, platters, and tankards were sent magically upwards at the Headmaster's command.

They thanked the elves for tea and the tiny creatures quickly disappeared with their offerings into the blur of activity. Then Hermione took them on a tour.

The food preparation area was impressively organized. It was like an assembly line. Hermione said the house-elves constantly competed to be cooks and only the best cooks earned the right to prepare the sample dishes. Most amazing, only three samples dish of every entrée and side dish were prepared from scratch. Then a panel of tasting elves sampled them. The best of each was selected and then magically duplicated in quantities needed to feed the whole school.

"So that's why everything always tastes so good," said Harry.

"Has to be," said Draco, "It's always the best of the best."

Harry wanted to see the puddings.

When they got to the bakery section, the elves were sample tasting. Treacle tart, Harry's favorite, was one of the puddings being judged. He asked if he could taste it too. The elves were clearly honored to be asked. They served him a plate with a sample of each. Each one was perfection as far as he could tell, so he honestly said, "I think all three are brilliant. I obviously don't have your professional experience to properly judge. *You* must make the decision."

The house-elf bakers loved his answer and duplicated one of each of the tarts for him to take away.

Seeing Harry with a stack of tarts, the other cooks rushed forward with their own offerings to take away. Harry ended up with his arms full. Draco and Hermione too were soon loaded down.

The last offering were three flagons of pumpkin juice delivered by... Dobby.

“Dobby!” exclaimed Harry. “We didn’t know you worked in the kitchens.”

“Harry Potter, Dobby is working everywhere there is work being needed,” said their tiny friend as he hooked the handle of one flagon onto one of Harry’s fingers clutching his staggering pile of food offerings.

Hermione seemed in danger of having her stack of food topple over when three other elves rushed forward with picnic baskets and quickly had all their food securely packed away for them.

Now in addition to Dobby, there were a dozen or more elves attending to them.

“Thank you so much for allowing us to interrupt you during your busiest time of the day,” said Hermione graciously.

“Ah, Miss,” said an elf who appeared to be much older than the others, “House-elves is always busy.”

“I can see that,” said Hermione. “Are all of you *paid* the same as Dobby?”

It was a *‘faux pas’* dung bomb.

The kitchen became very quiet. The only sound seemed to be the bubbling of cooking pots. Every house-elf in the kitchen was now standing still and looking at them.

Finally, the elderly house-elf said, “It is not being proper for a house-elf to be accepting paying. House-elves is too proud. We is not approving of Dobby.”

“But it’s not right to work *without* being paid,” insisted Hermione.

This resulted in very stern looks on the face of all the house-elves, except Dobby, who was slowly backing away and trying to hide behind the elves nearby.

“Hermione...” started Draco.

But the old elf stepped forward, “Thank you for coming, Miss. We is needing to be getting back to work.”

At his words, a dozen or more house-elves rushed forward. They snapped up the picnic baskets and hurriedly ushered Hermione, Harry and Draco out the door. They set down the baskets in the corridor and quickly shut the door.

“Hermione... I *told* you... house-elves *live* to work,” said Draco angrily. “You just insulted them in the *worst* possible way. I doubt they’ll *ever* let us visit again.”

“Well, I think they just don’t know what’s *good* for them. They’ve been exploited *too long*,” said Hermione defiantly. “And I’m going to *do* something about it.”

The next Saturday morning, as students left the castle for Intramural Quidditch League matches, they were confronted by Hermione sitting behind a table fitted with a large black banner with foot tall yellow letters:

PEE
-- *Prevent Elvish Exploitation* --

She had fact sheets, flyers, pennants, and badges.

The badges read: *I PEE*

They cost one galleon each but sold out in minutes. Everyone wanted one.

Chapter 9 – The Yule Ball

Fred and George were Hermione’s biggest supporters. They soon made more badges, including:

<i>I Need 2 PEE</i>	<i>Please PEE</i>	<i>PEE with Me</i>
<i>PEE Forever!</i>	<i>Only U Can PEE</i>	<i>Don’t Forget 2 PEE</i>
<i>I Love 2 PEE</i>	<i>I Stand 2 PEE</i>	<i>Friends PEE Together</i>
<i>Stand Up 2 PEE</i>	<i>Help Me PEE</i>	and <i>PEE Now!</i>

They split the profits with Hermione.

There were more students with PEE badges than Champion badges and many with both.

There was a rumor going around that the Professor Dumbledore himself had worn one to a staff meeting but had taken it off when Professor McGonagall had tutted, “Really, Albus.” However, there was some disagreement as to which badge in particular he had worn.

“No offense, but how did you come up with something so cool, Hermione?” asked Draco.

“None taken,” said Hermione breezily. “At first, I thought of things that sounded like the titles of articles in political journals, like ‘*Stop the Outrageous Abuse of Our Fellow Magical Creatures and Campaign for a Change in Their Legal Status*’. Then I realized that wouldn’t get the students’ attention. So, I thought, *who* knows how to get attention? Well, Fred and George, of course. So, I knew it had to be something *very rude* and *catchy*.”

“Brilliant!” said Harry.

“Fred and George thought so too,” said Hermione proudly.

“I agree. So, what are you going to do with the money, Hermione?” asked Draco.

“Thank you, Draco. Well, most of it is going to go into expanding the reach of my campaign,” said Hermione. “I hope to get an opinion piece published in the Daily Prophet.”

“You could do an interview with that Skeeter woman,” suggested Ginny, jokingly.

“Never!” barked Hermione. “She’s the last person...”

“Anyway, you can’t give the money to the house-elves; they’d never accept it,” said Harry.

“Actually... I was thinking of using some of the money to do something *nice* for them,” suggested Hermione.

“Like what?” asked Harry.

“I haven’t thought of anything... just yet,” she admitted.

“I bet they’d like some new scrub brushes,” teased Draco.

Hermione just scowled.

Professor Dumbledore introduced Professor McGonagall at the feast on Sunday night.

She formally announced the Yule Ball and reviewed all the particulars. It would occur the evening of Christmas, three weeks hence. Fourth-years and above were eligible, but they could invite younger partners. Of course, attending required remaining at Hogwarts over Christmas, though there would be a special run of the Hogwarts Express the afternoon of Boxing Day to allow interested students to spend the rest of the Christmas holidays at home.

Most of the fourth-years and older students signed up to stay for Christmas because of the Ball, but also because of their new friends from Beauxbatons and Durmstrang who were far from home.

After the announcement, Draco told Harry he very much wanted to stay for the Ball. “I’m going to ask Ginny tomorrow. I know she’d really like to go, especially being a third-year. You can ask Hermione.”

“But it’s a *dance*,” said Harry nervously. “I’ve never danced before... And I sort of wanted to be with Sirius for his first Christmas in twelve years.”

“Harry, I’m sure Sirius will understand,” said Draco. “And you can take the train home on Boxing Day... And *I* can teach you how to dance. My mother made me learn. She said it was an ‘*essential element of refined society -- like using the proper utensil when dining.*’ Anyway, I’m sure you don’t want to disappoint Hermione.”

Harry did *not* want to disappoint Hermione. But thinking about asking her tied his stomach in knots.

“What do I say?” asked Harry uncertainly.

“Just say, ‘Hermione, will you come to the Yule Ball with me.’ It’s not hard,” said Draco matter-of-factly. But Draco could tell by the look on Harry’s face that he did not agree. “Come on, Harry... You’ve faced the Dark Lord *twice* and a *hundred* Dementors. This is *nothing*...” said Draco encouragingly.

Harry still did not say anything, so, Draco said, “OK. We’ll do it *together*, tomorrow, before breakfast. Just follow my lead...”

Draco and Harry arrived early for breakfast and waited outside the Great Hall. Draco looked very confident. Harry was pale and sweating.

Ginny and Hermione came down the marble staircase together. Draco waved to them, and they hurried over, likely expecting some interesting news. Draco wasted no time and said, “Ginny, will you come to the Yule Ball with me?”

Ginny squealed with delight, exclaimed, “Oh, Yes!” and then hugged Draco.

Then all eyes turned to Harry. Draco nudged him with his shoulder.

Harry’s mouth was completely dry. He tried to swallow but couldn’t. He had memorized the words and practiced them over and over. He felt Draco nudge him again. But he was completely frozen.

Then he heard the words, “Harry, will you take me to the Yule Ball?”

It was Hermione.

He nodded and croaked, “OK.”

Hermione stepped forward and kissed him lightly on the lips. It was the first time she had ever done that. Harry melted. Still inches from his face she said softly, “I *know* you wanted to ask me. I hope I didn’t spoil it for you.”

“No, Hermione... You *saved* me,” said Harry, now completely relaxed. “Can I start over?”

Hermione nodded.

“Hermione, will you come to the Yule Ball with me?” asked Harry.

“Yes, I’d love too,” said Hermione happily.

Draco gaped in amazement and Ginny had tears in her eyes.

At the Slytherin table, Draco said, “I don’t know how you do it, but even your *screwups* come out golden.”

The talk of the next few days was all about the pairings for the Yule Ball.

The Champions:

Viktor Krum and Parvati Patel -- considered one of the best-looking girls in school.

Fleur Delacour and Roger Davies -- Ravenclaw Quidditch Captain.

Cedric Diggory and Cho Chang -- Ravenclaw Seeker.

The Obvious:

Harry Potter and Hermione Granger.

Draco Malfoy and Ginny Weasley.

Their Friends:

Fred Weasley and Angelina Johnson -- Gryffindor Chaser (and elected Captain for the house intramural league team).

George Weasley and Alicia Spinnet -- Gryffindor Chaser.

Luna Lovegood and Neville Longbottom -- considered the perfect ‘odd’ match.

Other Notables:

Ron Weasley and Lavender Brown -- she asked *him* (the rumor was, it had something to do with his joke about the planet, Uranus).

Pansy Parkinson and Theodore Nott -- probably the most hen-pecked boy in school.

No girls would accept Crabbe or Goyle -- not even Millicent Bulstrode -- so they gave up trying.

Draco and Ginny scheduled dancing practice for themselves with Harry and Hermione in the empty classroom they always used for spell practice. Harry had never danced in his life and desperately needed it. ‘*La-di-dah-ing*’ instead of having real music meant it was not much fun -- except for being able to hold Hermione close. But Harry learned well enough to feel confident that he would not embarrass himself at the Ball.

Christmas morning arrived and there were presents.

Dobby gave Harry and Draco each a pair of socks for Christmas. Draco gave Dobby a wool hat, his favorite, and Harry gave him all the remaining old socks of Uncle Vernon’s. Sirius sent Harry a penknife with attachments that would open any lock and

undo any knot. Hagrid gave him a vast box of sweets. Hermione gave him a book on professional Quidditch teams.

This year Harry made sure he did not forget. He gave Hermione a pair of mother-of-pearl earrings in the shape of a flower. Draco would not say what he had gotten Ginny.

Harry and Draco gave each other the same present -- a one-year subscription to the Daily Prophet.

After Christmas breakfast, the doors to the Great Hall were closed in preparation for the Yule Ball. When the time came that evening, everyone met their partners in the Entrance Hall.

Hermione looked amazing. Harry had never seen her so pretty. Her hair was done up beautifully and she had on lipstick. She was wearing beautiful blue satin dress robes and the earrings Harry had just given her.

Ginny was also very pretty. Her flaming red hair was enhanced by the beautiful light pink dress robes Draco had helped her buy before school. She was also wearing a small gold chain and pendant in the shape of a heart, which Harry suspected was Draco's Christmas present to her.

Professor McGonagall, resplendent in emerald-green robes, stepped in front of the doors to the Great Hall and announced, "Witches and Wizards, Ladies and Gentlemen -- the Yule Ball."

The great doors swung open, and everyone was dazzled by the sight as they entered. It was truly spectacular. The Great Hall had been completely transformed into a magnificent sparkling ice palace.

Once everyone had entered, Professor McGonagall had the attendees move aside to form a lane up to the far end of the room. The platform where the High Table was normally situated was now a stage with a band -- the famous Weird Sisters -- and the area in front of it was a large dance floor.

Professor Dumbledore, who was standing in front of the band declared loudly, "Enter the Champions and their partners!"

The band struck up an entry march.

The three Triwizard Champions and their partners entered the Great Hall and formally processed to the dance floor where the pairs turned to face each other. The band began to play a waltz and the couples danced. They were shortly joined by Professor Dumbledore and Professor McGonagall, which was the signal that the dance floor was now open for the evening.

Draco liked dancing and he forced Harry to dance too. After a while, Harry decided he liked it -- especially the slow dances where he got to hold Hermione close.

The two couples had a great time. They traded dance partners several times.

When Harry and Hermione were taking a break -- Hermione said her dress shoes were too tight -- Viktor Krum came over and asked Hermione to dance. She politely accepted. It made Harry jealous.

Percy Weasley took the opportunity to take Hermione's chair and talk to Harry. He said that the Ministry was still investigating Mr Crouch's murder but had not come up with anything. He said the Minister told him he would be moved out of his acting position as soon as the Triwizard Tournament was over. He was hoping to be promoted onto the Minister's personal staff. Then he excused himself when he noticed Fred and George talking to Ludo Bagman.

Harry searched for Hermione. She was still dancing with Krum. But he could no longer see Draco and Ginny on the dance floor. When the song ended, Krum escorted Hermione back to Harry. He bowed to Hermione and nodded to Harry before turning away. However, he returned a minute later with drinks for Hermione and Harry.

"He's really very nice," said Hermione when Krum departed again. "He's even more shy than you."

"No way," said Harry.

"He hardly said a word, but admitted he'd been wanting to talk to me for a long time," said Hermione, sipping her drink. "Maybe I'll ask him to set up a PEE chapter in Bulgaria..."

"Hermione!" exclaimed Harry.

Hermione laughed, "I'm just teasing you..."

Suddenly, without warning, Harry's scar exploded in pain.

He had not felt anything like it since the Forbidden Forest, but this was worse -- *much* worse. He dropped his drink and slid off his chair onto the floor. He was fighting to remain conscious, but the pain was excruciating.

Finally, the pain began to subside, and he began to sense his surroundings.

Professor Dumbledore was helping him back into his chair. Professor McGonagall was telling everyone that everything was fine and asking people to move back and resume dancing. Hermione had screamed for Professor Dumbledore, but Harry had not heard anything.

"What happened, Harry?" asked Dumbledore.

"It was my *scar* again, sir. It's *never* been this bad... but there was something else. Before the pain overwhelmed me, I felt... *triumph*... an immense feeling of triumph," said Harry, sounding very worried. "Does this mean Voldemort's at Hogwarts again?"

Dumbledore shook his head, "No, I do not think so. My sources tell me he is somewhere in Albania. We'll talk about this later, but now I think it would be a good idea for you to take a walk with Miss Granger to clear your head."

Harry and Hermione left the Great Hall arm in arm and went outside into the grounds. As they turned the corner heading toward the greenhouses, they saw Professor Snape rousting couples out of the bushes and taking points. Ron and Lavender Brown were among the offending couples.

Harry and Hermione stopped to watch and ducked back behind the corner. Hermione snorted, "What does she see in him? He has not danced with her even *once*."

Just then Igor Karkaroff walked up to Professor Snape, and they overheard him say, "We need to talk, Severus... *now!* You're *not* putting me off *again*."

"Very well, Igor. What is it?" said Snape sounding disinterested.

"Don't play *games* with me; I know you felt it too. It hasn't burned in thirteen years," hissed Karkaroff.

“Yes, Igor, I felt it. But *I* have nothing to fear. Can *you* say the same thing?” sneered Snape.

“He’s *back*,” said Karkaroff sounding terrified. “What should I *do*?”

“Run,” said Snape coldly and turned his back on Karkaroff and headed their way.

Harry and Hermione dashed away to prevent Professor Snape from discovering them. They returned to the Great Hall and sat down away from everyone. They discussed Harry’s scar and what they had just heard. The two events had to be connected. They agreed it could only mean one thing.

Voldemort was back again.

Before they could discuss it further, Draco and Ginny joined them. Even before they sat down, Ginny said, “We have something important to tell you.”

Harry and Hermione looked at each other, wondering if they had heard about Harry... but it was not what they expected.

“Hagrid is half-*giant*,” said Draco ominously.

“So?” responded Harry questioningly.

“Harry, giants are *vicious*. They love *killing*. Everyone *hates* them. They were driven out of England centuries ago,” explained Draco.

“But Hagrid is *nothing* like that. I’ll admit he likes dangerous creatures, but he’s harmless,” declared Harry.

“I agree,” said Hermione, “but many people are prejudiced.”

Draco and Ginny then related how, after just escaping Professor Snape’s shrubbery search, they had ended up near Hagrid and Madam Maxime in a rose garden created for the Yule Ball. They overheard Hagrid asking Maxime if she were half-giant too. It had not gone well. Madam Maxime had been deeply offended by Hagrid’s question and had stormed off. Draco and Ginny had slipped away after that.

They all agreed they should not talk to Hagrid or anyone else about it. Draco suggested they all dance again since it was getting close to midnight. With Hermione in his arms, Harry forgot about his scar and Voldemort. They would tell Draco and Ginny later.

The midnight bell sounded, and the Weird Sister's announced the last dance.

Afterwards, Harry escorted Hermione back to Gryffindor tower. Draco and Ginny were already there standing close together by the portrait of the Fat Lady who was being visited by her friend, Violet.

Draco winked at Harry. He kissed Ginny's hand and said goodnight. Ginny clutched her heart pendant and climbed through the portrait hole. Draco turned and walked away whistling.

Harry took Hermione's hand, but she pulled it away and threw her arms around Harry's neck and kissed him as she had never kissed him before. But before Harry could kiss her back, there was a loud sucking sound followed by a pop like a champagne cork.

Harry and Hermione jumped apart.

It was Peeves the Poltergeist, who began cackling and chanting, "*Pottie luuves Grangie. Pottie luuves Grangie. Kissy, kissy, kissy...*"

Harry and Hermione scowled at Peeves. Hermione sighed, then said, "Goodnight, Harry. It was *wonderful*." She turned to go. But Harry pulled her around and kissed her. Peeves must have been surprised because he stopped his chant in mid stanza.

Hermione had tears in her eyes. "I wish this night would never end." She turned again and went through the portrait hole.

The Fat Lady said, "You're a lucky one, Mr Harry Potter."

"Yes, indeed," echoed Violet.

Harry's head was so high in the clouds he hardly noticed that Peeves resumed his razzing and followed Harry down the corridor until the floating pest encountered another couple to pester.

Chapter 10 – The Dream

The next day, the Hogwarts Express took students who had stayed just for the Yule Ball to Kings Cross so they could spend the rest of the Christmas Holidays with their families.

The train left at noon. Harry and Hermione were on it. Draco remained at school because Ginny, and the other Weasleys, were staying.

Harry and Hermione had a compartment to themselves. They held hands almost the whole way and talked about many things.

Harry was happier than he had ever been in his whole life.

During the week-long holiday, Hermione had Harry and Sirius over to her house for dinner, so they would get to know her parents. Harry and Hermione spent most of their time together at number Twelve, though they also went out to see the Christmas decorations in the shops of Diagon Alley and around London as well. They also enjoyed Pantomimes at Covent Garden and a Christmas concert at St Martin in the Fields.

The time passed all too quickly for Harry.

The two returned to school on the Hogwarts Express on the first of January. Draco and Ginny were waiting for Harry and Hermione at the castle entrance.

“Professor Dumbledore wants to see you right away, Harry,” said Draco.

Harry said he would meet them at dinner and went to Dumbledore’s office.

It was about his scar hurting at the Yule Ball. Professor Dumbledore assured Harry that he had investigated, but there was no evidence of Lord Voldemort being anywhere nearby or even in England. However, Dumbledore was concerned not only because Harry’s pain had been so intense, but that it had included an emotion -- the feeling of triumph. He asked Harry if he had any other “episodes” since.

Harry assured him he had not.

“Something has clearly changed, Harry,” said Dumbledore. “Only, I am afraid, we must wait to see what happens. It is certain, however, that Lord Voldemort has not given up

his attempts to return yet again. We must remain on guard. If you experience *anything*, please come see me immediately.”

The next morning at breakfast, on the first day of term, the joy of the holidays ended abruptly.

Rita Skeeter’s column in the Daily Prophet was an article titled:

HOGWARTS GIANT SECRET

It was about Hagrid being half-giant. It questioned Professor Dumbledore’s judgement in having someone on staff -- as a teacher no less -- whose parentage included such vicious and murderous creatures, not to mention the underlying creepiness of a human and giant coupling.

But it was worse. It also reported that Hagrid had violated wizarding law by illegally crossbreeding Manticores and Fire Crabs. And that he was endangering students in his Care of Magical Creatures class by forcing them to care for the deadly creatures. She quoted several students who said they had been injured by the so-called ‘*Skrewts*’ and were afraid of Hagrid. The article ended by recommending an investigation by the Ministry of Magic.

Skeeter’s article made Harry, Draco, and Ginny very angry. But Hermione practically blew a fuse.

“That *evil* woman! I’ll *get* her someday,” vowed Hermione.

“What I don’t understand,” said Draco, “is how she found out he was half-giant? I mean, we *know* Hagrid told her about the Skrewts when she interviewed him. But we only found out about him being half-giant at the Yule Ball. I’m sure he never told Skeeter about that. It took meeting someone like Madam Maxime to get him to bring it up.”

“I agree,” said Hermione. “Someone else must have overheard it too and told Skeeter. Madam Maxime would *never* have repeated the conversation -- it would raise questions about *her*.”

One small news story went unnoticed by most, but not Hermione. Lucius Malfoy and Orpheus Nott had been released from Azkaban after serving their four-month sentence for Muggle-baiting at the Quidditch World Cup. Draco did not say anything, but looked sour.

On Wednesday afternoon, Hagrid was missing from Care of Magical Creatures. Professor Grubbly-Plank was substituting for him. She would not say why Hagrid was not available. Most of the students were happy about it -- because of the Skrewts. Grubbly-Plank taught them about Unicorns instead. It was an excellent lesson and much more enjoyable than being maimed by Skrewts.

The next Hogsmeade visit was scheduled for the last weekend in January. The night before, Harry had a dream.

He was sitting in a large, winged chair in a dark and dingy room with high ceilings. It was lit only by the fire in an old, ornate fireplace. There was a man, perhaps Sirius' age or younger, with blond hair who was groveling before him. When he heard himself speak, it was the high-pitched voice from the back of Quirrell's head and the memory of his parent's murder -- the voice of *Voldemort*.

The blond man was reveling in their approaching revenge against Harry Potter. He was particularly thankful that his Master had agreed to his very simple and clever plan.

A huge snake then slithered into the room and hissed in Parseltongue, saying an old Muggle man was listening outside the door.

Voldemort instructed his servant to invite the Muggle in. The old man was brave but naïve -- completely ignorant of the wizarding world. Voldemort dispatched him mercilessly and offered the man's body to the snake, which he called "Nagini."

Harry woke up suddenly with his scar hurting. It was still the middle of the night, but he used his mirror to call Sirius and tell him about the dream. Sirius instructed Harry to see Dumbledore the first thing the next morning, and Harry promised he would.

But Harry broke his promise and did not go. It was a Hogsmeade weekend and Harry was afraid Professor Dumbledore would not let him go. And at Draco's suggestion the night before, he was planning to take Hermione to Madam Puddifoot's Tea Shop with Draco and Ginny.

As Draco, Harry, Hermione, and Ginny were about to leave for Hogsmeade, Professor Snape stopped Harry at the front door and told him the Headmaster wanted to see him.

Dejectedly, Harry told the others to go on ahead and he would try to meet them later -- while thinking the worst.

Professor Dumbledore looked and sounded very disappointed. “Harry, Sirius contacted me about your dream and your scar hurting again. But you did *not* come to see me as I asked.”

Harry felt guilty for letting Dumbledore down, but it was overridden by his anger at Sirius, no matter how unjustified. Clearly, Sirius had not trusted him to keep his promise. It was the first time Harry had been angry at his godfather.

“However, I am pleased you told your godfather,” continued Dumbledore.

“Sir, it was just a *dream*,” was Harry’s response.

“That was a *first-year’s* excuse, Harry. I will pretend I did not hear it,” said Dumbledore coldly.

Harry looked down at his feet.

In a more analytical tone, Dumbledore said, “As I said when you returned from Christmas break, the situation has *changed*. Now, I believe, we know very much *more*.”

“We do?” asked Harry, surprised.

“Assuredly,” declared Dumbledore. “But first, I want you to tell *me* about the dream in as much detail as you can recall.”

Harry repeated what he had told Sirius, but with much more detail.

Professor Dumbledore listened with his eyes closed. His only reaction was when Harry mentioned the name of the huge snake, Nagini, which caused Dumbledore to raise his eyebrows, but only for a moment.

“As you stated, Harry, Lord Voldemort was sitting in a chair and used a wand to kill the poor Muggle gentleman. Yet his servant had to turn the chair around for him. So, we know he is no longer merely spirit, but yet something less than able-bodied. And he *still* seeks revenge on you,” concluded Dumbledore.

Harry did not like the last part at all, but only asked, “Do you know who his servant is?”

“Pale, blond, and maybe a little younger than Sirius is something, but not enough, I am sorry to say,” said Dumbledore. “Is there anything else, perhaps?”

“Well, he *did* remind me of someone, but I can’t remember who,” said Harry sounding a little frustrated.

“If you *do*, please tell me next time; it is *vital*ly important,” said Dumbledore emphatically. “If not already obvious to you, this was *no dream*. You have experienced a mental connection with Lord Voldemort himself -- one that I believe he is as yet unaware. You were seeing through *his* eyes, hearing *his* words. We do not know when or how this connection occurs. Perhaps it is when you are asleep, and he is relaxed. I believe we will learn more with time.”

Harry did not like the idea of having a mental connection with his mortal enemy. What if it worked *both* ways? Could Voldemort *possess* him?

“Remember when I told you that Lord Voldemort transferred some of his powers to you when he tried to kill you as a baby?” asked Dumbledore.

Harry nodded.

“I believe this is another manifestation. You only experienced it now because Lord Voldemort has finally reestablished an *independent* physical existence.”

Then Dumbledore said what Harry had been expecting... and dreading.

“Harry, I do not want you going into Hogsmeade until further notice. You need to remain in the castle.” It was an order.

Harry protested but Professor Dumbledore dismissed him.

Harry was incensed. He wanted to be *with Hermione*.

Without a second thought, he retrieved and donned his invisibility cloak and walked out the front door past Mr Filch. He removed the cloak once he was out of sight of the winged gate and on his way to Hogsmeade.

He found Hermione at the Three Broomsticks. She told him that Draco had taken Ginny to Madam Puddifoots. Harry said he would like to take her there, but Hermione shook

her head saying, “I thought I wanted to... But we don’t need to go there for people to think we’re a couple. I really prefer the Three Broomsticks and Butterbeer to a stuffy old tea shop, if you don’t mind.”

Harry did not mind at all. One of the things he greatly appreciated about Hermione was how down-to-earth she was -- not all giggly and gossipy like a lot of girls.

As they were enjoying their Butterbeer, Ludo Bagman entered the inn, soon followed by a group of Goblins who cornered him in a booth. Bagman looked worried. They wondered what was going on and kept watching.

Suddenly, someone spoke from right behind them. “I could tell you things about Bagman that would shock your Muggle-born sensibilities.”

It was Rita Skeeter.

Hermione stood up, turned on her and gave the acid reporter a piece of her mind about her article on Hagrid, finishing, “...And I bet you’re following Mr Bagman around so you can do the same thing to *him*.”

Rita was completely unphased. She had been abused by far more powerful people than a fourth-year Hogwarts student. She just laughed and said, “Well maybe I’m here to dig up dirt on *you*, little miss.” She wagged her finger at Hermione and finished, cheerily, “Ta, ta.” Then she stuck her nose in the air, walked around Hermione, and strolled over to chat with Bagman, who was still hemmed in by the Goblins.

“I’m going to see Hagrid tomorrow and tell him to stop hiding,” declared Hermione, still standing.

“Hiding?” asked Harry.

“Yes, hiding. He has nothing to be ashamed of... Oh, let’s get out of here. I can’t stand the sight of her,” said Hermione, sounding frustrated and angry.

Harry and Hemione strolled about the village just looking in the shop windows. They even peeked through the window of Madam Puddifoots and saw Draco and Ginny holding hands and talking. They visited the Shrieking Shack and talked about how superstitious wizards were -- surprisingly even more so than Muggles.

Finally, it was late afternoon, getting colder and only about fifteen minutes from sunset. Harry suddenly shivered. But it was not the cold -- he felt uneasy. Perhaps for this reason, he removed his wand from the pocket inside his robes and pushed it up the sleeve of his left arm.

Hermione observed him and asked uneasily, “Are you *feeling* anything?”

Harry shook his head. “No, not really. It’s starting to get dark; just a precaution.”

They decided to warm up again in the Three Broomsticks before heading back to the castle. The inn was now very crowded. They were able to find a table and ordered hot Butterbeers.

Hermione excused herself to go to the bathroom. She had only taken a few steps from the table when Harry felt someone bump into his back annoyingly hard as they moved between tables. As Harry turned to see who it was, he felt a hand tightly grip his shoulder...

... and he was suddenly turning, feeling compressed and unable to breath in a whirl of dark and light. Just as he was about to suffocate, he landed hard on his feet and was roughly shoved face to the ground. Harry tried to gather himself, but he was immediately overcome with nausea and vomited.

Harry heard a derisive laugh and was kicked very hard in the ribs. Gasping for breath, he rolled over onto his back. A robed and hooded figure was standing over him holding a wand pointed at him.

Without warning, he was lifted and off his feet and slammed against a wall -- no, not a wall, but a stone monument. At the same time, he was bound tightly from head to foot with ropes which sprung from the stranger’s wand.

It was almost dark, but Harry realized he was in a graveyard. He could just make out the outline of a large old house not far in the distance.

The stranger roughly stuffed a gag into Harry’s mouth and slapped him hard on the face for good measure. Then he gave a triumphant laugh and ran off.

Harry strained against the ropes, desperately trying to reach his wand inside his sleeve. But it was no use.

He was helpless.

All he could do was blame himself for disobeying Dumbledore's order.

Chapter 11 – Flesh, Blood and Bone

The hooded stranger soon returned carrying a cloth bundle which he set down very gently on the ground close by.

But what captured Harry's attention was the huge snake which had followed them and was now circling the stone monument Harry was tied to. The snake had to be at least twelve feet long and a foot thick in the middle. Seeing it gave Harry a terrible sinking feeling.

Suddenly the cloth bundle jerked spasmodically. It was unnatural and frightening. Something inside was *alive*.

Then Harry's scar burned savagely, accompanied by an intense feeling of anxiety and impatience. Harry watched with impending dread as the cloth bundle continued to twitch freakishly.

Harry heard something being dragged. The stranger returned into his field of vision. He was laboring to maneuver an enormous cauldron which was filled with a silvery potion that was threatening to slosh out. The man's hood had fallen back, and it revealed the pale blond-haired man from Harry's dream.

The man made a final adjustment to the cauldron which was now just a couple of yards away. The man pulled out his wand and lit a fire beneath the cauldron. In just seconds the potion was bubbling and sparkling.

Then Harry heard a cold, high-pitched voice from the cloth bundle. "Hurry!"

Harry groaned when he heard it.

The blond man dashed over and carefully picked up the bundle. Then he opened it to reveal -- an abomination -- a revolting daemon child. It was something from a nightmare... with pale white translucent skin stretched tight, oversized head, hands and feet, and long emaciated limbs folded into a fetal position. And the face... *horrible!*

Harry wanted to throw up, but the gag in his mouth threatened to choke him. He could see his feeling of disgust mirrored in the blond man's eyes, but the man continued until he had completely unwrapped the creature.

Then he lowered the thing into the steaming and frothing cauldron.

Harry prayed for it to drown.

The man began reciting a strange incantation as he waved his *wand*...

Harry suddenly recognized it... It was *Ron Weasley's* wand!

The man summoned bone dust from the grave beneath the stone monument and added it to the cauldron. He continued reciting the incantation as he pulled a long knife from his belt and suddenly, to Harry's horror, viciously sliced off his own right hand at the wrist and added it to the cauldron.

Now crying in agony as he attempted to staunch the rapid flow of blood from the stump of his wrist, the man turned the knife on Harry. The man's face was covered in sweat and tears, but also full of rage. He raised the knife as if to cut Harry's throat, but at the last second, slashed upward and cut Harry deeply across his right cheek.

Harry moaned in pain.

The man held the blade of the long knife horizontally below the cut and captured the flow of blood until the blade was completely covered. Then he resumed the incantation while he carefully transferred the blood into the cauldron and stirred the potion with the knife until the blade was clean. He then collapsed to sit on the ground beside the cauldron, cradling his bloody stump under his arm pit.

As the cauldron simmered, the man gazed up at Harry and gasped agonizingly, "I so wanted to *cut* your miserable throat, but my Master wants you for *himself*." Then he laughed and just stared at Harry.

At that moment, the cauldron began sending out bursts of blinding white light. The blond man jumped up and backed away. Then came a huge surge of steam and the light was suddenly extinguished.

In the resulting cloud of mist, Harry saw his worst nightmare slowly arise naked and whole from the center of the cauldron.

A single high-pitched command rang out, “Robe me!”

The blond man sprang forward and quickly retrieved robes from among the bundle of cloth the ground. He reverently pulled them over his Master, who stepped out of the cauldron onto the ground.

Lord Voldemort had returned.

Chapter 12 – The Death Eaters

“My wand, Barty,” commanded Voldemort.

The man reached into his robes and withdrew a wand. He bowed and handed it up reverently with his remaining hand to his Master. Voldemort ordered the man to hold out his left arm and pull up the sleeve of his robes. The man struggled in great pain but managed to do it with his bloody stump.

Harry saw the blood red Dark Mark tattoo on the man’s forearm. Voldemort pressed the tip of his wand into the mark, and it instantly turned black.

Harry’s scar burned once again, but not as badly as before. He remembered Draco saying the Dark Mark was used to communicate with and summon the Death Eaters.

Voldemort then conjured a glistening silver hand out of thin air which attached itself to stump of the man’s right wrist. The man held it out, turning it, flexing it, and gazing at it with wonder and pride.

“For your faithfulness and loyalty to Lord Voldemort...” said Voldemort. “Now let us see who else appears to profess theirs.”

“Thank you, My Lord!” cried the man with intense gratitude.

“But where are your manors, Barty? You brought a *guest*,” said Voldemort sarcastically as he turned to face Harry. “You should introduce us... but, of course, Lord Voldemort needs no introduction... We meet again, *Harry... Potter...*”

Voldemort stretched out his arms. “Welcome to my ancestral home. You embrace the very grave of my father, whose bone, your blood, and the flesh of my faithful servant restored me to my body.”

Then he walked up to Harry until they were face to face. “Why *your* blood, Harry Potter? So that Lord Voldemort can do *this!*” Voldemort raised his left hand and jammed his index finger into Harry’s scar.

Harry’s scar burned and he groaned in pain.

Voldemort laughed hysterically, holding and grinding his long fingernail into Harry’s forehead until he drew blood. “I can *touch* you now, Harry Potter... unlike before with foolish Quirrell.”

Suddenly, numerous swooshing and popping noises began to sound close by. Voldemort turned from Harry and walked away, stopping just past the cauldron. Masked and hooded figures were appearing in the darkness and approaching slowly. They seemed to be taking predetermined places and forming a circle with Voldemort in the key position, like a gemstone in a ring. But there were empty places in the circle.

The blond man was headed across the circle, when Voldemort spoke clearly and distinctly, so all could hear, “No, Barty. You now take the place directly to Lord Voldemort’s *right hand* -- his most faithful servant. Now, as for the *rest* of you...”

The Death Eaters all bowed and subordinated themselves. Nagini slithered around the broken circle of followers.

Voldemort briefly welcomed them but then proceeded to condemn, rebuke and ridicule them, except for Barty, for believing him destroyed and never searching for him. Voldemort tortured Avery for groveling and said they would all pay for their thirteen years of disloyalty -- except his most loyal servant who had searched for him and helped him return to his body... *and* those who went to Azkaban rather than claim to be Imperiused.

Voldemort conducted a roll call of all the Death Eaters, both those present and absent. He ridiculed Lucius Malfoy and Orpheus Nott for their capture at the Quidditch World Cup and their trivial little game of Muggle-baiting. He praised all those in Azkaban, specifically the Lestranges for their faithfulness. He baited McNair and humiliated Crabbe and Goyle and all those who had feigned the Imperius Curse. Of the remaining missing Death Eaters, he said one was too cowardly to appear and would pay, but the one who had betrayed his fellows would be killed.

McNair timidly asked the Dark Lord how he had been able to return.

Voldemort told his story... about his downfall in trying to kill Harry Potter. Because of the mother’s protective self-sacrifice, which he had not foreseen, the boy had lived. His killing curse had rebounded and ripped him from his body. He survived only because of

his previous brilliant and extraordinary Dark Magic experiments. But without a body and a wand, he was helpless and forced to flee. Then he had waited -- *in vain*.

Only after ten agonizing years, he encountered Quirrell. But his attempt to gain the Philosopher's Stone was thwarted by Harry Potter.

He was forced back into hiding and again had almost lost hope after another two years in exile. But then, his most faithful servant, who had surreptitiously escaped from Azkaban, found him. He helped his Master perform even more brilliant Dark Magic which, along with a human sacrifice, unicorn blood and Nagini's venom, enabled him to return to a weak rudimentary human form.

It was enough to enable him to summon his wand which had apparently been found by his spy, Wormtail, in the ruins of the Potter's house, and hidden. Wormtail's deception had only recently been discovered and he had taken his own life in Azkaban, apparently in despair -- an unforgivable sign of *weakness*. Wormtail had been useful, but ultimately, could never have been trusted.

Then he described how he used ancient Dark Magic and a potion with powerful ingredients -- bone of the father, flesh of the servant, and blood of the enemy -- to return to his own true body tonight. He again praised his faithful servant for the plan to snatch Harry Potter where he was most vulnerable -- away from the protection of Albus Dumbledore -- in Hogsmeade on a student visitation weekend. How simple and easy it was -- and right under the very nose of the Hogwarts Headmaster.

Harry cursed himself again for violating Dumbledore's orders. How foolish and selfish he was.

Voldemort then turned and tortured Harry using the Cruciatus Curse to the delight and amusement of his followers.

Harry had never experienced such agonizing pain in his life. He wanted to die to make it stop.

"You see, Harry Potter has *no* special magical powers," declared Voldemort. "He has only been *lucky* or helped by Albus Dumbledore. Lord Voldemort and Harry Potter shall duel; you shall see for yourselves. Then Nagini shall have... *dinner*."

The Death Eaters all laughed.

Chapter 13 – Priori Incantatem

Voldemort flicked his wand.

The ropes binding Harry to the monument vanished and he fell painfully to the ground. But he got up quickly, pulled the gag out of his mouth and defiantly threw it to the ground.

One of the Death Eaters said mockingly, “Oh, *dear*.”

Voldemort laughed, “That is the spirit... But you have a *wand* do you not, Harry Potter? Or do you just wish Lord Voldemort to end it all quickly?”

In a flash, Harry had his wand out of his sleeve, yelling, “*Stupefy!*”

Voldemort barely had time to block the stunning spell.

“Very *good*, Harry Potter. If you had mastered non-verbal spells already, you might have actually *surprised* Lord Voldemort,” said Voldemort, covering for his near miscalculation.

“So, you *do* want to duel with Lord Voldemort,” he added silkily.

There was nowhere to run. The Death Eaters were already closing ranks and forming a wide circle around Harry and the Dark Lord.

Suddenly, Harry felt the overwhelming sense of well-being he had experienced in Defense Against the Dark Arts. He knew Voldemort was using the Imperius Curse on him non-verbally. What was he doing? Harry tried to focus.

Voldemort was saying something about dueling etiquette.

The Death Eaters were laughing.

Harry felt himself starting to bow. He resisted. “*No!*”

“*No?*” said Voldemort, sounding surprised. “I said, ‘BOW’, Harry Potter!”

Again, Harry felt pressure, this time much stronger, on his back and spine trying to make him bow. He resisted with all his might, “*NO!*”

And the curse broke.

Harry immediately fired another stunning spell at Voldemort and this time slightly grazed him on the shoulder before he reacted to block its full force.

There were gasps from the Death Eaters.

Voldemort’s face erupted in rage, and he screamed, “*Avada Kedavra!*”

But Harry had not waited, he had immediately followed his stunning spell with, “*Expelliarmus!*”

Incomprehensibly, the two spells collided and transformed into a narrow beam of golden light connecting the two wands.

Harry’s wand was shaking and vibrating. He could see the same thing was happening to Voldemort. Harry held on with all his strength.

Suddenly, the two combatants were lifted off the ground and they glided up and away over the Death Eaters to an open patch of ground. The Death Eaters followed, trying to maintain the circle around them.

Then the golden light began to send off thousands more beams which crisscrossed and formed a large, webbed dome enclosing Harry and Voldemort. The Death Eaters were shut out and frantically shouted for instructions. They sounded strangely muffled. The giant snake was repelled by the brilliant light and slithered away into the darkness.

Voldemort shouted for his followers to do nothing as he struggled, like Harry, to hold onto his wand. Voldemort looked astonished at what was happening. But when unearthly Phoenix song suddenly filled the air, his astonishment turned to uncertainty.

Harry felt hope for the first time. And then, a voice in his ear told him not to break the connection.

At that moment, large beads of light appeared on the beam of golden light connecting the wands and began to move back and forth. One bead of light approached Harry’s wand tip. His wand got very hot and began vibrating even more violently. Harry instinctively knew he could not withstand contact with the approaching bead of light.

He concentrated with all his might to force the bead back and, to his amazement, it and all the other beads began slowly moving toward Voldemort. Now Voldemort was experiencing the same effects and for the first time his eyes showed fear.

Finally, one of the beads connected with Voldemort’s wand. From it came sounds of screaming as the ghostly body of an old man emerged -- the old man Harry had seen in his dream. The old man said, “*He was a real wizard, then? Killed me, that one did... You fight him, boy...*”

The Death Eaters were now shouting and sounding frightened.

Then a middle-aged man and woman appeared. The woman said with a Slavic accent, “*He took my husband’s beating heart. He killed me to feed his snake... Get him for us.*”

The woman, her husband and the old men began to circle Harry and Voldemort, whispering encouragement to Harry and hissing curses at Voldemort, who now looked truly terrified.

Then a pretty young woman emerged. It was his mother. She told Harry to hold on and that his father was coming. And then like the others, his father emerged as a ghostly shadow and spoke to him. He whispered to Harry that when the connection was broken, they would all linger just long enough for Harry to get away.

“But *how?*” pleaded Harry, now barely able to hold on.

His father replied, “*Call the one who said you could call him.*”

And Harry understood.

“*Be ready to run,*” said his father quietly, then, “*Go... NOW!*”

Harry echoed, “NOW!” and wrenched his wand away.

The golden beam broke. Instantly, the dome vanished, and the Phoenix song echoed into silence. But the ghostly figures remained and converged on Voldemort, shielding Harry from him.

Harry was already off running. He surprised and stunned the nearest Death Eater, broke through the circle and was off racing down between the nearest row of headstones.

Voldemort screamed at the pursuing Death Eaters to stun Harry, who was now dodging curses and weaving in and out between headstones. Harry thought about putting on his invisibility cloak but did not think he had time.

Then without warning, he hit a clear patch of ground. He skidded to a halt and dove back behind the nearest gravestone. Hearing his pursuers close behind, he knew he could not wait any longer.

“DOBBY!” he called in desperation, then whispered, “...*please* come!”

It felt like his heart was pounding in his throat.

Not more than a heartbeat later, there was a loud pop and Dobby the house-elf was standing next to him. Harry jerked Dobby out of the line of fire behind the gravestone and yelled, “TAKE ME TO DUMBLEDORE, NOW!”

Just as Harry started to feel the same constricting and suffocating sensation that had brought him to the graveyard, he felt a sudden viselike grip on his neck and heard breaking bone.

Before he could understand what had happened, he fell into darkness.

Chapter 14 – The Hospital Wing Again

“Harry. Harry. Can you hear me? If you can hear me, open your eyes.”

To Harry it sounded far away. But it caught his attention. His mind felt very fuzzy. He felt like he had long overslept and was having trouble waking up. Finally, he opened his eyes and blinked.

Professor Dumbledore was staring down at him with Madam Pomfrey hovering at his shoulder.

Sounding very groggy, Harry said, “Whaaat...?”

Dumbledore sighed, then said, “Good. Good. Do not speak, Harry. Madam Pomfrey needs to check you over first. Then we shall talk.”

Madam Pomfrey took Dumbledore’s place and proceeded to feel Harry’s neck very carefully. She also moved his head slowly from side to side and tilted it up and down. She had Harry lift his arms and legs, flex his fingers and toes and touch his nose repeatedly with his index fingers. Then she had him move his head on his own.

Next, she had him sit up in bed and repeated everything.

Finally, she had him drink a large beaker of potion that seemed to warm up his whole body and cleared the fog in his brain.

She turned to Dumbledore and said, “You can talk with him now, Headmaster. I’m going to get him some breakfast. He must be starving for real food by now.”

And Harry realized he *was* starving -- hungrier than he had been since leaving the Dursleys.

Dumbledore stepped back into view pulling a chair with him and sat down next to Harry. He looked relieved.

“Harry, I will be asking you to tell me what happened to you -- but not right now. I want several other people to be here, so until then, I am going to tell you what happened after you returned, which everyone else already knows...”

Harry was already reliving everything that happened in his mind and could not help himself, blurting out “Sir, Voldemort’s back! It’s all my fault! I went to Hogsmeade after you told me not to, and...”

“Please, Harry. *We know,*” said Dumbledore, understandingly. “It is *my* fault for not explaining to you *why* you should not have gone into Hogsmeade. If you had known what I suspected, you would *not* have gone. So, *please* let me bring you up to date.”

Just then, Madam Pomfrey returned with a large tray of food. It smelled *delicious*. She told Harry to eat every bit and warned that if he did not, she would send the Headmaster away until he did. She retreated a short distance and watched Harry eat while Professor Dumbledore began speaking again.

Dumbledore explained that Hermione and Madam Rosmerta had rushed to report that a cloaked man had grabbed Harry in the Three Broomsticks and Disapparated with him. Madam Rosmerta had been delivering their butterbeers. She and several others had witnessed the abduction and reacted in alarm. She yelled to Hermione, who had not made it farther than a couple of tables away on her way to the bathroom.

Hermione understood the danger and said they had to tell Professor Dumbledore immediately. Rosmerta grabbed Hermione and Disapparated with her to the gates of Hogwarts. From there they ran, raising the alarm in the castle until they found Dumbledore.

Professor Dumbledore said he immediately contacted Amelia Bones at the Department of Magical Law Enforcement and called for all the teachers and staff to meet in the Great Hall. It took a while for everyone to gather, but when Dumbledore finally started the meeting, Madam Bones, and a dozen Aurors were also present along with Rosmerta and Hermione.

They were discussing a plan of action, which including rounding up all former Death Eaters for questioning, when to their utter astonishment...

...Dobby, Harry and a blond-haired man Apparated right in front of Dumbledore.

The man had a shining silver hand, which was clamped like a vice around the back of Harry's neck.

Almost everyone had been caught completely by surprise, including Professor Dumbledore. But Professor Moody had reacted almost instantly to stun the man.

However, it took a spell by Dumbledore to release the man's grip on Harry's neck. It had to be done very carefully because Harry's neck was clearly severely broken. He was also unconscious and barely breathing.

Dobby was in great distress seeing Harry so seriously injured. He blamed himself for not arriving quickly enough and, crying uncontrollably, had to be taken away by Madam Sprout.

Harry was carefully moved to the hospital wing. Madam Pomfrey was able to quickly mend Harry's broken neck vertebra but discovered his spinal cord had been completely severed. She could not understand why Harry was still alive.

Hermione was crying but in control of herself. She stayed out of the way while Madam Pomfrey worked.

Madam Pomfrey decided to place Harry into a coma and the Full Body Bind Curse to completely immobilize him. She brought in Healers in less than an hour from St. Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries in London to help her work on Harry and, over the next twenty-four hours, they somehow managed to get the spinal cord to begin repairing itself. They were not sure how or why they had been successful but were grateful.

It had then taken just over a *month* for his spinal cord to fully reconnect.

Harry was stunned. He turned to Madam Pomfrey and thanked her for saving his life.

She smiled and said, "Just don't ask me *how*, Mr Potter. I can't explain it." Then she returned to her office.

Professor Dumbledore continued. Initially, all the focus had been on getting Harry safely to the hospital wing. Dumbledore had not left Harry's side until he was under Madam Pomfrey's care. Dumbledore thought it better to take Hermione back to the Great Hall with him.

By then, Madam Bones and a few others, including Professor Moody, realized who the man with the silver hand was. And they were astonished.

He was Barty Crouch Jr, the Death Eater son of Barty Crouch Sr, the former head of the Department of International Magical Cooperation, who had been murdered at the Quidditch World Cup along with his house-elf. It had been assumed he was murdered by the Death Eaters who had attacked the campground, but they could not prove it. Inspection of the wands of Lucius Malfoy and Orpheus Nott had cleared them of the potential murder charge, so the Death Eaters who had escaped remained the prime suspects.

The mystery was that Barty Crouch Jr was known to have *died* in Azkaban over five years previously. He had been convicted by the Wizengamot the year after Voldemort's disappearance. He was accused of participating in the torture of the Aurors Alice and Frank Longbottom by Bellatrix Lestrange and her husband, who had been seeking information on the whereabouts of the Dark Lord.

Harry looked surprised.

Professor Dumbledore read his face and said the two Aurors were indeed Neville's parents and that they were not dead. They had been tortured into madness and had become permanent residents of St Mungo's. He advised Harry not to tell anyone and allow Neville to reveal it if and when he were ready.

Dumbledore continued.

Madam Bones had ordered Crouch to be interrogated. Professor Snape provided Veritaserum.

In front of everyone, Barty Crouch Jr admitted who he was. He explained how his father, who had been the Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement at the time, had allowed his dying wife, at her request, to switch places with her son in Azkaban using Polyjuice Potion -- which Dumbledore explained to Harry enables you to take on another person's appearance.

Crouch Sr had kept his son restrained at home using the Imperious Curse and placed him under the care of their house-elf.

Bertha Jorkins had stumbled onto the plot and Crouch Sr had modified her memory and sent her off on a long vacation. The Crouch's house-elf, Winky, was devoted to the son and convinced her master to give him rewards for good behavior. One of these was to attend the Quidditch World Cup. The son had been under an invisibility cloak in the top box sitting next to Winky, who had been ostensibly saving a seat for her master.

Crouch Jr had been slowly succeeding in fighting off the Imperious Curse and awoke sufficiently in the top box to steal a wand from a red-headed boy seated in front of him.

After the match when the Death Eaters attacked, Winky tried to take her charge to safety in the woods. But on the way, Crouch Jr regained full consciousness and control. He cast the Dark Mark using the stolen wand. When Ministry Officials responded to the spell, he hid under the invisibility cloak with the elf. They did not find him and left, but his father, arriving a bit later, did.

Barty Crouch Jr killed his father and then, to "tidy up", killed Winky too. He then left in search of his Master, Lord Voldemort. Rumors had always suggested the Dark Lord was hiding somewhere in the forested mountains of Albania.

It took him four months, but he found his Master by using the Dark Mark on his left arm. He would touch it as if to summon the Dark Lord. When very far away, nothing happened. But as he approached Albania, the Mark started to react -- first turning darker red and then, as he got closer, grayer, and finally, black.

It led him to what remained of the Dark Lord -- a spirit less than ghost -- who seemed to be nurtured by the company of an enormous snake. But with the help of a devoted servant with a wand, his Master was able to create a rudimentary body using Dark Magic. The servant had captured a vacationing Muggle couple and by possessing the man, the Dark Lord used his living heart -- and other bits -- to return to life. It still required the use of Unicorn blood and Nagini's venom to keep his Master alive.

But with a physical body, the Dark Lord was able to summon his own wand which Peter Pettigrew had found in the rubble of the Potter's house and hidden.

"Lord Voldemort regained physical form the night of the Yule Ball," said Dumbledore, "when your scar burned, and you felt his triumph."

"I saw the *thing* in the graveyard," said Harry. "It was *horrible*... like a demon child."

"No doubt the same creature holding the wand in your dream," said Dumbledore.

Harry shuddered.

Dumbledore continued again.

Barty Crouch Jr told them that they made their way slowly back to England over the next month. Voldemort was too weak to Disapparate -- even using side-along Apparation with Crouch. Voldemort Imperiused the captured Muggle woman and had her pose as Crouch's wife. The Dark Lord figured as their sickly infant. Back in England, they settled into the old, abandoned mansion of Voldemort's Muggle father and grandparents. Voldemort then killed the Muggle woman and fed her to Nagini.

Barty proudly said he had come up with the very simple plan to kidnap Harry Potter where he would be out of Dumbledore's protection. His Master needed Harry Potter's blood to break the protection his mother had given him -- by using it to become part of his recreated body along with the bone of his Master's father and the right hand of his servant, which Barty had gladly provided.

Barty triumphantly declared that the Dark Lord had returned. And his Master had given him a magnificent magical hand -- a powerful hand he used to crush Harry Potter's neck as he tried to escape.

He admitted his Master had again failed in trying to kill the boy in the duel witnessed by the Death Eaters. But he finished by saying that he would be honored and rewarded above all the others -- because he, and he alone, had helped his Master return and had then killed Harry Potter for him.

Barty was then taken immediately to Azkaban to resume serving his life sentence. Madam Bones ordered Aurors to be stationed in the school and sent others back to the

Ministry to order the round-up and interrogation of all known current and so-called ‘former’ Death Eaters.

“Unfortunately,” said Dumbledore gravely, “we found out later that the Minister for Magic, Cornelius Fudge, countermanded the order pending an investigation -- saying he did not want to cause a panic based on *rumors*. Fortunately, a few Aurors had deployed before they received that order and had already apprehended Avery and McNair. Their interrogations confirmed what Barty said was true -- Lord Voldemort had indeed returned. They had been summoned by him and seen him duel with you and... /ose -- enabling you to escape. The duel had greatly unnerved them and sowed real doubt in Lord Voldemort’s power versus yours. Avery even wondered if you were the Chosen One.”

At this, Harry said, “*What* did he call me?”

Dumbledore smiled and said, “That is something we will discuss... but later.”

Professor Dumbledore then said that Fudge had still been attempting to hush the whole thing up when, the next morning, the Daily Prophet published a blockbuster headline that filled the whole top half of the front page.

Dumbledore had the paper and held it up for Harry to read.

YOU-KNOW-WHO RETURNS!

“The Daily Prophet had the whole story,” explained Dumbledore. “It was if a reporter had been in the Great Hall at the time. I cannot imagine who let the story out. Hermione and Madam Rosmerta were there, of course. And while I am sure Hermione told the school and Rosmerta told Hogsmeade, they or whomever they told would not have had the time nor wherewithal to provide the level of detail present in the newspaper article -- well, certainly not Rosmerta. The same goes for the teachers, staff, Madam Bones and her people. Everyone was very busy. So, we have another mystery.”

“The fallout was that the Wizengamot was not pleased with Fudge. Last week he was sacked after they completed their inquiry. His actions had enabled the rest of the Death Eaters to escape. Lord Voldemort and all his followers are once again officially wanted and on the run.”

“Rufus Scrimgeour was voted the new Minister for Magic and is already organizing for war. He remembers what it was like last time and is prepared to take significant action. I have already spoken with him, but unfortunately, he is not taking my advice. He is too conventional and will not take extraordinary, but necessary, actions, such as removing the Dementors from Azkaban or sending an envoy to the Giants.”

Harry was trying hard to pay attention, but his mind had started to wander.

He had finished eating and felt comfortably full. He did not want to know how Madam Pomfrey had kept him fed and taken care of the other bodily functions for over a month. He set his tray aside.

As if she could read his mind, Madam Pomfrey emerged from her office to collect his tray. She had him drink more potion.

Dumbledore said, “I am going to go collect a few people. We will return in a few minutes. Madam Pomfrey tells me you may get dressed. There are clean clothes in your bedside cabinet.”

Then he whispered, “Miss Granger has your Invisibility Cloak.”

Professor Dumbledore waved his wand and conjured a comfy chair. “I think you will be more comfortable in this after spending a month in bed.” He smiled and left.

Harry changed into his robes and then sat down in the chair that Professor Dumbledore had so kindly provided. He felt incredibly weak, but it felt very good to be out of bed. He had been temporarily distracted by Dumbledore’s story, but now he knew he was expected to tell his own.

He was *not* looking forward to it.

Chapter 15 – Under Guard

Professor Dumbledore brought Professor McGonagall, Professor Snape, Hermione, Draco, and Sirius to hear Harry’s story. Sirius had again been staying in the guest quarters while Harry recovered.

Madam Pomfrey had already told him that Sirius had spent every day by Harry’s side. The same was true in the evenings and weekends for Hermione. Only classes and curfew kept her away.

Harry told his story without holding anything back.

He confessed and apologized for his reckless violation of Professor Dumbledore’s order to stay in the castle. He described in detail his abduction, the Dark Magic used to bring back Voldemort, the Death Eaters, his torture, the duel, and, finally, his nearly fatal escape. The hardest part was talking about his mother and father appearing. He blamed himself for Voldemort’s return and took and full responsibility for what happened.

Sirius walked to the window next to Harry's chair while Harry was speaking. It was open a little for ventilation despite the cold weather. There was a very large green beetle sitting on the sill inside the window.

Sirius smashed it violently with his hand, and everyone jumped. Sirius apologized -- he was venting his anger at what Voldemort had done to his godson, but he also hated bugs inside buildings.

Harry finished by apologizing again. He was surprised that no one asked any questions. Perhaps Madam Pomfrey or Professor Dumbledore had insisted on that.

Dumbledore thanked him, told him to rest and ushered everyone out -- except Hermione. Snape gave Harry a disapproving look before departing. Sirius noticed and followed Snape with a look that said they were shortly going to have a 'conversation'. At the door, Draco gave Harry the 'thumbs up' sign and mouthed, 'well done, mate.'

When they were alone, Harry cried, "Hermione..." his voice cracking with emotion.

"Oh, *Harry!*" she cried and knelt next to his chair taking his hand. "You don't have to say *anything*. I can only imagine how *hard* this has been for you."

"No, Hermione, I let everyone down. I let *you* down." Tears streamed out of his eyes. "Look what I've *done*. Voldemort's *back!* ...It's *all* my fault."

"Harry, that's *not* what people are saying at all," said Hermione sympathetically.

"What?" said Harry disbelieving.

"No, it's just the *opposite*... Harry, don't you see? You *beat* Voldemort in a *duel* and escaped from him and *all* his Death Eaters. Barty Crouch confessed it in front of everyone... Harry, you're a *hero!*"

Harry could not believe it. He felt like a complete failure.

Hermione pulled the front page of an old Daily Prophet from her robes and held it up for him. The enormous headline read:

HARRY POTTER VICTORIOUS AGAIN

"But Professor Dumbledore showed me the paper reporting Voldemort's return," said Harry, sounding confused.

"Harry, you've been unconscious for over a *month*," reminded Hermione. "This one is from the next day. This is the *biggest* story in over a decade. You have a lot of catching up to do."

Harry still shook his head in disbelief.

“Oh, Harry...” said Hermione. She kissed his hand and then rested her cheek on it saying, “I can’t stay. Madam Pomfrey said only five minutes.”

“Well, please don’t leave until she makes you,” said Harry.

“I won’t,” said Hermione.

Madam Pomfrey said Harry had to remain in the hospital wing until she believed he was well enough to travel -- at least another week or two. He was extremely weak. He was scheduled to go to St Mungo’s for recuperative physical therapy. After that he could go home with Sirius to continue rest and recovery with regular check-ups at St Mungo’s. If cleared by their Healers, he would be able to return to school after Easter break.

The next day, Draco brought Dobby to see Harry.

As soon as Dobby saw Harry, he began crying and apologizing that Harry had been hurt and it was his fault for being so slow.

Harry had to order him to stop apologizing before he would stop. Then he took Dobby’s hand and said, “Dobby, you *saved* my life. If you hadn’t come, I would have been dead for sure.”

Then he added, “Dobby, I want you to know it was the spirit of my father who told me to call you. Otherwise, I don’t know how I could have escaped.”

On hearing this, Dobby was enthralled. “Harry Potter is being helped even from *beyond the grave!*”

Harry had not thought of it that way before, but it gave him comfort.

The next week in the hospital wing dragged by. Harry was not allowed to do anything. He said he felt fine -- just a *little* weak -- and asked if he could resume classes. But when he tried to move his comfy chair, he fainted. He knew then he was not fine and followed orders thereafter.

Sirius still visited almost every day. He had moved back to Grimmauld Place soon after Harry had been brought out of his coma. He commuted via Apparation to the Hogwarts gate. He would spend most of his visits commenting on the news of the day.

Harry got the sense that something was going on that Sirius wasn't talking about. He said Remus had moved out but did not know where he was -- which seemed very strange.

Hermione, Draco and Ginny came to visit him every day. They repeated how everyone was amazed Harry had beaten Voldemort yet again -- and this time in a *real* wizard's duel.

Harry tried to downplay it, but they would not listen.

"You *beat* him and that's a *fact*," said Draco proudly. "*And* you have *another* scar to prove it."

"If you mean this..." said Harry, pointing to the still red scar across his cheek from the corner of his lip to his ear lobe. "You *know* that's from Crouch's *knife*."

"Well, I'm not going to correct anyone who says otherwise," said Draco grinning, "It's too good that way."

Hermione suggested Harry could have Madam Pomfrey remove it since it was not a *curse*d scar, but Draco just scoffed.

Hermione and Ginny both looked askance, but Harry just laughed along with his friend at their reaction.

Draco also informed Harry that two militant factions had developed among the Slytherin students -- pro-Potter and pro-Dark Lord. Most students from families of known or suspected Death Eaters were pro-Dark Lord. But all the rest were pro-Potter, and they were the clear majority. The Slytherin dining table was now being seated along those lines. Those pro-Potter sat closest to the High Table. Those pro-Dark Lord huddled near the back wall. The two factions were separated by the Durmstrangs.

Harry had many other visitors including Hagrid, who could not stop talking about how the few surviving Blast-Ended Skrewts -- now quite huge -- were coming along. He also told Harry how Hermione and Draco had come to see him about Rita Skeeter's article. Then he said, "They made me see to right. If Harry Potter had the courage face You-Know-Who, I should at least 'ave the courage ta face me own students."

Of course, Fred and George came to visit and had to be told more than once by Madam Pomfrey not to get Harry too worked up. Apparently laughing was not good for his type of injury.

The Slytherin House Quidditch team except Warrington and Montague came to visit. Warrington was the son of a Death Eater who, like Malfoy's father, had claimed to be

under the Imperius Curse the last time Voldemort was in power, while Montague just seemed to be a Voldemort sympathizer.

Ginny once brought Luna and some other Ravenclaws to visit. Luna was her usual self, commenting on how very terrible Harry looked.

Cedric Diggory, Hannah Abbot, and Susan Bones from Hufflepuff stopped by too.

As soon as Harry saw Diggory, he exclaimed, “I completely forgot! The Second Task! I missed it! What happened?”

The second task of the Triwizard Tournament had been held on the twenty-fourth of February. Apparently, there was not much for the spectators to see. It had been an underwater challenge in the Black Lake. Cedric had come in first followed by Krum. They were now tied for first in total points. Fleur was now a very distant third having failed to complete the second task due to an attack by Grindylows.

Cedric said the champions each had to rescue a hostage hidden at the bottom the lake within one hour. The hostages had been bewitched by Professor Dumbledore to ensure their safety. Krum’s hostage had been Parvati, Cedric’s was Cho, and Fleur’s was Gabrielle, her little sister. The Merpeople, who lived in the lake, had returned Gabrielle safely after time expired.

Harry wanted to know how they had breathed underwater. Cedric explained that he and Fleur had used the Bubblehead Charm while Krum had transfigured the upper half of his body into a shark. Harry was quite impressed.

The third task was scheduled for the twenty-fourth of June, so Harry expected he would be able to see it.

Viktor Krum and Fleur Delacour also visited Harry. Fleur was accompanied by Gabrielle. Harry quickly realized it was Gabrielle of the two sisters who really wanted to see him. Fleur seemed to be paying more attention to Sirius, who was visiting as usual.

Madam Pomfrey started to complain at the number of students visiting, but the most she did was to limit the number visiting at one time.

Harry did not mind. There was nothing else to do.

Madam Pomfrey said he was not fit enough even to read -- as he would have to hold up a “heavy” book. Harry tried to argue that he should be strong enough to read the Daily Prophet, but apparently, it was too heavy too. A forkful of food or a small glass of pumpkin juice seemed to be her limit.

Hermione read him the important stories in the Daily Prophet every evening. Harry was hungry for news of Voldemort. There had not been anything specific on him, sightings or otherwise. But there were plenty of signs of Death Eater activity -- murders, strange disappearances, and kidnappings which, disturbingly, including several small children. There were also reports of an alarming increase in werewolf attacks, many associated with the name, Fenrir Greyback -- a wanted criminal. Muggles seemed to be a favorite target of the Death Eaters. The paper reported the Muggle Prime Minister had been apprised of the situation by the Minister for Magic.

While reading the Daily Profit to Harry one evening, Hermione said she was surprised there had not been any news about Igor Karkaroff yet. Harry asked her what she meant, but Draco jumped in and said Karkaroff had scarpered as soon as he learned the Dark Lord had returned.

Harry said, "Right. Voldemort said in the graveyard that the Death Eater who had betrayed the others would be killed. Hermione, you think it's him?"

She nodded and put down the paper.

"Would you like to hear some news *not* about Voldemort?" asked Hermione.

"Sure. I suppose Voldemort isn't the *only* thing going on," quipped Harry.

Hermione told him that Ginny had argued with Fred and George in the Gryffindor common room. It turned out Ludo Bagman had stiffed them on their winning bet at the Quidditch World Cup and they had been trying to get him to pay them ever since. Ginny overheard them discussing blackmail and said she would tell their mother if they did any such thing.

Draco said Bagman was rumored to owe a lot of money to the Goblins and had bet heavily on Fleur to win the Triwizard Tournament because of the long odds on her.

Hermione also said she asked for and received a meeting with Professor Dumbledore to talk about PEE. Ginny had accompanied her for moral support. Dumbledore had listened very patiently and then told her that Dobby was the *only* house-elf he had ever met who wanted to be free. He also said the Hogwarts house elves were all *volunteers*. None were under any obligation to stay -- it was their choice. Almost all were descended from long lines of house-elves who had been working at Hogwarts for untold generations. Dumbledore said he would be willing to give them wages and benefits... if Hermione could convince them to accept.

Hermione said she made three attempts to persuade them.

On the first attempt, she announced what Professor Dumbledore had said and was ready to take down a list of names to give him. None signed up. On the second attempt, she had to roam about the kitchen trying to talk to individual elves because they would no longer gather to listen to her. On the third attempt, they ushered her out even before she had a chance to start speaking.

“They made it very clear I was no longer welcome unless I was there to ask for food or for work to be done,” complained Hermione. She reluctantly admitted that her PEE campaign was not going to work unless she got into politics after leaving Hogwarts. But she still wanted to do something nice for the house-elves.

At this, both Harry and Draco groaned.

“Give it up, Hermione, *please!*” exclaimed Harry.

“I’m only *suspending* my efforts,” replied Hermione, sounding very righteous.

When Harry did not have visitors, he either slept or just stared out the windows. At times, he felt he had more fun living with the Dursleys.

At the end of the second week in March, Madam Pomfrey declared Harry was fit enough to travel.

He was sent to St Mungo’s via the Hogwarts Express with Sirius. But after one day of examination, the Healers diagnosed him well enough to convalesce at home -- declaring that Madam Pomfrey had provided exemplary treatment.

However, if he thought he were free of restrictions now that Madam Pomfrey was not there to reign over him, he was wrong. If anything, Sirius was a stricter nursemaid. He hired a Healer from St Mungo’s to set up a physical recovery schedule which included a lot of coordination exercises that Harry hated. He had to do them six times a day while Sirius supervised him.

Fortunately, at Grimmauld Place, Harry had, quite unexpectedly, a *lot* to distract him. The house was bustling with activity.

Sirius could no longer keep secret what Harry had been wondering about. Number Twelve, Grimmauld Place was now the headquarters and operations center for the Order of the Phoenix. It was a secret organization Professor Dumbledore had founded over twenty years before to fight Voldemort.

Harry, Hermione and Draco had first heard Dumbledore mention the name of the organization on the day Pettigrew had been captured the previous year. Hermione had researched the organization in the library but, to her chagrin, found nothing.

Dumbledore reactivated The Order of the Phoenix the very night Voldemort had returned.

Sirius kept Harry reasonably well informed of the general activity even though Harry was not allowed to sit in on operational meetings -- not being of-age. Sirius said it was also for the Order's protection since Harry was still Voldemort's primary target.

But some activities and operations were so secret, information about them was restricted to the team selected by Professor Dumbledore -- so even Sirius did not know everything. Harry now knew that Remus was no longer at Grimmauld Place because Dumbledore had sent him on a secret mission weeks ago.

But the thing that surprised Harry the most was -- Kreacher.

The old house-elf was now never far from Harry's side. And the odd mutterings under his breath were gone. He made sure Harry followed the Healer's orders and often asked if there were anything he could do for him. The quality of meals prepared by Kreacher seemed to improve even more, if that were possible.

Finally, Harry asked him, "Kreacher, you've changed. What is it?"

Kreacher bowed very deeply and croaked, "Kreacher has heard of Master Harry's victorious duel with the Dark Lord on the day of his return. My Master's godson is truly a worthy representative of the noble House of Black. Kreacher will answer Harry Potter's call."

Harry thanked Kreacher profusely because now he fully understood what that meant.

As the days of Easter break arrived and then neared their end, Harry was increasingly anxious to get back to school. He knew he had over two months of schoolwork to catch up on. He was not even sure if it were possible, but he knew he would have Hermione's help.

He had one last check-up from the St Mungo's Healer who declared his spinal cord, coordination, reflexes, and strength completely normal.

Sirius told Harry it had been arranged for him to travel by Floo Network to Hogwarts for security reasons. A special 'non-stop' connection had been set up from the Grimmauld Place kitchen fireplace to the Staff room.

Harry packed his things, said goodbye to Sirius and Kreacher, and made the trip, stepping out of the fireplace in Hogwarts to see Professor Dumbledore and Professor Snape waiting for him.

Professor Dumbledore welcomed him back.

Professor Snape said nothing and looked sour.

Dumbledore then laid out a very clear set of instructions. For his own safety and security, Harry was not to leave the castle grounds without an escort approved by Professor Snape. Harry understood this to mean he was not going to Hogsmeade or anywhere else.

He was also to be escorted within the castle and grounds by a teacher or an Auror from the Ministry, many of whom were now assigned to protect the school. Aurors would remain at a reasonable distance, but Harry must ensure he remain within sight of his escort except when in the Great Hall, a classroom, the library, the bathroom, House common rooms, or dormitory. He was never to try and evade his escort. If he violated any of these rules, he would be sent home -- to the *Dursleys* -- and placed under house arrest by the Ministry of Magic for his own protection.

Did he understand? Yes. Good. Off you go.

It turned out Professor Snape was his first escort. Snape took Harry to his office and proceeded to lecture him that by going into Hogsmeade against Professor Dumbledore's orders, he had enabled the Dark Lord to return to power much earlier and... more powerfully because of Harry's blood, than he might have otherwise.

Harry knew this all too well and had already suffered his own internal recriminations for months. He had expected Professor Dumbledore to say this long ago and was surprised when he had not. However, finally hearing it from someone in authority made him feel truly ashamed. Professor Snape never pulled any punches when it came to screw-ups.

Professor Snape ended by saying if it were up to him, he would have expelled Harry and sent him back to live with his aunt and uncle. Snape escorted Harry to the entrance of the Slytherin common room. There was an Auror already posted outside in the corridor ready to follow Harry if he went anywhere.

As he entered the Slytherin common room, Harry was not sure he was glad to be back at Hogwarts after all.

But the thing that bothered him the most was that his scar had not hurt him once since the night Voldemort had returned.

It was a bad sign.

Chapter 16 – The Prophecy

Crabbe, Goyle, Nott and a few of the older Slytherins did not return after Easter break.

Other things had changed too.

Students were now not always sitting at their own house tables. It was more of the change that began the previous year in visiting other house common rooms. It started before Easter break with Viktor Krum and some of the Durmstrangs who did not like sitting near the pro-Voldemort faction of the Slytherins. Now everyone was doing it.

Breakfast and lunch were now strictly open sitting wherever you wanted. The same was true for ordinary dinners. But for feasts and special occasions, house tables were observed. The exception was the group of remaining pro-Voldemort Slytherins who always kept to the very end of the Slytherin table in the rear corner of the Great Hall.

Harry was treated like a hero by everyone except the pro-Voldemort Slytherins. These students became increasingly isolated from the other students -- more so than just where they sat for meals. They were shunned.

However, Harry was so busy trying to catch up on his studies he did not have time to think about it. As expected, Hermione gave up much of her own study time to bring Harry along. Also, having an Auror or a teacher always hovering nearby made it almost impossible to joke around or have fun with anyone.

Draco and Ginny found it very intimidating and now spent a lot more time away from Harry and Hermione.

Harry had not had a chance to kiss Hermione since the Yule Ball, and it had his stomach in knots.

Then something wonderful happened.

Tonks became one of the Aurors assigned inside the castle rotating through “Harry Potter protection duty,” as she called it.

Hermione kissed Harry outside the library in front of Tonks on her very first tour of duty.

Harry looked at Tonks. She was looking up as if something on the ceiling had caught her attention.

Harry kissed Hermione back and it seemed as if a little bit of normalcy had returned to their relationship.

Later, when Tonks took Harry back to the Slytherin common room, he said, “Thanks, Tonks. I thought I was going to burst for waiting.”

She laughed. “Silly you; none of the other Aurous would care.”

But it was different; she just did not understand.

The news in the Daily Prophet was not getting better. Harry found it very depressing. The Ministry had no idea where Voldemort was. Finally, after many weeks, there was a front-page headline about something other than a murder or a disappearance. The headline read:

ATTEMPTED BREAK-IN AT MINISTRY

The article said a man named Sturgis Podmore was apprehended trying to break into the Department of Mysteries late at night. Interrogation revealed he had been acting under the Imperius Curse, but he did not know who had cursed him. The Ministry would not say what Mr Podmore had been after, but it is rumored it had something to do with the reputed Hall of Prophecies, which the Ministry would not confirm exists. Mr Podmore was currently recovering in St Mungo’s and refused to be interviewed.

Hermione was surprised that the story made the front page. She said the Prophet must believe there was more to the story than the Ministry was letting on.

However, the story that day which earned more of her attention was on page two.

PROPHET REPORTER STILL MISSING

Daily Prophet freelance reporter, Rita Skeeter, remains missing after more than five weeks. Miss Skeeter, one of this newspaper’s most famous investigative reporters, failed to file a major story she had been pursuing on the return of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. Anyone with any knowledge of Miss Skeeter’s whereabouts is asked to notify the Department of Magical Law Enforcement at the Ministry of Magic. At this point, foul play must be considered a possibility.

“Couldn’t have happened to a nicer person,” said Draco sarcastically.

Hermione, who normally said something sympathetic for almost anyone suffering misfortune, said, “She was probably sticking her nose where it didn’t belong and this time it cost her. This is *Voldemort* we’re talking about.”

“Well then, you’re off the hook,” said Draco.

“What do you mean?” asked Hermione.

“Didn’t you say you were going to ‘*get her*’ for what she wrote about you,” said Draco teasingly.

“About what she wrote about *Hagrid*,” corrected Hermione.

“Anyway, it looks like she won’t be bugging us... for a while at least,” concluded Harry.

At lunch, Harry received a note from Professor Dumbledore to come to his office right after dinner. The password was ‘*pepper imps*.’

Tonks escorted Harry when he left the Great Hall after dinner.

Dumbledore’s office looked the same as it always did, but Professor Dumbledore himself did not have his warm congenial appearance. He looked as serious as Harry had ever seen him. He came around in front of his desk and conjured two comfy chairs for Harry and himself.

Dumbledore said, “Harry, do you remember the question I would not answer almost four years ago in the hospital wing and again last year?”

Harry had never forgotten. “You mean, why Voldemort wanted to kill me?”

“Yes, the question I said I would not answer until you were ready,” said Dumbledore.

He looked very grave and continued, “Whether you are ready or not, only you will truly know. But the ordeal you have just gone through tells me you *are* ready. In fact, I now think I should have told you last year when you saved Sirius -- which clearly provided more than ample proof. I can only say that I wanted to protect you. I still see that innocent eleven-year-old boy who arrived at Hogwarts four years ago -- an old man’s sentimentality I am afraid.”

By this time, Harry well understood that Professor Dumbledore liked to spend a little time on introspection, so he said nothing. He knew Dumbledore would get to the point soon enough. And he did.

“Lord Voldemort came after you because of a *Prophesy*, one of only two I might add, made by none other than Sybil Trelawney on the very evening I interviewed her for the job of Divination teacher fifteen years ago.”

Professor Dumbledore retrieved a large shallow stone basin sitting on his desk and placed it on a small table between their chairs. It contained a silvery liquid.

“This is a Pensieve,” said Dumbledore. “It lets me review memories firsthand. You shall see in a moment...” He took his wand and held the tip to his right temple. As he

withdrew it, a threadlike wisp of silvery-white smoke clung to the wand tip. Dumbledore directed the wisp into the silvery liquid.

Soon a small ghostly image of Professor Trelawney rose from the Pensieve and spoke.

“The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches...

Born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies...

And the Dark Lord will mark him as his equal, but he will have power the Dark Lord knows not...

And either must die at the hand of the other for neither can live while the other survives...

The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord will be born as the seventh month dies...”

Dumbledore explained, “The first part of the Prophecy -- ‘*The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches... Born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies...*’ -- was overheard by someone eavesdropping in the hallway outside Sybill Trelawney’s room at the Hog’s Head Inn in Hogsmeade. The eavesdropper was caught by the innkeeper and thrown out. But the eavesdropper conveyed that portion of the Prophecy to Lord Voldemort.”

Dumbledore then explained that because Lord Voldemort acted on the incomplete portion of the prophecy, he had unintentionally and unknowingly caused the Prophecy to unfold -- by creating the very person who could destroy him. And that person would do everything in his power to destroy Voldemort even if he had not known about the Prophecy.

“Me... Because he *killed* my parents,” said Harry, with complete understanding.

“Exactly,” said Dumbledore with a look of relief.

“Harry, you have power the Dark Lord knows not -- power that you have yet to discover -- power that marked you as his equal... when he gave you that scar. I have already told you that he transferred some of his powers to you that night. It is much more than that. Remember I told you that you have been referred to as the Chosen One?”

Harry nodded.

“The Chosen One is the wizard who is destined to destroy Lord Voldemort, the one -- the only one -- ‘*with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord,*’” said Dumbledore.

Yes, Harry understood, “*And either must die at the hand of the other*’... only one can live; only one can survive.”

“Does that change your mind?” asked Dumbledore.

“No. I *want* him dead. I *want* to kill him,” said Harry without the slightest doubt.

“I will help you, Harry. You are still young and have very much yet to learn. The time will come when you are ready -- when you are fully of-age,” said Dumbledore. “Do not be too eager. That would be foolish.”

“I understand,” said Harry.

It was more than just the end of Hogsmeade visits. It was the end of childhood. He would want to protect Hermione, but that would be impossible. She would never allow it. And he wanted her help. No, it was more than that...

He *needed* her help -- at least as much as he needed Dumbledore’s.

Chapter 17 – The Hall of Mysteries

Professor Dumbledore asked Harry if he had seen the article in the Daily Prophet about the attempted break-in at the Ministry.

Harry nodded saying that Hermione said there had to be more to it to make the front page.

Dumbledore smiled and said, “There *is* a Hall of Prophecies in the Department of Mysteries. This Prophecy is stored there. Sturgis Podmore is a member of the Order of the Phoenix, though they don’t know it. He was Imperiused by Lord Voldemort’s agents and sent there to get the Prophecy. We have been able to find this out from Podmore using certain techniques unknown to the Ministry and St Mungo’s.”

“It is clear to us that your defeat of Lord Voldemort in the graveyard more than unsettled him -- it *terrified* him. He wants to hear the *full* Prophecy. Using Podmore was certainly only the first attempt. It was a poor effort and tells us that Lord Voldemort is ill informed about the Hall of Prophecies.”

“Once a Prophecy orb has been created, only those whom a prophecy is about may touch it -- and reveal the prophecy it contains. If the crystal orb containing a prophecy is touched by anyone else, that person will be become catatonic and require months in

hospital to recover. So, only you and Lord Voldemort may touch it. I am taking you to the Ministry of Magic tonight to retrieve it before Lord Voldemort can.”

“Tonight?” asked Harry.

“Yes, we are meeting Broderick Bode from the Department of Mysteries at eight o’clock. He will escort us,” said Dumbledore.

Harry looked at one of the many clocks in Dumbledore’s office, all of which read five minutes to eight. Noticing Harry’s gaze, Dumbledore added, “We shall be using the Floo Network, which I have had connected between my office and the Ministry of Magic for this single occasion.”

“By the way, Harry, Professor Trelawney made her second Prophecy the morning of the Quidditch World Cup. I was having a welcoming breakfast for teachers and staff the weekend before the start of term when she made it. Here it is,” said Dumbledore stirring the Pensieve once more with his wand which caused the floating image of Professor Trelawney to speak again.

“It will happen tonight...”

The Dark Lord lies alone and friendless, abandoned by his followers...

His servant has been chained these thirteen years...

Tonight, before midnight, the servant will break free and set out to rejoin his Master...

The Dark Lord will rise again with his servant’s aid, greater and more terrible than ever before...

Tonight... Before midnight... The servant will set out... To rejoin his master...”

“She foretold Barty Crouch Jr’s escape to help his master return. None of us could have guessed it was he, of course; so, we could have done nothing to prevent it.”

It seemed to Harry that Professor Dumbledore was no longer hiding anything important from him.

“I think it is time to go, if we are not to be late,” said Dumbledore matter-of-factly.

Harry and Professor Dumbledore traveled the special Floo Network connection together -- Dumbledore held Harry’s arm and used the Floo powder for both of them. After they arrived at the Ministry, Harry said he thought only one person could travel at a time using Floo powder. Dumbledore told him it was a common misconception likely based on the use of small fireplaces.

Bode was waiting for them in the Atrium. He enabled them to skip the security desk, and they were in the basement of the Ministry in about a minute. It only took another two to get to the Hall of Prophecies and arrive at row ninety-seven of the vast array of tall storage shelves filled with glass spheres.

Harry retrieved one small glass sphere from the shelf pointed out by Bode. It was much smaller than the crystal ball he had expected. Its spot on the shelf was labeled for both Harry Potter (with a question mark) and the Dark Lord.

Bode then opened a small case he been carrying and used his wand to levitate another small crystal ball from the case to replace the one Harry had removed. “It’s a real prophecy... just not about you or You-Know-Who,” explained Bode.

“It is about *me*,” interjected Dumbledore. “In other words, a decoy.”

“You?” said Harry, surprised.

“Yes, why not? A bit of a joke,” chuckled Dumbledore. “It says I will live more than my time, whatever that means...”

Bode had Harry sign a receipt and he and Professor Dumbledore were back in Dumbledore’s office five minutes later.

Professor Dumbledore waved his wand at the fireplace, and it responded with a brief sucking sound like a vacuum cleaner getting hold of something too big for the hose.

“Now what?” asked Harry.

“Well, it is *your* Prophecy, Harry,” said Dumbledore. “My advice is to destroy it because, now that *you* have retrieved it, anyone can possess it. Currently, only you and I know what it says in full. Lord Voldemort wants it. So, knowing the full Prophecy puts in danger anyone you tell it to or give it to.”

Harry immediately threw the small crystal ball into the fireplace, where it shattered.

A ghostly image of Professor Trelawney arose and repeated what Harry had heard in the Pensieve.

“Very good,” said Dumbledore. “Your friends should know *something* of the Prophecy, Harry. They deserve it. But, most importantly, do not tell them either that you retrieved it from the Hall of Prophecies or destroyed it. All you need tell them is that I revealed the Prophecy to you and that it foretold you as the one who can vanquish Lord Voldemort.”

“Is that why I survived a severed spinal cord?” asked Harry suddenly. The question had just popped into his head.

Professor Dumbledore looked intently at Harry. It looked like he was contemplating his answer. Finally, he said, “I believe it is a very likely explanation -- *‘And either must die at the hand of the other’...*”

“... *‘for neither can live while the other survives’*,” finished Harry without any fear.

Chapter 18 – The Beginning

Before Professor Dumbledore bid Harry goodnight, he told him the Order of the Phoenix was planning to set a trap for Lord Voldemort. Because Voldemort would eventually be told that he would have to go to the Hall of Prophecies himself to get the Prophecy, they knew *where* he would be -- but not *when*.

“Please keep this a secret, Harry, ...at least until Miss Granger figures it out,” said Dumbledore with a wink.

They both laughed.

Tonks was waiting for him when he left Dumbledore’s office. “That didn’t take too long. Anything interesting?”

“I’m not supposed to say, but I figure you’ll know more about it than I do before long,” said Harry mischievously.

“That does sound interesting. Must be Order business,” said Tonks guessing.

Harry was stunned. “*You’re* in the Order?”

“We and our friends are everywhere, Harry. Just keep it quiet, OK?” said Tonks, sounding like she wished she had not let it slip. “But, you’d have seen me at number Twelve eventually.”

Harry, Hermione, Draco, and Ginny were now sitting together for most meals, at either the Slytherin or Gryffindor table. The Durmstrangs and Beauxbatons were now

completely intermixed at the house tables. Krum now sat with Parvati at the Gryffindor table. Fleur had already gone through several boys since Roger Davies. No one cared about seating except the pro-Voldemort Slytherin minority at the rear end of the Slytherin table.

At the end of breakfast, the day following his meeting with Professor Dumbledore, Harry asked the others to come with him to their usual empty classroom. He told them that Dumbledore had revealed a Prophecy about him that was being stored in the Hall of Prophecies at the Department of Mysteries. Dumbledore knew the Prophecy because he had witnessed it. The Prophecy foretold that Harry was the one who would vanquish Voldemort.

“I’ve believed you were the Chosen One since you beat the Dark Lord at the end of our first year, not to mention the next,” said Draco confidently. “The duel in the graveyard and your escape this year was just the exclamation point.”

Harry wished he had Draco’s confidence. But he greatly appreciated his support.

Harry thought Hermione would say something about Harry’s destiny, but instead she said she was right about the Podmore story in the Daily Prophet. Then she immediately predicted it would be a great way to set a trap for Voldemort.

Harry was not surprised at all. Hermione was truly brilliant.

Harry then revealed that Professor Dumbledore told him the Order of the Phoenix was developing just such a plan.

Ginny wondered why Professor Dumbledore did not mention the Ministry being part of the plan.

“I don’t think he trusts them,” said Harry. “He already told us they weren’t taking his advice.”

“I think it’s more than that,” said Draco. “The last time around, the Dark Lord Imperiused a lot of Ministry Officials. It’s bound to happen again. It’s one of the ways he creates fear -- you don’t know who you can trust.”

Harry was very nervous as exams approached because he felt so far behind.

Though Hermione had enabled him to get reasonably caught up, he did not feel confident he had really learned everything he missed. Draco said he should not worry because all the teachers would give him a break -- except perhaps Professors McGonagall and Snape. That was what worried Harry the most.

Hermione offered to increase their revision time, but Harry said his brain was already overloaded.

Final exam week finally arrived. Harry did not know how, but he managed to get through it -- barely. He was anxious to find out how he did.

To celebrate the end of exams, Harry, Hermione, Draco, Ginny, and his Auror escort went see Hagrid. The Auror remained outside the hut. Hagrid hinted about a secret mission that Professor Dumbledore was sending him on, and that Madam Maxime would be coming with him.

Ginny tactfully mentioned she had heard about a row between him and Madam Maxime, but Hagrid dismissed it as, "all in the past."

The Third Task of the Triwizard Tournament was held on the twenty-fourth of June.

Sirius returned to Hogwarts to watch and stayed in the Three Broomsticks until Harry, and everyone left for the summer holiday.

The Third Task was conducted in the Quidditch stadium. Hagrid had planted a hedge maze on the pitch in early spring and it was now completely unrecognizable -- the complex and confusing walls of tall hedges filled it completely. Spectators could see down into the maze from the stands, but the maze had been enchanted to prevent the champions from hearing or seeing the spectators.

The Triwizard Cup was placed in the center of the maze, which offered multiple routes to the cup. The champion who reached the cup first would win the Task *and* the Championship.

The event started with the usual fanfare, but there was much more tension this time as the outcome would decide the overall winner. Krum and Diggory entered the maze at the same time because they were tied. Fleur had to wait to enter based on her lower

point total -- one minute for every point behind. It seemed to put her at a significant disadvantage.

The task was extremely challenging and dangerous. There were many obstacles to overcome -- including magical creatures and enchantments.

Viktor Krum was thwarted by a Sphinx and could never find another path to the cup -- so he did not finish. Diggory could not get past a giant spider which pursued him until he had to call for help by sending up red sparks with his wand. Fleur defeated one of Hagrid's now giant Skrewts, got past both the Sphinx and the spider, and reached the Triwizard Cup.

Fleur winning the Triwizard Tournament was considered a remarkable upset. After Diggory's capitulation, the Hogwarts crowd had switched their support to her as the underdog.

Minister for Magic, Rufus Scrimgeour awarded Fleur the one-thousand galleon prize money. The Beauxbatons carried Fleur on their shoulders all the way to the Champion's Victory Feast. The Beauxbatons went wild in their celebration. Any notion of French decorum was completely forgotten until the early hours of the following morning.

On the way back to the castle, Fred and George confronted Ludo Bagman under the Quidditch stands. They had seen him being paid off by the Goblins with so many bags of galleons he could hardly carry them.

Sirius, Harry, Hermione, Draco, and Ginny observed it from a distance. It did not look to be a very friendly meeting. Sirius asked what was going on. Harry told him that Bagman had stiffed Fred and George on their Quidditch World Cup bet.

"Is *that* so..." said Sirius. "You lot wait here."

Sirius walked straight up to Bagman, pushing Fred and George out of the way. He grabbed Bagman by the front of his robes with one hand and began poking him in the face with the index finger of his other hand. But they could not hear what he was saying.

A minute later Fred, George, and Sirius returned to the group while Bagman was seen to be hurrying away with his remaining loot. Fred and George had huge grins on their faces. Each was carrying a large sack of money.

“I persuaded Bagman to pay off his debt,” said Sirius explaining what happened.

Fred and George laughed, “I’ll say,” said Fred, then imitating Sirius’ voice, “*Pay up now, you damned, cheating bastard, or I’ll have a good friend of mine pay you a visit during the next full moon.*”

Hermione looked aghast.

But Sirius said, “It’s the *only* way to deal with a dishonorable man like Bagman. There are way too many of them out there. Today he was *very* lucky. If Fleur hadn’t won, the Goblins would have *killed* him if he didn’t pay up. He already owed them a lot of interest on his gambling debt from the World Cup. As it turned out, his long shot today put him over the top and then some -- *this time.*”

Fred and George were extremely grateful and offered to share their winnings, but Sirius said he would not have done anything if Harry had not told him what was going on. It was all theirs, and he had been glad to help.

Fred whispered to Harry that Bagman had given them thirty-to-one odds. They had won over eleven-hundred galleons on the World Cup and another three hundred today on student bets.

At the Victory Feast, Sirius sat with the students as usual. Fleur invited Sirius to sit with her and the Beauxbatons at the Ravenclaw table, which he did. She told him she would be returning later in the summer to work for Gringotts. She was personally congratulated by almost everyone, including, of course, Krum and Diggory.

When Harry and the others congratulated her, she invited Harry to sit with her and Sirius. Harry accepted, but soon excused himself and rejoined Hermione, who he could see was giving him the eye from the Gryffindor table.

The celebration lasted until midnight and then continued in the Ravenclaw common room.

The Durmstrangs and Beauxbatons departed the next day after a special Sunday brunch feast. Professor Dumbledore made a departing speech, thanking them for their friendship and welcoming them back any time. All the Hogwarts students saw them off.

The last few days until the end of term were very relaxing.

Harry and his friends learned officially they had passed all their exams and, as usual, Hermione was top of the year. They were also given summer essay assignments, but that was to be expected.

At the End of Term Feast, Dumbledore awarded the House Cup to... Gryffindor. Dumbledore did not award any last-minute points to Harry for what happened. And Harry expected none. He understood his escape from Voldemort had been a near fatal life lesson -- there was nothing heroic about it, despite what Hermione and Draco said. Harry agreed with Professor Snape.

Professor Dumbledore let the house Quidditch captains present awards to the champions in the Intramural Leagues. Ginny's team won the All-Girls League. The *unofficial* House Quidditch Cup was won by Slytherin with Draco as Seeker for the last two matches. Montague was finally happy.

With their school trunks packed, most of the students departed for Hogsmeade and the Hogwarts Express.

Harry and Hermione went to the Staff room with Sirius and used the Floo Network to go straight to Grimmauld Place. Kreacher was waiting for them in the Kitchen with delicious snacks.

Sirius left the Kitchen and ordered Kreacher to accompany him.

Hermione hugged Harry and held on to him, saying, "I'll do everything I can to help you get ready. I believe in you. I believe in your destiny."

"I need you, Hermione. I can't do it without you. I wouldn't have gotten this far without your help," said Harry softly.

Nothing more needed to be said about it.

After another moment, Harry said, "Come over as soon as you can. There's something I want you to help me with."

Before she left, Harry kissed Hermione goodbye. It was the first time he had kissed her first.

Hermione was escorted home by members of the Order of the Phoenix, who had already visited her parents to explain the new arrangements. They also placed every conceivable magical protection on her parent's house. Everyone recognized that Hermione was now in just as much danger as Harry.

Sirius took Harry to Privet Drive that day on his motorbike to renew Harry's protective enchantment for another year.

Aunt Petunia did not want to let them in. Sirius was forced to use magic to unlock the front door.

Harry and Sirius were shocked to learn that Mr Dursley had died mysteriously the previous week. He had burned to death in his car in the parking lot at work. The police had called it a freakish accident because there had been hardly any damage to the car.

Petunia and Dudley were afraid to leave the house. She was having everything delivered. They correctly believed that Mr Dursley had been killed by magic. They did not want anything to do with Harry and did not want him to stay, even for a day.

Sirius managed to convince Mrs Dursley that if Harry did not spend a day in the house, the most important magical protection on their home would be gone and they would be in very great danger. She relented but demanded that Sirius stay as well to protect them, so he did.

When he and Harry left the next day, Sirius promised to arrange more protection for them.

As they walked to Sirius' motorbike, Harry said gravely, "*Everyone* I know is in danger."

"Everyone you *don't* know is in danger too, Harry..." said Sirius. "We're at *war*."

The End

End Notes:

Without citation, the nature of this alternate universe fan fiction story requires liberal use of terms, concepts, characters, paraphrased conversations and story lines from *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* by J.K. Rowling.