

Title: Harry Potter – Slytherin: The Half-Blood Prince

Written: 10/20/2017

Revision: 2.2, 8/7/2023

Summary: Harry Potter, sorted into Slytherin House, is upstaged in popularity by Ron Weasley.

Audience: PG

Category: Alternate Universe

Warnings: Magical violence

Length: 78 pages

## **Harry Potter – Slytherin: The Half-Blood Prince**

### **Chapter 1 – A Very Busy Summer**

Harry could not remember a busier summer holiday.

It was so busy at number Twelve, Grimmauld Place, that Harry and Hermione found it difficult to find time or space to continue their secret Animagus training. They finally settled on eleven in the evening in the attic. They managed to fit it in most days.

After a week, Hermione said she had regained the feeling of heightened senses, but she had still not experienced the second heartbeat, which would clearly signal being on the path to eventual transformation. Harry felt like he was starting over for the third year in a row. He still felt what he now called “the resistance” and still got the headache. But at least he was not concentrating on trying to become a stag anymore. He knew, if successful, the image of the creature he would become would appear in his mind right before he transformed.

The Order of the Phoenix was extremely active. The members were constantly coming and going. There were several small-group meetings every day and usually a major meeting once a week, typically when Professor Dumbledore attended.

Even though Professor Dumbledore had made Harry a member of the Order of the Phoenix the previous year, it was a secret from his friends -- even Hermione. So, Harry only attended meetings when both he and Hermione were invited, which had only happened twice by the end of July. Otherwise, he relied on Sirius to keep him informed.

The two meetings had covered intelligence reports of Voldemort's activities. But they did not include much more information than was being reported in the Daily Prophet. The situation was not good.

The wizarding population was under tremendous stress. Travel was very dangerous, even in groups. Death Eaters were on a killing rampage. People were afraid to trust anyone because they could be a spy for the Death Eaters or under the Imperius Curse -- it did not make much difference which.

The Ministry seemed impotent against the dark forces arrayed against them. Their actions were almost completely defensive. Auror operations usually came up empty. The Death Eaters almost always got away. Clearly the Ministry had been and was being compromised but seemed incapable of stopping it.

Pius Thicknesse had been fired after Easter -- he was a suspected Voldemort sympathizer or had been Imperiused, or both. This and the capture of a dozen Death Eaters at the Ministry had been setbacks for Voldemort, but he had clearly recovered quickly.

Scrimgeour appeared to be increasingly paranoid and rarely left his office. Dolores Umbridge, as Senior Undersecretary, had taken over most of his day-to-day activities and was clearly cracking down from a security perspective, regardless of the impact on wizard rights. The Order thought she was doing more harm than good.

The only good news was that the Order had recruited a handful of new members. Their identities were being kept secret as part of a new cell structure that Dumbledore had set up. Only Dumbledore and Shackbolt knew their identities.

Sturgis Podmore had finished recuperating from the effects of the Imperius Curse and the Memory Charm placed on him by Death Eaters trying to gain entry into the Department of Mysteries last year. He had resumed all his duties in the Order and was no longer staying at number Twelve.

\*\*\*\*\*

Just before the end of July, the O.W.L. examination results were delivered.

Harry was exuberant. He got the Outstanding in Potions that he had worked so hard for. It meant Professor Snape would have to take him as a N.E.W.T. student in Potions

and his goal to become an Auror was intact. He thanked Hermione profusely because he would not have managed it without her help revising.

Harry's other grades were a mixed bag, but not terrible. He got another Outstanding in Defense Against the Dark Arts, as he expected, and Exceeds Expectations in Charms and Transfigurations -- all of which were critical subjects for becoming an Auror. He earned Acceptable in the rest, except for History of Magic, in which he received a failing grade of Poor.

Of course, Hermione received an Outstanding grade in everything.

\*\*\*\*\*

Sirius and Fleur hosted a birthday party for Harry at number Twelve. Draco, Ginny, Fred, and George attended. The Order members who happened to be there joined in too. Kreacher outdid himself in preparing the food and decorations but was clearly annoyed by Fleur's many little and several large criticisms.

Lupin was a late-arriving surprise guest. He told them what he had been doing -- trying to persuade the "werewolf community" not to join Voldemort. However, it had not been going well because Voldemort offered them license to prey on Muggles -- *and* "uncooperative" witches and wizards. Lupin told them about Fenrir Greyback, a notorious werewolf and criminal. Greyback actually enjoyed being a werewolf and specialized in attacking children. He was already working for Voldemort and being used to intimidate families with children into doing the Dark Lord's bidding.

Draco said he was having a great time at the Weasley's. He loved Mr and Mrs Weasley. They treated him like part of the family, though they ribbed him about being a Slytherin. And Ginny had finally introduced him to the Ghoul in the attic. He also told them he had passed all his OWLs -- Outstanding in Potions, Defense, and Exceeds Expectations in everything else, except for Acceptable in History of Magic.

Ginny passed all her end of year exams too, but the biggest news was her being named Gryffindor Quidditch captain, not to mention Prefect.

Fred and George confidentially told Harry they had acquired an old, run-down premises in Diagon Alley for a joke shop. They said it would take them some time to get it ready, but they were already operating their mail order business from there and living there too. Apparently, Mrs Weasley was not too happy about it, but as long as they came home for Sunday dinner, she did not complain too much.

But the biggest surprise of the party was Sirius announcing his engagement to Fleur. The wedding was set for the following July in France at her parent's house. It seemed to offer hope for the future when there was so much uncertainty.

The next day, Hermione's parents arrived at number Twelve for a week-long visit. They were brought over from their safe house in France by the Order under very heavy security. They were extremely grateful to Professor Dumbledore, who spent the first evening attending to them.

"Will this war ever end?" asked Mrs Granger, almost in tears, of Professor Dumbledore, as she held Hermione's hand.

"I will not lie to you," said Dumbledore. "The last time, it lasted *eleven* years. This time we are better prepared, but I am afraid it is impossible to say. We can only hope."

Though it was not the first time Hermione's parents had been to Grimmauld Place, it was the first time Kreacher had ever acknowledged their presence. He was polite and respectful, seeing to their every need. Sirius was astonished. Mr and Mrs Granger were not sure what to make of Kreacher, but they returned the kindness with genuine thanks and praise.

Harry wondered if Kreacher had heard about what happened to Hermione in the clutches of the Dark Lord's Army. Was it possible the old house elf was seeing the world differently?

Hermione spent all her time with her parents during their visit. Harry did not want to get in the way, but Hermione asked him to be with her most of the time. All the activity at number Twelve and talk of the war made her parents very uncomfortable. They asked Hermione to come back with them to France, but she refused. The goodbyes at the end of her parents' visit were tearful and somewhat strained. Still, Hermione knew they would be safer away from England.

\*\*\*\*\*

Sirius got Harry and Hermione's books and school supplies for them in Diagon Alley. Professor Dumbledore did not want them going anywhere unless it was absolutely necessary. Sirius also had to buy Harry new robes. He had a major growth spurt over the last year and was now almost as tall as Draco.

Harry had not expected it, but Professor Snape continued his Occlumency lessons once a week during the summer. Snape did not bring the Pensieve, so if he were still removing memories before the lessons, he was doing it at Hogwarts or somewhere else beforehand.

Harry was surprised when Hermione asked Professor Snape if she could participate in the Occlumency training. But he was dumbfounded when Snape agreed to it immediately.

Hermione's ability to concentrate and focus her mind made her a natural. Professor Snape said she was an example that Harry should strive to emulate. Harry suspected he said it more to belittle him rather than to praise her. Before the summer was over, Hermione was better than Harry. He was not the least bit surprised or jealous. That's just who Hermione was.

\*\*\*\*\*

Two weeks before the end of August, Professor Dumbledore called on Harry at number Twelve just after midnight. Harry was almost in bed when Dumbledore knocked on his bedroom door.

As soon as he saw Professor Dumbledore, Harry asked excitedly, "Are we going Horcrux hunting, sir?"

Dumbledore smiled, "Not tonight, Harry. We are going *Slughorn* hunting instead."

"What's a Slughorn?" asked Harry, confused.

Dumbledore chuckled. "Horace Slughorn is an old colleague whom I am hoping to persuade to come out of retirement and fill our vacant teaching position. And I need your assistance."

"Me, sir? What do you want me to do?" asked Harry, even more confused.

"Absolutely nothing at all; just be yourself," was all Dumbledore would say.

Professor Dumbledore took Harry to the small village of Budleigh Babberton using side-along Apparation. Harry had already experienced it in fourth year when he was abducted by Barty Crouch Jr.

It turned out ex-Professor Slughorn was ‘borrowing’ the homes of vacationing Muggles to evade the Death Eaters, whom he said were trying to recruit him. He was changing locations frequently to keep ahead of them. He had detected Dumbledore’s and Harry’s approach using magical alarms and made the house appear to have been ransacked by Death Eaters. He went to the extreme of making it look like someone -- himself -- had been killed or kidnapped by splashing dragon’s blood on the walls and ceiling.

Professor Dumbledore discovered Slughorn posing as an overstuffed comfy chair and forced him to reveal himself. Overstuffing came naturally to the old professor as he was quite fat.

Harry soon realized Slughorn was most concerned with his own self-importance and self-indulgence. During his career, Slughorn had ‘collected’ students he believed promising and had connected them with influential and important people to facilitate their careers. Professor Dumbledore had obviously brought Harry along because he knew Slughorn would want to *collect* him too. Harry would be his crown jewel, the ultimate prize in his collection.

Harry did not like Professor Slughorn. Yes, he was a Slytherin -- he had even been Head of House -- but he was old-school. He was prejudiced against Muggle-borns. He had taught Harry’s parents. And while he did praise Lily’s brilliance, it was her being Muggle-born which he thought made it so remarkable. Harry tried to shame him by declaring that the smartest girl in his year was Muggle-born and his friend. Slughorn quickly back peddled, claiming he was not prejudiced, but Harry did not believe him.

As Professor Dumbledore had said, Harry did not have to do anything. Slughorn agreed to resume teaching after a short visit. Dumbledore and Harry said their goodbyes and returned to Grimmauld Place.

The next morning, Harry told Hermione about Professor Slughorn, saying he was replacing Mad-Eye Moody as Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher.

\*\*\*\*\*

Fleur Delacour moved into Grimmauld Place later that day. She shared the master suite with Sirius.

Living with Fleur twenty-four hours a day soon wore on Harry and Hermione, but Sirius was like a love-smitten schoolboy.

Kreacher was clearly repulsed by Fleur because she insisted on helping him cook -- his province -- and would not stop calling him her “adorably sweet little elf-man.”

\*\*\*\*\*

At the last Order meeting that Harry and Hermione attended before the start of school, Professor Dumbledore ordered termination of all connections with the Floo Network. This included Hogwarts School, all Order member residences, and all safe houses, including number Twelve. He said they could no longer trust the Ministry of Magic. Once reliable members of the Ministry were no longer cooperating with the Order.

Harry and Hermione would have to travel back to school another way.

After the meeting, Professor Dumbledore took Harry and Hermione aside. Harry wanted to take the Hogwarts Express back to school. He had not been on it in two years. But Professor Dumbledore said it was out of the question. “And I am afraid we can no longer fully trust the Aurors for security on the train. You will travel via side-along Apparation with Sirius and Remus and arrive just outside Hogwarts gates. Kreacher will get your trunks safely delivered.”

“Why not use a portkey,” asked Harry.

“I’ve added further protective measure to prevent any direct connections into the school -- no exceptions,” answered Dumbledore.

“But what about house elves -- Dobby or Kreacher to take us?” suggested Harry.

“No, Harry. I do not want elf-Apparation into the school to become widely known. Emergencies only,” said Dumbledore, ending the discussion.

## Chapter 2 – School Surprises

On September first, Harry and Hermione arrived just outside the front gate of Hogwarts with Sirius and Lupin about the same time the Hogwarts Express was arriving in Hogsmeade. Tonks and another Auror were on duty at the gate. Tonks gave Lupin the eye, but he just nodded to her.

As Harry and Hermione walked up to the castle, Harry looked back. Lupin was still there talking to Tonks.

“Are Tonks and Lupin together?” asked Harry.

Hermione glanced back at the gate. “Mrs Weasley told Ginny they are, but they don’t get much time to see each other these days. She said Tonks wants to get married now but Lupin wants to wait until the war’s over.”

“I can understand that,” said Harry.

“You *can*?” asked Hermione, sounding surprised.

“Yes,” said Harry, also surprised. “Who *knows* what’s going to happen?”

“*Exactly*,” said Hermione seemingly in agreement, “That’s why they *shouldn’t* wait.”

Harry had known Hermione long enough to know there was no point in arguing. He would just end up getting the silent treatment from her.

Harry and Hermione met up with Draco and Ginny in the Entry Hall before the Sorting Ceremony.

Draco and Ginny told them about meeting Professor Slughorn on the train and being invited to a picnic lunch in his compartment. Slughorn knew Draco’s father and was impressed that Ginny was a Prefect, Quidditch Captain, and dating Draco. Slughorn also invited Zabini, Belby and McLaggen. He grilled them all about Harry and what happened last year.

Professor McGonagall interrupted their conversation in the Entry Hall and had them get seated at their house tables. There was no mixed house seating allowed at event feasts, like the Start of Term Welcoming Feast or the End of Term Farewell Feast.

The sorting of new students took place as usual. The Sorting Hat recited a poem about dark times and unity.

Professor Dumbledore surprised -- more like stunned -- the students by introducing Professor Slughorn as the new Potions Master and Professor Snape as the new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher.

Professor Snape got a rousing round of applause from the Slytherins. Everyone knew he had sought the position for years and had filled-in after Professor Lupin resigned



three years before and again after Professor Moody was murdered near the end of last year.

Professor Dumbledore then made all the standard announcements -- out of bounds areas, Filch's list of restricted items, and Quidditch Team signup, including House Teams and Intramural Quidditch League teams. He also promoted the Dueling Club with Harry Potter leading it.

Harry got a bigger cheer than Professor Snape did... and from *all* Hogwarts houses.

After the feast, Harry had to explain to his friends that he had just *assumed* Professor Slughorn would be teaching Defense. Professor Dumbledore had never actually said it.

At breakfast the next morning, Harry learned from Hermione that Professor Slughorn accepted students with Exceeds Expectations O.W.L. grades in his N.E.W.T. Potions class. Hermione had heard Professor McGonagall telling Ron when she was handing out class schedules and she ordered him to continue taking Potions. Harry was annoyed by the news because he could have done better in some of his other exams if he had not spent all the extra time revising Potions.

Neither Harry, Hermione, nor Draco were taking NEWT level Care of Magical Creatures or Astronomy. Harry and Draco were also no longer taking History of Magic. Hermione talked them both into continuing with Ancient Runes with her and she continued taking Arithmancy. So, the three of them would still be in the same classes for Potions and Ancient Runes, but now also NEWT level Transfiguration. Most NEWT level classes were mixed houses because fewer students took the more difficult subjects at a higher level.

Professor Snape was completely different as the primary Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher. When he had merely substituted for Professors Lupin and Moody, he always spent a good part of the lesson criticizing the curriculum and teaching methods of his fellow teachers and trying to show them up. But now as *the* Hogwarts Defense teacher, he approached the subject with a sublime passion -- almost reverence. Whereas his approach to teaching Potions had been critical, perfunctory, and practical; Defense was encouraging, delving, and subtle. Snape was captivated by what could be accomplished using the Dark Arts. It was clear that he would rather be teaching the Dark Arts themselves rather than how to *defend* against them.

It made Harry uneasy.

And so was the class -- it was *un*-easy, to say the least. Professor Snape had always been a task master. But as the Defense teacher, he was *driven*. From day one, he demanded that all NEWT students perform all spells *non-verbally*. It was agonizingly difficult for everyone -- except Hermione. For her it was just something to remember to do. Harry now *hated* going to Defense Against the Dark Arts.

It was now just the opposite with Potions. Professor Slughorn was the opposite of Professor Snape -- jovial and laid back. That did not mean it was not challenging. But there was only the pressure you put on yourself.

Ron Weasley arrived late to Potions class on the first day. He had to get a sixth-year Potions textbook from the back cupboard since he had not bought a textbook in advance. Ron returned to his table with an old tattered one and complained rather loudly that all he ever got was junk. Ron was sharing his worktable with Lavender Brown. She just looked at him and rolled her eyes. She had come to hate his constant complaining and turned to look admiringly at Draco, who was sharing a table with Mandy Brocklehurst from Ravenclaw. Harry, of course, was paired with Hermione.

At the start of the class, Hermione dazzled Professor Slughorn with her knowledge of three unidentified potions which Professor Slughorn had prepared before class -- Veritaserum, Polyjuice Potion, and Amortentia. Professor Slughorn realized that Hermione must be the Muggle-born girl that Harry had praised when he met him in Budleigh Babberton during the summer. He also realized that Harry and Hermione were *together*, and he gave Harry a wink.

Professor Slughorn assigned them a practical exercise to prepare the most powerful sleeping potion known, *Draught of the Living Death*. The student preparing the best brew would win a small vial of *Felix Felicis*, euphemistically known as *Liquid Luck*. He made sure to explain the precautions and restrictions on its use -- including a specific ban in organized competitions.

Later, to the class's astonishment, Professor Slughorn announced that Ron Weasley had prepared the best potion. While Hermione's had been excellent, he declared Ron's to be "perfect." So, Ron was awarded the small vial of *Felix Felicis*.

Lavender was now in total awe of Ron; her earlier eyes for Draco forgotten.

### Chapter 3 – Quidditch Questions

Harry held tryouts for the Slytherin Quidditch team earlier than usual because he had to fill three vacant positions.

Pucey successfully moved from Chaser to Keeper after Bletchley completed his final year at Hogwarts. Two completely new players also made the team. Vaisey replaced Urquhart who had not yet returned from St Mungo's. His legs were still paralyzed from a curse by the Dark Lord's Army the previous year, but Professor Dumbledore had announced that the Healers said he was responding to restorative therapy and would eventually recover. Daphne Greengrass became the third Chaser. She was recruited by Davis from the All-Girls Intramural League team.

The Gryffindor Quidditch team had to fill four vacancies. Angelina Johnson, Alicia Spinnet, Fred and George Weasley had all finished school. Robins and Zabini won the second and third Chaser positions behind veteran Katie Bell. Coote and Peakes were the new Beaters. Ginny said they all worked well together, and that Ron was better and more consistent at Keeper without his wisecracking twin brothers constantly harassing him. She seemed very confident.

In the first Quidditch match of the season between Gryffindor and Slytherin, Ron was spectacular. Slytherin did not score a single goal. Harry got the Snitch, but they lost by ten points. Harry blamed himself for not getting the Snitch sooner -- Madam Hooch ruled that Gryffindor had scored the winning goal only a second before Harry caught the Snitch. But Ginny had kept him from getting it several times because she was also an excellent Seeker.

But Draco would not let Harry take any of the blame, saying "Come on, Harry, we didn't score a *single* goal. It's *our* fault," speaking for the Slytherin Chasers who were all very embarrassed.

Ron had been very good, but also *amazingly* lucky on several goal saves. On one sure goal, the Quaffle collided with a bird that just happened to get in the way -- too bad for the bird... and Slytherin. On another certain goal, a Bludger knocked the Quaffle off course at the last second. Even more unbelievable was a clear shot on goal that was blocked by Ron's shoe, which flew off when he swung around wildly because he guessed wrong and was far out of position.

Instead of celebrating the Gryffindor win, Hermione was incensed. As soon as the match was over, she raced over to confront Ron. Lavender was already hugging Ron, saying, "You were *really great* today, Ron."

Ron was grinning and feigning modesty. “Nah, not *that* good... well, *maybe*... and a *bit* lucky.”

“I’ll say,” said Hermione interrupting, “Maybe you had a little *help*.”

At that moment Hermione was joined by Harry and Draco.

“What do you mean by *that*?” snarled Ron.

“I mean, I think you used the Felix Felicis you won from Professor Slughorn,” declared Hermione.

Ron turned a bright red and he looked like he wanted to hit Hermione. But instead, he reached into his pocket and pulled out a small vial. He held it between his thumb and forefinger right in front of Hermione’s face, practically touching her nose, so she had to look cross-eyed at it.

The vial was full and still sealed with wax.

Hermione’s mouth dropped open and she stammered, “I’m... I’m sorry, Ron.”

But he had already pulled the vial away, turned his back, and stalked off.

Lavender glared at Hermione and then ran to catch up to Ron, putting her arm through his and snuggling up to him as they walked back toward the castle.

Hermione looked at Harry and Draco for support, but they had grimaces of embarrassment and looked away.

“I’m *sorry*. I shouldn’t have accused him without *proof*,” said Hermione, sounding devastated.

“It’s OK,” said Draco, “We were *all* thinking the same thing.”

Harry nodded.

“But you didn’t *say* it,” said Hermione.

Just then Ginny walked over. “I just talked to Ron. He’s playing it up... ‘*Falsely accused by my own housemate*.’ I told him if *you* hadn’t confronted him, *I* would have. He didn’t

like that; called me a traitor. Everyone in Gryffindor knows he won the Lucky Potion. He bragged about it to everyone in the common room... Anyway, Lavender is comforting him -- gave him a great big kiss as a reward for his “brilliant performance.” She blamed *me* for not getting the Snitch and delivering a crushing defeat to Slytherin. A win is a win, I say. And Ron clearly deserves the credit. He legitimately saved thirteen of the sixteen goal attempts and we got lucky on three.”

Draco said, maybe a little too flippantly, “Congratulations, Ginny, but the season just started and we’re only *ten* points down. Gryffindor will have to win out, because we aren’t going to lose again.”

“We’ll see,” said Ginny dismissively, but then she smiled and sidled up to Draco, sliding her arm through his and taking hold of it, saying, “Let’s go to the Student Lounge. I’ll just pop in on the celebration in the common room and then sneak out. Ron’s going to get all the attention. They won’t miss me.”

The four of them headed off together.

A day later, Harry could still not get over Ron’s performance. True, Ron had shown signs of becoming a very good Keeper last year, but always fell apart sometime during the match... well, except for the last one right before the end of the year. He had been extremely good that day for sure. This time, however, Ron had been nearly perfect, and his lucky breaks had given them the win.

But knowing Hermione and her good judgment, something did not feel quite right to Harry.

## Chapter 4 – Memory Mission and Giant Problem

At dinner the following Tuesday, Ginny told Draco, Harry, and Hermione that Hagrid let her know during his class that afternoon that he was hurt because they had not taken his NEWT level Care of Magical Creatures.

Hermione made Harry and Draco come with her to visit Hagrid after dinner. Harry had his usual shadowing Auror escort. By this time, Harry often forgot they were there. When Harry commented on it, Draco said, “Now you know what it’s like to be rich and have servants.”

“I can *live* without it,” said Harry disdainfully.

Draco laughed, but said ominously, “Maybe *not...*”

Hagrid grumbled quite a bit but finally admitted his class did not align with their career goals. Then, like nothing had happened, he brightened up and said excitedly, “I got somethin’ real interestin’ ta show ya,” and told them to come back on Saturday after breakfast. Hermione prodded him to tell them, but he would not, saying. “I don’t wanna spoil the surprise.”

On the way back to the castle, they speculated on what the surprise could be.

Draco said, “He’s probably come up with another dangerous crossbreed of magical creatures -- maybe a hippogriff and a sphinx.”

“Knowing Hagrid,” said Harry, “it’ll probably be something worse -- like a *dragon* and a *basilisk*.”

\*\*\*\*\*

Harry held the first meeting of the Dueling Club for all interested students from all years and began reviewing what they had covered the previous year.

He assigned Neville the task of teaching the first-years the basics while partnering them with the second-years. Harry and Hermione began to teach third-years and above the Patronus Charm. They started with a demonstration. Everyone was very impressed with Harry’s stag and Hermione’s otter. As Harry expected, few students produced any results when they attempted it. Harry told them it would be difficult and take a lot of effort over the next several weeks, if not months. He cautioned that many of them might not be able to produce a Patronus, especially a corporeal Patronus, until they were older.

Before he closed the session, Harry told all the students about the Student Lounge, how to open it and enter. He did not tell them anything else or that it was actually the Room of Requirement.

As Harry dismissed everyone, Neville shouted, “DUMBLEDORE’S ARMY!”

Everyone echoed the call and then chanted it as they left the Great Hall.

The next morning, Harry, Hermione, Draco, and Ginny each received a note from Professor Slughorn inviting them for dinner on Saturday night in his office.

“It’s the Slug Club,” said Draco. “Professor Slughorn wants Hogwarts most famous student, that being you, Harry, under his *personal* supervision. And he wants you, Hermione, for your *brains*.”

Ginny added, “Everyone he knows seems to be famous and he says he helped them on their way given his ‘*connections with the connected*.’”

“I’ll go,” said Harry, “but only because Professor Dumbledore wants me to get to know him.”

“It’s probably for *that* reason,” said Hermione.

“I don’t think so,” said Harry. “Professor Dumbledore didn’t seem that impressed with him. It must be something else.”

Harry was right.

Professor Dumbledore invited Harry to his first personal lesson of the year on Thursday evening. He picked up where he left off the previous year -- showing memories about Tom Riddle in the Pensieve. This time he showed Harry a memory that Professor Slughorn had provided.

There was something wrong with it. Riddle asked Professor Slughorn a question about Horcruxes and then suddenly the image *shifted*, and Slughorn was talking out of a fog, admonishing Riddle. This shift into fog-talking happened twice during the memory. Professor Dumbledore told Harry that Professor Slughorn had altered the memory, probably because he was ashamed of what had really happened.

Then he said, “Harry, we *must* have that memory -- complete and unaltered. It is *vital*. Your assignment is to get it. I believe you are the *only* person who can. There will be no more lessons until you do.”

Harry did not understand why an incredibly powerful wizard like the headmaster could not get it using Legilimency or some other means.

Professor Dumbledore explained if he succeeded in using Legilimency against an accomplished wizard like Professor Slughorn, he would only see the *altered* memory because Slughorn would be defending the *true* memory.

“He’s invited me to the Slug Club,” said Harry.

“Good. Cultivate the relationship. It should help you get the memory,” advised Dumbledore.

Of all the things Professor Dumbledore had ever asked Harry to do, this seemed the most nefarious -- using subterfuge to get personal information from a Hogwarts teacher. He thought to himself, ‘Hermione is much better at this sort of thing. I’ll get her to help.’

He told Hermione, Draco, and Ginny about it the next morning.

“So, what should I do, Hermione?” asked Harry.

“Why don’t you just *ask* him... in the *right way*, of course,” she responded.

Harry was incredulous. “Just *ask* him?”

“Yes. Take him aside on Saturday night at the party, when he’s happy and relaxed, and ask him *nicely*,” suggested Hermione.

“That *won’t* work,” said Harry dismissively. “Professor Dumbledore would have told me if it would.”

Hermione bristled, “You said Professor Dumbledore *didn’t* tell you how to do it.”

“He didn’t, but I’m sure that’s not what he had in mind. It’s too *simple*,” complained Harry.

Hermione shot back, “Well then, I *told* you what I thought. You’ll just have to come up with *something else*,” and she stalked off in a huff.

“What set her off?” asked Harry.

“You said her idea was no good,” said Ginny.



“No. I just said I didn’t think it would work,” complained Harry.

“Same thing, mate,” said Draco.

Harry scowled and Ginny laughed.

\*\*\*\*\*

After breakfast on Saturday, the four went down to see Hagrid. Hagrid told Harry’s shadow Auror they were going to be a while, and he would escort Harry back to the castle. When the Auror left, all Hagrid would say was, “Yer gonna be glad ya came,” as he led them into the Forbidden Forest. For some reason, he did not bring Fang along.

Harry, Hermione, and Draco had not been in the Forest since their second year. It was Ginny’s first time, but she was just as concerned as the others, who had barely escaped *death* the last time. At *least* it was daylight.

They were quite deep in the Forest when three centaurs stepped from the shadows of the enormous trees and blocked their path. Harry recognized the one on the right as Firenze, a beautiful palomino, but it was the black centaur in the middle that spoke. “We have *warned* you, Hagrid. The one you brought *must go* from our forest.”

“He’s as much right ta be here as yer kind, Magorian,” said Hagrid angrily.

“We will not let this continue any longer. The forest is being *destroyed*,” answered Magorian raising his bow threateningly.

Before Hagrid could respond, Firenze spoke, “We must not take any action that endangers their *young*.”

“They do not *look* so young,” snorted the third centaur, a red brown color.

“Nevertheless, they are clearly students at the school, Ronan,” said Magorian. “Take this as your *last warning*, Hagrid.”

Then the three centaurs turned and walked back into the shadows. They made almost no noise. You could not tell just moments later whether they remained close or had continued on.

“What was *that* about, Hagrid?” asked Harry.

“Damn nags think they *own* the Forest. There’s plenty o’ room fer everyone,” said Hagrid angrily.

“Who’s *‘the one you brought’*, Hagrid?” asked Hermione.

“You’ll see,” said Hagrid.

And they did see, almost immediately.

They suddenly entered a clearing of hard packed earth. Most of the surrounding trees were leaning, beaten down or broken. Many uprooted trees were stacked in a huge pile next to a circle of large boulders around the remains of a smoldering fire. But what drew their full attention was a colossal man sitting cross-legged near the fire with his chin resting on his heaving chest. His eyes were closed, and his huge arms were resting in his lap.

It was a GIANT!

It made Hagrid look like a small child.

Even though the giant was obviously asleep, it did not diminish the terror in Hermione’s eyes.

“Hagrid!” she whispered in alarm. “Why did you bring a *giant* here?”

Draco and Ginny had not taken a second step into the clearing and had already backed up into the trees. Harry had wanted to do the same but, but Hermione had pursued Hagrid in her attempt to get answers, so Harry had followed her.

“Hagrid, why did you *do* this?” Hermione was pleading for an explanation and was now tugging on Hagrid’s sleeve to stop, and he finally did.

Hagrid turned around and said, “I had ta *protect* ’im from the other giants. They was beatin’ on ’im cause he’s so small, an I were afraid they was gonna kill ’im.”

Hermione could only shake her head.

Harry said, “So *small*...?” as he gazed upward at the enormous sleeping giant despite the fact it was sitting on the ground.

“I had ta... he’s me *brother*,” Hagrid confessed.

Harry and Hermione’s jaws dropped.

“Well... half-brother... ’is name’s Grawp,” said Hagrid, sounding rather proud.

Just then, the giant snorted loudly, opened his eyes and bellowed.

“HAGGER!”

The voice was deep and rumbled like thunder.

Hagrid whipped around and said, “Grawp, I’ve brought me friends ta meet ya like I said I would.”

Grawp suddenly stood straight up, right out of his cross-legged sitting position. He was alarmingly agile and quick for such a huge creature. He had to be over sixteen feet tall and was incredibly massive, in addition to being brutishly ugly.

Hermione yelped and she and Harry both quickly stepped back several paces. Harry turned and glared back at Draco and Ginny, but they had retreated behind a large tree and were now just peeking around it.

“Grawpie... this is... Har-ry... an this is... Her-mi-o-ne,” said Hagrid very slowly, like talking to a small child, while sweeping his arm back to indicate the two frightened figures behind him. “Say ‘hel-lo’ like I taught ya.”

Grawp now stared at the pair, then blinked and said in a slow monotone, “Hel-lo, Har-ry... Hel-lo, Her-mi.”

“See there, he likes ya,” said Hagrid cheerfully, though there was nothing to indicate the giant liked anything about them or even understood what he was saying.

“I’d ’ave ’im shake yer hands, but ’e don’t know ’is own strength yet,” said Hagrid chuckling.

From the looks of the trees surrounding the clearing, that was quite obvious.

On the way back to the cabin, Hagrid explained that bringing Grawp back from Professor Dumbledore's mission to parley with the giants is what took him so long in returning to Hogwarts the previous year. In fact, Grawp had *not* wanted to come in the first place and had resisted. It explained why Hagrid had suffered so many cuts and bruises for so long. But Harry concluded that Hagrid and Grawp must be getting on now since Hagrid only looking beaten up *some* of the time.

"Olympe -- Madam Maxime ta ya -- weren't too keen on the idea, but she helped me with 'im 'til we got back ta France. She had a way with 'im, ya see," Hagrid explained.

Hagrid told them it had taken most of last year to get Grawp "civilized" and learn enough English for simple communication.

"But the centaurs..." Hermione began, but Hagrid cut her off.

"That's nuthin' fer ya ta be worryin' 'bout," insisted Hagrid. "Besides, there ain't 'nough o' 'em ta run Grawpie off. Them centaurs er mostly talk anyway..."

But it was clear that Hermione was worried.

Finally, Hagrid said, "It's jus' that in these here times, if summin' were ta happen ta me, I'd like ta know that ya'd be there ta take care of 'im... just in case. An one other thin'... I got somthin' fer ya all fer helpin' me along."

He reached into one of his many pockets and pulled out what looked like a wad of leather and cord. He fumbled them apart and handed one to each of them.

"Them er *mokeskin* pouches... pretty rare, unless ya know where ta find the li'le blokes. Ya can put yer treasures inside and it'll only open fer the owner. Just put it 'round yer neck when it's empty and it becomes yers."

They thanked Hagrid -- and assumed it was advance payment for "*just in case.*"

As Hagrid walked them back to the castle, none of them could conceive of having to take care of a giant, much less having to deal with the centaurs.

## Chapter 5 – Slughorn's Shining Star

Harry did not stop thinking about Grawp until Hermione reminded him about Professor Slughorn's party. He groaned in anticipation. They spent the rest of the day in the Student Lounge waiting until it was time to go.

Harry was glad that neither Hermione nor Ginny had any reservations about using the Room of Requirement after what had happened to them in the Room at the hands of the Dark Lord's Army the previous year.

So many students were now using the Student Lounge, it had expanded. In addition to becoming larger, there were more rooms for different groups and club activities. The swimming pool was now enormous.

Professor Slughorn's Slug Club party was incredibly boring -- at least Harry thought so. It was nothing but standing around with drinks and finger food served by Hogwarts house-elves and listening to Slughorn babble on about past students whom he had helped and who were now famous.

The girls seemed to enjoy it and so did Ron Weasley. *He*, not Harry, was clearly the star guest. Professor Slughorn made him the center of attention and would not stop prattling on about him being a "Potions prodigy."

Hermione nudged Harry. "Go talk to Slughorn. He's in a good mood."

Harry shook his head. "Not now. He won't stop *raving* about Ron. I mean, look at those fawning girls..."

"I see them," said Hermione dismissively. Then she sighed, "OK, then later; but don't *waste* this opportunity."

"Stop *pushing*, Hermione," complained Harry. "I'm not going to just walk up and ask him... I'm going to be... *subtle*."

Hermione rolled her eyes and left to talk with Ginny and Draco.

Draco left the two girls and joined Harry. "Hermione still mad at you?"

"She isn't *mad* at me," said Harry absently. He was trying to think of how to be subtle.

"OK. And you're not bugged because *Ron's* suddenly getting all the attention?" jabbed Draco.

That got Harry's attention. "What? *No!*" he exclaimed.

Harry paused for moment and then asked, sounding very frustrated, "How can I do something Professor Dumbledore *can't* do?"

"He must think you can, or he wouldn't have asked you... simple as that. But you *won't* as long as you *think* you can't," responded Draco matter-of-factly.

"You sound like Hermione," said Harry. Then he sighed, "I have *no* idea what to do."

"Maybe you should take Hermione's advice," offered Draco.

Harry groaned and then said, "I guess I'll *have* to, if I can't come up with something else soon."

Harry never tried speaking to Professor Slughorn at the party. Hermione did not speak to him as he walked her back to Gryffindor tower with Draco and Ginny. Hermione's kiss goodnight was perfunctory. She *was* clearly mad at him. Harry decided he would ask Professor Slughorn after the next Potions class.

He did and it was a *disaster*.

Professor Slughorn accused him of being a "*pawn*" of Professor Dumbledore and stormed out of the classroom.

When Harry told Hermione what happened, she said, sounding quite critically, "Well, you must not have asked him *properly*."

Now Harry was mad. "Thanks, at *lot*, Hermione," he responded coldly. "It was *your* idea to just ask him. It didn't work. Now it'll be even *harder* to get that memory."

Harry stalked off.

He went to his dorm room and was about to flop onto his bed when he saw a note on the pillow. It was from Professor Dumbledore.

*Come to my office after dinner. Bring your cloak and sugar quills.  
A.D.*

Harry felt a thrill.

He was certain Professor Dumbledore was finally taking him Horcrux hunting.

## Chapter 6 – Horcrux Hunt

Professor Dumbledore had Harry put on the invisibility cloak before they left his office. When they were through the front gate of the school, Dumbledore instructed Harry to take his arm. Then he Disapparated with Harry in tow. Harry was starting to get used to the dark claustrophobic feeling of suffocating compression. He still did not like it, but it did not make him nauseous anymore.

Harry and Dumbledore Apparated in front of Marvolo Gaunt's shack. It was unmistakable, even in the dim twilight and dark shadows of the trees.

"You may take off your cloak now, Harry," said Dumbledore.

The shack was now completely run down. The roof looked ready to collapse. Professor Dumbledore had to use magic to open the front door, not because it was magically locked, but because the frame was now so warped, the door was completely stuck.

Once inside, Dumbledore used his wand to sweep the room like a torch, going over every surface.

"Ah, Ha!" he said happily after some minutes.

"What, sir?" asked Harry, sensing nothing.

"Magic leaves traces, if you know how to look. It also helps to know the witch or wizard who performed it -- their particular *style*, so to speak. Lord Voldemort has left his magical *fingerprints*."

Concealed under a small section of the dirt covered floorboards, Professor Dumbledore found a small recess. In it was a small wooden box. He removed the box, opened it and withdrew an old gold ring with a large simply cut black stone. It looked like opaque glass with a faint symbol etched onto it.

Harry recognized it as the ring Marvolo Gaunt had held up to Bob Ogden's face in the memory Professor Dumbledore had shown him last year.

Dumbledore had found the Horcrux ring!

Harry was amazed. He would have had to completely demolish the shack to find it, even knowing it was hidden there somewhere.

Dumbledore's eyes seemed to lose focus and then tear up. He moved to put the ring onto his finger.

“NO!” Harry yelled instinctively and lunged forward to swat the ring from Dumbledore's hands.

It flew across the room and pinged off the wall, landing on the dirty floor.

Harry was sure he had seen a blue light emanate from the ring as it was about to go onto Dumbledore's finger.

Professor Dumbledore looked utterly shocked by Harry's assault, but then quickly gathered himself and said very seriously, “Thank you, Harry. You probably just saved my life...”

He turned from Harry to look at the ring lying on the floor and then continued, “As we both well know, that ring is a *Horcrux* and carries a powerful curse. To put it on would certainly be *deadly*. It might have brought back Lord Voldemort in some form using my body for energy -- as happened with Miss Weasley and the Diary -- or caused me to seek him out and surrender to him.”

“Then *why* would you possibly think of putting it on, sir?” asked Harry incredulously.

Dumbledore shook his head and said, “I must have momentarily lost my senses -- perhaps reveling in my success in having found it. Now, please pick it up and put it in your pocket. It will not hurt you if you do not wear it.”

Harry did as he was told but did not believe Dumbledore's explanation of his nearly catastrophic mistake.

Professor Dumbledore returned the now empty ring box to its hiding place and used magic to make it and the room look as if nothing had been disturbed.

They returned to Dumbledore's office the way they had come.



“Please place the ring on the center of my desk, Harry,” instructed the headmaster. “We are now going to destroy it, like we destroyed the diary.”

“With Basilisk venom? You still have some, sir?” asked Harry.

“Yes, in a manner of speaking,” Dumbledore answered as he walked over to the glass case on the wall which contained Godric Gryffindor’s sword. He opened the case and retrieved it.

Returning, he said, “Harry, Gryffindor’s sword is Goblin made. Goblin armor and weapons are uniquely magical; wizards cannot match it. This sword does not need cleaning or sharpening. Legend says, *‘it only takes in that which makes it stronger.’* I coated the blade with Basilisk venom four years ago after our excursion into the Chamber of Secrets. It did not dry on the blade, Harry; it was immediately *absorbed*. We shall now test that legend.”

Dumbledore held out the sword for Harry to take. “Now if you please, Harry, take the sword and strike the ring with it.”

Harry eagerly took the sword and spent a few moments getting the feel of it. It was amazingly light and perfectly balanced. It felt like it was made for him and gave him a sense of great confidence and... power. It amazed him.

Dumbledore cleared his throat, “The *ring*, Harry, if you please.”

Harry refocused, a little embarrassed. He took the sword in both hands, squared himself to the ring, raised the sword over his head and brought it down hard with a chopping motion. It was like the sword was telling him what to do and guiding itself.

The blade hit the ring with the sound of a hammer on anvil. An instant before it hit, the stone in the ring glowed a brilliant blue and emitted a clearly human scream, which was silenced instantly upon contact with the blade. The blade of the sword rebounded with double the speed of impact, vibrating violently. Harry barely managed to hold on.

“Well *done*, Harry!” exclaimed Dumbledore. “The Sword of Gryffindor has again performed noble work and, I believe, for the first time ever for someone who was not of Gryffindor House.”

“I don’t understand, sir,” said Harry as he handed the sword back to Dumbledore, who placed it back into its glass case.

Professor Dumbledore peered intently at Harry over his half-moon spectacles. “Harry, *anyone* can wield that sword -- as a sword. But the sword will only act *magically* for a Gryffindor. It was something *else* I also wanted to test. If it had not worked for you, I, as a Gryffindor, would have used it to destroy the Horcrux. But as I have believed for some time now, you are *different*. You are a bridge between the two houses. Sometimes I think we sort too early. This convinces me. Only a *true* Gryffindor could have used that sword to destroy the Horcrux.”

Harry hesitated and then spoke, “Sir, I’ve never told anyone... but when I was sorted, I told the Sorting Hat I *wanted* to be in Gryffindor. But the Hat said my request was nonsense and I belonged in Slytherin.”

Dumbledore nodded knowingly, then asked, “Do you remember the time Professor McGonagall brought you to my office and I told you I that speak to the Hat after each sorting?”

Harry nodded.

Dumbledore continued, “The Sorting Hat does *sometimes* take what the student desires into account. Of course, this is not widely known. If he always did as student’s wish, I dare say, there would be very few Hufflepuffs.” Dumbledore winked and then continued, “In your case, the Sorting Hat said you gave him a very strong *subconscious* need to be in Slytherin... But back to the business at hand...”

Professor Dumbledore picked up the ring and unceremoniously placed it on his right ring finger.

Harry looked startled.

“Oh, there is *nothing* to worry about, Harry. It is now *just* a ring, and there is the proof of it,” said Dumbledore confidently.

He held his hand out for Harry to see, showing that the ring had caused no ill effects. Then he brought it back close to his face to inspect the stone. He gave a small sigh, shaking his head slightly.

Harry assumed Professor Dumbledore had also just seen the hairline crack through the stone that Harry had.

While still examining the ring, Dumbledore said, “I believe I know where *another* Horcrux may be hidden -- probably either the locket or the cup. But I have not yet found the exact site, which may be quite difficult to find. When I do, I will let you know for another hunt.”

Harry found his heart beating faster just thinking about it, but then Dumbledore asked, “So, tell me, how are you progressing with your homework assignment, Harry?”

Harry’s stomach seized up and he turned red with embarrassment. He told Professor Dumbledore of his failure.

Dumbledore was not impressed. “Harry, you must exploit Professor Slughorn’s *weaknesses*.”

“But, *sir*, I don’t see *how* I could do better than you...” Harry’s words trailed off as Dumbledore gave him a withering look.

It seemed like minutes went by in silence, though it could only have been seconds, with Harry feeling increasingly guilty until he managed to say, “I’m sorry, sir. I’ll try *harder*. I’ll *get* the memory.”

“Thank you, Harry. It is *vital* that you do.”

## Chapter 7 – Umbridge Unleashed

Hermione, Draco, and Ginny were waiting for Harry in the Slytherin common room. Harry quietly told them about the Horcrux hunt and the ring’s destruction. But he left out the parts about Gryffindor, the Sorting Hat and its mistake.

“Wow, Harry, that’s incredible,” said Draco.

Hermione and Ginny agreed.

Without a trace of smugness, Hermione added, “And that’s why Professor Slughorn’s memory is so important, Harry. We’ll all help you get it.”

But a week later, none of them had come up with any good ideas for how to do it, now that Professor Slughorn was on guard.

\*\*\*\*\*

Over the next several weeks, Ron's performance in Potions was nothing short of spectacular. Professor Slughorn was effusive in his praise. He stopped favoring Harry in any way. And, though Hermione was always excellent, and often brilliant, she did not get a tenth of the attention that Ron got.

Hermione was increasingly frustrated at being runner up.

"Slughorn *'loves'* Ron. Maybe *Ron* can get him to give up the memory," joked Ginny when the subject returned to Harry's assignment from Professor Dumbledore -- as it did almost daily.

"Like *Ron* would ever help *us...*" said Draco derisively. "And besides, we'd have to tell him too much."

"I wasn't being *serious*," snapped Ginny. "Anyway, he's too busy snogging Lavender."

"*What?*" snorted Draco.

"Yes. Ever since the goal shutout against Slytherin, she's been attached to his face like a Remora," said Ginny pursing her lips and making a loud squealing sucking sound.

Hermione nodded, "I don't know when he has time to study, and he's still top of the class in Potions. He *can't* be using his lucky potion; there isn't enough."

"Lavender's been doing his other homework to allow him more time to *'focus on his Potions mastery.'*" Ginny made air quotation marks as she finished.

Hermione rolled her eyes.

"Is there any chance we can use Legilimency on Professor Slughorn?" asked Harry, adding, "He wouldn't expect it from a student."

"No," said Hermione. "It takes *years* to master and, besides, Professor Slughorn would be especially ready to protect that particular memory. Obviously, Professor

Dumbledore knew this and didn't try. He wanted Professor Slughorn here at school so *Harry* could get it."

"But what about Professor Snape?" suggested Draco. "He's a master Legilimens."

Hermione nodded, "No doubt, but Professor Dumbledore must have had a reason why he didn't ask him."

"I suppose so," admitted Harry reluctantly. "Still, it takes my *full* effort to block Professor Snape during my Occlumency lessons."

"We *can't* ask Professor Snape," cautioned Hermione. "It would require too much explaining. We don't know how much Professor Dumbledore has told him. Professor Dumbledore gave this assignment to *you*, Harry."

"OK, OK," said Harry in frustration. "Let's drop it for now and go to the Student Lounge."

\*\*\*\*\*

That night at dinner, a witch Harry had never seen before was sitting next to Professor Dumbledore at the High Table. She was ugly, short, squat and dressed in baby pink-colored robes with a matching little bow in her hair. After dinner, Dumbledore introduced her as Dolores Umbridge, the Senior Undersecretary to the Minister for Magic and the acting head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement.

Umbridge got up and began speaking. As she spoke, she paced back and forth along the High Table in front of the teachers.

Now, getting a good look at her, Harry thought she looked like a toad.

Draco must have read his mind. He leaned over and whispered, "She looks like a *toad*."

Harry snorted loudly.

It did not go unnoticed. Umbridge stopped speaking and stared directly at Harry, who looked down at his plate trying hard to suppress laughing.

Umbridge began speaking again, "Hem, hem. As I was saying... security has been quite *lacking* at Hogwarts School. No doubt this led to the student *incident* last year

among the houses. Henceforth, the *Ministry* shall be imposing new security and disciplinary measures at the school -- including the following tried and true *rules*.”

“One. Segregation of the four houses shall be restored -- visiting other house common rooms is *prohibited*. Passwords shall not be shared between houses and shall be changed at least twice daily. The Auror stationed at the entrance to each common room shall enforce these rules.”

“Two. Students shall only sit at their own house table in the Great Hall, their house section at the Quidditch stadium, with housemates at shared worktables in double classes, and with fellow housemates when using the library.”

“Three. Individual boys and girls shall not be permitted to be alone together or closer than arm’s length when together in larger groups.”

“Four. All disciplinary violations along with the assessed punishment shall be reported to the ‘*Auror in Charge*’ at the school. A weekly report shall be submitted to my office for review. From this I shall determine if further measures need to be implemented. Of course, this is for the protection, safety and well-being of all the students.”

“Five...”

During her remarks, low muttering and grumbling began and increased at the four student tables. By the time she had finished her baker’s dozen rules, angry comments and abusive remarks were quite audible throughout the Hall.

“SILENCE!” thundered the headmaster.

Professor Dumbledore had stood up and bellowed as Umbridge had finally stopped listening to herself pontificate and began to sense the outrage of the students. Dumbledore’s command had shocked everyone into complete silence, including Umbridge.

She looked startled, but quickly recovered, saying, “Thank you, Headmaster. This, I think, is *clear* evidence of the problems that need to be corrected. I shall be visiting Hogwarts again soon to see whether or not things have improved.”

With that, Umbridge walked out of the Great Hall, without so much as a by-your-leave to Professor Dumbledore, the staff, or the students. She held her nose high in the air and did not look at anyone.

“I don’t *believe* it,” whispered Draco. “There were *way* more than thirteen rules in that little speech.”

Hermione leaned in and the four of them put their heads together. She whispered, “I’m *not* surprised. The Ministry is under pressure from parents for what happened last year. Students got *hurt*. Parents do *not* want a repeat. The Minister obviously felt he had to *do* something. The new open house rules made them nervous -- too much change in a short time. They used it as a scapegoat.”

Professor Dumbledore made a few remarks about troubled times and working together before dismissing them.

The grumbling resumed as the students made their way out of the Great Hall.

\*\*\*\*\*

“Who does she think she is?” demanded Harry.

He and Harry had returned to the Slytherin common room without Ginny and Hermione -- assuming the new rules were already being enforced by the Aurors.

“She’s the Senior Under...” Draco began, but Harry cut him off.

“I know *that*. I mean, why is she sticking her nose into Hogwarts business? And look at all the *rest of it!*” Harry angrily threw down a flyer that had been handed to each student by Filch as they left the Great Hall after dinner.

It listed everything Umbridge had said and a whole lot more.

“Didn’t you *listen* to Hermione?” responded Draco.

“Yah, yah, all right, I got that. But why did they have to take away all the *fun stuff* too?” Harry complained, picking up and shaking the flyer. He began reading it, “...the Intramural League Quidditch teams... the Dueling Club... and the *Student Lounge!*”

“It’s a good thing she didn’t mention those while she was speaking or there would have been a *riot*,” said Draco.

“Damn *right*,” agreed Harry. “She left the really bad news for Filch to deliver. I don’t think I’ve *ever* seen him so happy,” he finished glumly.

Just then, Ginny and Hermione burst into the Slytherin common room.

“What are you *doing*?” exclaimed Draco. “You’ll get in *big* trouble... and *how* did you get the new password?”

“Tonks told us; she’s on guard,” said Ginny cheerfully.

Hermione continued, “The Aurors have *revolted*. Tonks came and told us. The Aurors assigned to the school had a meeting and decided they *liked* the way things were and knew the changes had *nothing* to do with what happened last year. If anything, they helped *defeat* the Dark Lord’s Army by putting them at odds with all the other students. The Aurors decided they were not going to enforce the old hag’s rules.”

Draco and Harry whooped. As did everyone else in the Slytherin common room who had been listening attentively.

Hermione finished, “We can continue doing what we’re doing. The Aurors will submit fake reports to Umbridge and warn us when she’ll be visiting. Tonks even placed a memory charm on Mr Filch to forget her visit and not remember handing out or seeing the Ministry Decree flyers, which, of course, will remain posted in case she comes back.”

“Let’s spread the word...” said Draco, “but not before I give Tonks a great big *kiss*... for being my favorite cousin, of course.”

Ginny could not decide whether to smile or scowl so her face ended up looking contorted.

Draco pointed at her face, and they all laughed.

Hermione went to brief the Hufflepuffs and Ginny the Ravenclaws.

\*\*\*\*\*

“But won’t the teachers object?” asked Luna, speaking for the other Ravenclaws.



“No,” said Ginny immediately, ready for the question. “The Ministry didn’t give the Hogwarts teachers and staff, or even Professor Dumbledore, *any role* at all in enforcement or reporting. She put it all on the Aurors. Hermione thinks Professor Dumbledore might have even given Tonks the idea to talk it over with the other Aurors. They all know the problems last year had *nothing* to do with the changes. The DLA were just evil supporters of Voldemort.”

Only one or two Ravenclaw students winced at hearing the name. Many students were now able to say the name, though most said ‘*Lord*’ Voldemort out of fearful respect. This change had occurred because Harry always openly used Voldemort’s name in the Dueling Club meetings.

\*\*\*\*\*

Professor Slughorn had another Slug Club party, but this time he did *not* invite Harry. Hermione, Ginny and Draco did not want to go, but Harry insisted they attend because it might help them get the memory.

Draco was fuming when he entered the dormitory after the party. “I am *sick* of Ron Weasley. He acts like he’s *Head Boy* around Professor Slughorn -- even referred to him as ‘old Sluggy’ a few times loud enough for the old fart to hear. Slughorn ate it up. Made me wanna puke. If Ron weren’t my future brother-in-law, I slap him silly.”

“What did you just say?” asked Harry in astonishment.

“What? Slap him silly?” asked Draco, confused.

“Nooo... future... brother - in - law...” said Harry slowly, his eyes wide.

Draco had a blank look on his face. “I *said* that?”

“You did. You really *are* serious about Ginny, aren’t you?” asked Harry, but it was not really a question.

Draco paused and answered slowly, “I guess I am... I mean... I’ve thought about it a lot. I know it’s *way* too early... A lot of things can happen... I haven’t dared to talk to her about it... But I can’t imagine *not* being with her... And who knows how this war is going to go... I just... I don’t know...”

Draco looked unsettled.

“What about Tonks?” asked Harry.

Draco smiled wolfishly, “Yea, she’s hot... but I’ve never been *serious*... more of a joke, really... She’s my *cousin*, after all, and a *lot* older. Besides, I know she’s after Lupin.”

He changed the subject. “What about you and Hermione?”

Harry responded immediately, almost coldly, “I can’t see past Voldemort.”

## Chapter 8 – Hermione’s Breakthrough

The Christmas holidays were approaching.

Harry had been teaching the Patronus Charm in Dueling Club, but despite his and many of the younger students’ best efforts, only two third-years could produce one. No first-year or second-year students could manage it, not even white mist, though they had all tried their best. So, Harry divided the class into two sections based on Patronus ability -- generally first through third-years and fourth through seventh-years.

Draco, Ginny, Neville, and Luna led the “juniors”, as Harry referred to the younger section; and he, Hermione, Chang and Summerby the “seniors”. Otherwise, the curriculum was almost the same for each group, except non-verbal work was emphasized with the seniors.

Harry was surprised at the number of *savants* -- students who were extraordinarily good at performing a particular bit of magic, be it charm, spell, hex, jinx, or curse. He would get them to help teach the finer points of their special skill, helping everyone improve.

\*\*\*\*\*

Notices for Ministry Apparation training were posted a week before Christmas break. It was scheduled to begin right after the holidays for all sixth-year and any seventh-year students who had not yet passed their qualification test. All sixth-years signed up.

More students than ever were staying at Hogwarts during the Christmas holidays.

The environment outside of school was frightening. There were more murders and disappearances reported in the Daily Prophet every week. The Ministry seemed helpless. About one Auror was dying for every Death Eater killed or captured. And there were a lot more Death Eaters than the Ministry had Aurors to sacrifice. The odds did not look good. Many parents of Hogwarts students wanted their children to remain in the safety of the school.

Harry and Hermione were staying for Christmas, but not for that reason. Sirius had sent Harry a letter that he was traveling to France with Fleur to meet her parents. Harry did not mind. He was happy to see Sirius finally moving beyond his troubled past.

Hermione, of course, was concerned about Kreacher being left alone during the holidays, but Harry reminded her he was still serving the Order at “Headquarters.” Still, Hermione made Harry promise to ask Dobby to spend Christmas day with Kreacher. It amused Harry because he knew Dobby drove Kreacher crazy, particularly with his notions of freedom and being paid for work.

Draco was spending Christmas at the Burrow with the Weasleys, though he told Harry he was not sure he would get through it without coming to blows with Ron. Everyone agreed Ron was becoming increasingly insufferable. Draco said he would rather stay at Hogwarts with Ginny.

Harry and Hermione used the holidays to spend more time on Animagus training. They were regularly using an empty classroom on the fifth floor.

Harry usually went first. Sirius had warned them not to practice at the same time after the first sign of something significant happening. If something went wrong, it was important to have someone ready to help. This was one of the reasons trying to become an Animagus on your own was so dangerous -- and also a reason it was regulated by the Ministry.

Harry closed his eyes and concentrated. He found that Professor Snape’s training in Occlumency helped him focus. After a few moments, for the first time he felt a second heartbeat and he began to feel stronger and more powerful. His senses magnified. His hearing became more acute, but nothing compared to the increase in his sense of smell. He could smell ...everything. He opened his eyes. Everything appeared in shades of gray, but the dark classroom now seemed bright.

Every movement Hermione made, even the very slight movement of her breathing and her eyes blinking, caught his attention. He tried to keep the feeling going, but it

suddenly faded -- no, it seemed suppressed -- and he was back to normal, except for feeling fatigued, like he just lifted a lot of weight, and with the usual headache.

Frustrated, he yelled, "DAMN!" then exclaimed, "Something *happened*, Hermione! I felt my senses sharpen like you described... *and* I felt the double heartbeat! But I couldn't hold it. I still felt something pushing back."

"Something *did* happen, Harry!" said Hermione excitedly. "Your breathing sounded deep and rough. It's your best effort yet, and the double heartbeat means you're close."

"Thanks, Hermione," said Harry appreciatively.

He bent over, put his hands on his knees and took several deep breaths. "It really takes a lot out of you." Then he stood up straight and said, "OK, it's your turn."

Hermione closed her eyes with her wand tip at her heart.

Suddenly, her outline faded and shrank dramatically in all directions and then solidified in midair. With a loud screech, a large bird was flapping its wings to remain airborne, and Hermione's wand dropped to the stone floor.

Hermione had transformed into... an *eagle*, a beautiful golden eagle.

The eagle gained control and soared around the room and then landed on the back of a chair next to Harry.

All Harry could do was stare in wonder at what Hermione had been able to accomplish.

Finally, he exclaimed, "You *did* it, Hermione! It's *amazing* to see!"

The eagle ruffled its feathers.

"Uh, can you... understand me?" asked Harry uncertainly.

The eagle responded with a soft high-pitched whistle.

"OK. One whistle means yes, and two means *no*," said Harry. "First... Are you OK?"

Whistle.

“Glad to hear it... Can you change back?” Harry was asking the key question and sounded a little concerned.

No whistle. Instead, the eagle took off and soared around the room. Then it landed on a wide windowsill and pecked at the windowpane several times.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea, Hermione,” said Harry shaking his head.

The eagle pecked at the windowpane again, now more insistently.

“I’m *not* opening the window... not *this* time, anyway,” said Harry firmly. “I want you to change *back*, Hermione. You’re making me nervous. Maybe the eagle you is exerting too much influence over the human you the first time.”

Whistle. Whistle.

“Sorry, Hermione. I need you to come back *now*...” insisted Harry.

The eagle stared at Harry for some time.

“Please, Hermione... *please*,” Harry pleaded.

Then... a single whistle.

The transformation was almost too fast for Harry to follow. The eagle was gone, and Hermione was standing by the window.

She shrieked with joy and ran to Harry, throwing her arms around him, exclaiming, “Oh, Harry... It was... indescribably *wonderful*.” She was talking while trying to catch her breath. “The image of the eagle... suddenly appeared in my mind... and then I was the eagle... You were right, Harry... the eagle in me wanted to soar... and *hunt*... It was almost *overwhelming*.”

She released him and stepped back to continue. “You have to *concentrate* on maintaining your *human* side *too*... You’ll understand when *you* do it. You were right not to open the window. I don’t know what I would have done.”

They were both anxious to practice again. And they did so over the next few days. However, Harry did not make further progress. The image of the creature he would

become never appeared in his mind. This greatly frustrated him. Hermione told him his frustration was holding him back -- that he just needed to relax and “go with it.”

But he couldn't.

His only satisfaction was in seeing Hermione succeed so spectacularly. By their third session since her initial transformation, she could instantly transform back and forth. And she no longer needed her wand to transform either.

During their fourth session, Harry opened the window. He watched Hermione soar out over the castle and grounds. She kept her word to remain in sight and returned after a short time.

She positively glowed afterwards. “It's *glorious* to fly, Harry. You can't know what it's like. And my *vision* is incredible.” She sounded happier than Harry had ever heard her, and he was completely captivated by her enthusiasm. It erased Harry's frustration over his own lack of progress.

“Well, if I ever need to have a letter delivered when Hedwig's gone, I'll know who to ask,” he said teasingly.

Hermione laughed and punched him softly in the arm. Then she kissed him. “Thank you, Harry, for understanding.”

Then he said, very seriously, “Let's keep this a secret for now -- even from Draco and Ginny, OK?”

“Why?” asked Hermione. “We said we'd invite them after we managed it.”

“I know, and it's *not* because *I* haven't managed it yet. I'm not sure, but I think it would be... I don't know... *safer*, for you to keep it secret,” explained Harry.

Hermione reluctantly agreed.

## Chapter 9 – Hermione's Helping Hand

Professor Slughorn scheduled a Christmas party to which each 'Slugee' remaining at Hogwarts for the holidays could invite a guest. Once again, Harry was not invited.

Apparently, he was no longer an official member of the Slug Club, which suited him just fine. However, Hermione insisted he go as *her* guest. Harry reluctantly agreed.

Since Ron had gone home for Christmas, Professor Slughorn did not have him to focus praise on at the Christmas party. Instead, he latched onto Hermione and, while he maintained that Ron was among the best Potions students he had ever taught, he declared to the assemblage that Hermione was “nipping at his heels.” And, though she lacked Ron’s “flair and imagination,” her precision and incredible knowledge *almost* made up for it.

Harry could hardly believe that Hermione was putting up with such backhanded compliments. But she seemed to bask in Slughorn’s comparative praise and stood right next to him with a very un-Hermione-ish sycophantic smile on her face.

Harry wondered what was going on.

He could see that Hermione was clearly playing up to Professor Slughorn and doing everything she could to flatter him. She was also making sure the waiters were keeping his glass full of Madam Rosmerta’s best oak-matured mead. Harry even saw Hermione use magic to replenish the contents more than once. She also saw to it that he ate very little of the oes de oeuvres and finger food -- often helping herself from his plate, which he found “charming.”

Harry finally realized she was trying to get Professor Slughorn drunk, but he had no idea why. Her efforts were clearly having an effect, even on someone as fat as their new Potions master.

Professor Slughorn began reciting poetry and offering toasts.

Hermione suddenly began nudging Harry around her, so he was standing directly in front of Slughorn. His eyes bulged a little as he took in Harry’s presence. Then, quite unexpectedly, he said in a loud but slightly slurred voice, “A toast... to Harry Potter -- the *Chosen One*.” He raised his glass abruptly and sloshed mead onto his protruding belly.

The toast drew an audible gasp from many in attendance.

For a teacher to openly declare what almost everyone believed or suspected was unprecedented -- even though they had been reading speculation about it in the Daily Prophet since last summer.

Harry said nothing, but Hermione raised her glass and responded, “To Harry Potter...” after which, everyone joined in.

Then Hermione leaned over and whispered into Professor Slughorn’s ear as he continued to stare at Harry. Harry saw Slughorn’s eyes well up and a tear slide down from the corner of one eye.

“Yes, yes,” said Slughorn absently as Hermione put her arm through his and led him away, saying to the crowd, “Professor Slughorn needs some fresh air.”

She gestured to Harry with her other arm to follow them. Hermione steered Slughorn out into the corridor and into the nearest empty classroom.

Professor Slughorn looked like he was close to passing out. He was having difficulty standing without teetering and having to catch himself. So, Hermione propped him against the wall just inside the door.

Then she pulled Harry right in front of Slughorn again and said, “Talk to him, Harry.”

But before Harry could think of what to say, Slughorn said in a soft slurred voice, “I *know* what you want... the *memory*... I *cannot* give it to you.” Then he sobbed, “I’m... *ashamed*.”

This angered Harry, but he did not want to try the approach that had failed before. Suddenly inspired, he said, “Yes, Professor Dumbledore wants the memory, but *I* don’t. All I need is a *number*, Professor -- just the number of pieces he divided of his soul. You know what I mean. Tell me the *number* Tom Riddle told you and you can keep your memory.”

Slughorn blinked several times and then gulped.

“Seven,” he whimpered. It sounded like a plea for mercy.

Hermione gasped.

Slughorn began to cry and blubbered, “Forgive me, Harry. You have no idea what he was like even then. I cannot forget what he did to my poor *Lily*. I *pray* you are the Chosen One... But how can you possibly find... that *many*. I’m *sorry*. I’m *so* sorry.” Then he started crying uncontrollably and slowly slid down the wall until he was sitting



huddled like a lost child with his head resting on his knees and his arms around his legs.

Harry and Hermione stared in silence, and, in moments, Professor Slughorn was snoring loudly.

“You *did* it, Hermione,” said Harry at last.

“I helped, but you asked the *right* question, Harry. Now go and see Professor Dumbledore. This *can't* wait. I'll go back to the party and get someone to help me get him to bed.”

Harry nodded. He kissed Hermione on the cheek and turned to go when he paused and turned back, asking, “What did you whisper in Professor Slughorn's ear?”

Hermione smiled, “I said you have your *mother's* eyes.”

Harry kissed her again and then ran all the way to Dumbledore's office.

## Chapter 10 – Horcrux Accounting

“I would have liked to have had that memory,” said Dumbledore with a slight shrug, “But you found out what we *needed*, Harry. Good work.”

“With Hermione's help,” reminded Harry.

“Yes, with Miss Granger's help,” agreed Dumbledore. “She is an *amazing* young witch. You could not do better, Harry.”

Harry smiled and nodded. Then he said, “So, Voldemort made seven Horcruxes then.”

Dumbledore hesitated for a moment and then said, “No, Harry. He *divided* his soul into seven *pieces* -- seven. It is considered by most witches and wizards to be the most powerfully magical number. And it is certainly the only number he considered worthy of Lord Voldemort. Therefore, he made *six* Horcruxes, Harry, just six. The *seventh* bit of his soul remains in his magically restored body.”

Harry ticked off his fingers, “So, there's the Diary, the Ring, the Locket, the Cup, something of Gryffindor's, and Ravenclaw's.”

Dumbledore leaned back in his chair and pressed the tips of his fingers together. “I do think Lord Voldemort originally wanted the complete set of Hogwarts founders’ artifacts. But we know the only known artifact of Godric Gryffindor is his sword,” said Dumbledore gesturing toward the glass cabinet where it hung on the wall. “It would have been a truly formidable Horcrux because it is, in and of itself, a powerful magical object. Obtaining it must have been one of his objectives in seeking a teaching position here. But because he failed in that, I believe he settled on something else... his pet snake, Nagini.”

“His *snake*?” asked Harry, very surprised.

Dumbledore gave Harry a penetrating look. “Indeed. Your surprise is warranted. It was *not* a wise choice. Making a Horcrux from something that can think for itself creates enormous uncertainties. But his ability to possess the snake and maintain contact with it at great distance, suggests an extraordinary *personal* connection between the two of them -- made possible *only* by the link between the shared pieces of Lord Voldemort’s soul. It also gives him an incredible ability to project his power without risk to himself.”

Harry suddenly *understood* something he had known since coming to Hogwarts. Now, for the first time, he fully realized how Voldemort had survived the rebounding killing curse and why he could not die. The bit of soul remaining in his body would never reach the afterlife as long as another part of his soul was in a Horcrux. The Horcrux held the soul in the mortal realm like an anchor. His body could be completely destroyed, but the bit of soul from it would linger on earth until either it could use dark magic to create a new body or the bit of soul in a Horcrux could do so.

Harry wondered what would happen if more than one Lord Voldemort showed up at the same time. But his mind started to spin, and he refocused on the subject at hand.

“So, that leaves something of Ravenclaw’s. Do you think he found something, sir?” asked Harry leaning forward expectantly in his chair.

“I do indeed,” said Dumbledore, “because I am certain he *completed* his goal of dividing his soul into seven pieces. As you know, the only known relic of Rowena Ravenclaw is her diadem and, unfortunately, no one has seen it for centuries.”

“But you *do* think *he* found it,” said Harry uncertainly.

“Again, I do,” said Dumbledore. “I believe it has something to do with Albania, where he is known to have traveled, both before and after his bodily destruction when he first tried to kill you.”

“So, Voldemort went to Albania even before he went into hiding,” said Harry.

“Yes, and I believe that is *significant*,” said Dumbledore.

“How could we ever find something hidden in *Albania*?” exclaimed Harry in frustration. “And what if Voldemort has made *more* Horcruxes since he returned -- or at least one anyway, to make up for the diary he knows was destroyed.”

“If Lord Voldemort did indeed hide a Horcrux in Albania, we just need to use logic to narrow the search -- as I did with the ring. But I do not think Lord Voldemort has *intentionally* made more than six Horcruxes, despite knowing one was destroyed,” said Dumbledore confidently. “You see, then his soul would have been divided into more than seven pieces... and that certainly *would not do* for Lord Voldemort. In addition, he can surely see, as can anyone around him, the physical effects of his dark actions. It has transformed him into the less-than-human visage you yourself have seen. I do not think he would dare... because of what he fears he might become -- more daemon than man.”

Harry pondered this later as he lay in bed waiting to fall asleep. He wished Draco were there to talk about it instead of being with Ginny and the Weasleys at the Burrow.

The next morning, Harry told Hermione about the six Horcruxes and what Professor Dumbledore said had convinced him that the snake, Nagini, was one of them.

Hermione was listening attentively and then her face suddenly went blank like she had gone into a trance.

Harry had to prod her shoulder to snap her out of it. “What *is* it, Hermione?”

She looked oddly at Harry, but then forced a smile and said, “Oh ...I was just thinking what would happen if the snake found someone it liked better.”

But she was actually thinking about something quite different -- something much more important and quite *terrifying*...

...that Harry’s connection with Voldemort’s mind was just like Nagini’s.

## Chapter 11 – Ron Rules

The Christmas holidays were soon over.

Harry and Hermione told Draco and Ginny about their success with Professor Slughorn. Harry insisted Hermione deserved all the credit. They were impressed, but likewise disturbed to learn that Voldemort had made *six* Horcruxes.

Draco said Mrs Weasley was constantly fussing over Ron because of how well he was doing in Potions -- telling them that Professor Slughorn had not favored Mr Weasley when she and Arthur were students at Hogwarts. She seemed to view it as Slughorn making up for a past mistake.

Ginny said they had visited Diagon Alley over Christmas to see Fred's and George's joke shop -- Weasley's Wizard Wheezes -- which had opened just in time for Christmas shopping. Business was not too bad, even though there were a lot fewer shoppers these days. People were afraid to go out, especially at night.

To Harry, it sounded very depressing. "I thought Voldemort's failure at the Ministry last year and the capture of a dozen of his best Death Eaters was supposed to have been a serious setback," said Harry.

"It was... for a while," said Draco, "but according to Mr Weasley, they have retaliated by significantly increasing the murders and kidnappings. So, people are more afraid than ever."

Ginny chimed in, "Dad said you can't be sure who to trust at the Ministry anymore."

Mr Weasley told them that Scrimgeour had instituted *random* Veritaserum interrogations under the supervision of Dolores Umbridge and over the objections of the Wizengamot.

Ginny said, "Dad says everyone hates her, but she controls access to Scrimgeour. So, he hears only what she wants him to hear. Only her cronies have any power these days -- including Percy. Dad won't mention his name anymore."

"But Veritaserum must be exposing *some* people," said Harry.

“But it doesn’t work if you’re under the Imperius Curse,” said Hermione.

“I didn’t know that. Are you sure?” asked Harry.

“Come on Harry. When has Hermione ever been wrong?” asserted Draco.

“Oh, right. Sorry, Hermione,” said Harry apologetically.

Hermione just smiled.

Ginny continued, “Infiltration is the biggest danger. If done properly, a person under the Imperius Curse acts perfectly normal -- until they carry out their instructions. Sometimes it’s only to report back to the Death Eaters the Ministry’s plans, but that is usually enough. Dad is very worried, though he tries to hide it.”

Draco summed up by saying, “It’s *bad* out there, Harry. We’re insulated from it here. We need to let all the students know... so we’ll be *ready* for what’s coming.”

Harry, Hermione, Draco, and Ginny briefed the Dueling Club students on the situation outside Hogwarts.

The next day, the four were all standing before Professor McGonagall and Professor Snape. They were told in no uncertain terms to stop frightening the students and were given detention that caused them to miss the next Dueling Club meeting.

They had expected it. It did not matter -- mission accomplished. Harry assigned Neville and Cho to lead the next Dueling Club meeting. The club members redoubled their efforts during practice and paid even more attention in classes to the defensive magic being emphasized by all the teachers.

\*\*\*\*\*

The twelve weeks of Apparation training began in the middle of January, taught in the Great Hall by Professor Tofty from the Ministry of Magic. It took place every Saturday morning for an hour, except when there was a Quidditch match or Hogsmeade weekend.

During the third session, Hermione was the first student to Disapparate and Apparate without splinching. Harry succeeded at the seventh session and Draco at the eighth in early March. Harry said the mental focusing he learned during Occlumency lessons

with Professor Snape helped him. However, he would not be able to take the Ministry licensing certification test until he turned seventeen at the end of July. Draco would have to wait until June.

Hermione, whose was already of-age, would be able to take the first qualification examination offered by Professor Tofty in Hogsmeade at the end of April. Of course, everyone expected Hermione to pass with ease -- and when the time came, she did.

She told them she had never seen such a high level of Ministry security in Hogsmeade, which was provided for the students taking the test. Some of the protection was there just for Hermione and included Professor McGonagall.

\*\*\*\*\*

Hermione was now regularly leaving the castle to visit Hagrid -- quite often by herself. Only Harry knew it was usually a cover story. In truth, she was flying as an eagle every chance she could.

Harry continued his Animagus training with Hermione, but he had not made further progress. When Harry accompanied Hermione outside, he always loved watching her fly. But he had to admit to himself he was envious. But there *was* compensation... Hermione was always very *energized* afterwards -- though maybe not quite as much as Lavender always was with Ron.

\*\*\*\*\*

By the end of February, Harry was very concerned that Professor Dumbledore had not scheduled the next Horcrux hunt. In November, Dumbledore had made it seem like it would be soon, by saying he thought he knew where another one might be hidden. Harry now had to assume it had not panned out.

Yet, Harry was sure Professor Dumbledore was regularly leaving the castle due to his now frequent absences from dinner. In the past, such absences had been quite unusual.

But Quidditch helped distract Harry. Slytherin easily beat Ravenclaw.

\*\*\*\*\*

Ron continued his self-proclaimed role of ‘*Student*’ Potions Master. But to Ron’s great disappointment, Professor Slughorn stopped hosting Slug Club events after the Christmas Party. It seriously cut into Ron’s official ‘admiration society’ time -- though Lavender more than made up for it. She just could not seem to get enough of Ron. However, apparently, Lavender was starting to wear on Ron.

Ginny told them Ron was now taking every opportunity to avoid Lavender. Unfortunately, in Potions, he was stuck with her at the same workbench. She ooh-ed and ahh-ed his every move.

It was revolting, in addition to being hard to tune out, especially for Hermione.

But not even Potions topped Ron’s new reputation as a Quidditch player. It rivaled Harry’s.

When Ron again blocked every attempt on goal by Hufflepuff in a very long game, it did not matter that Ginny caught the Snitch. Midway through the match, everyone, including the Hufflepuff spectators, started shouting out the increasing save count as Ron blocked each goal. Gryffindor won handily and almost everyone was chanting Ron’s name. No one had ever seen anything like it.

It was astonishing -- *too* astonishing for Draco. “We know Hufflepuff’s not good, but something’s *not right*,” growled Draco to Harry and Hermione.

But Ginny came to Ron’s defense after the match. “He’s *always* been *good*. Fred and George used to make him nervous, always ragging on him. You saw his potential last year. He’s finally achieved it now that they’re *gone*.”

“Maybe...” said Draco, scowling, “but I don’t *believe* it -- not *two* matches in a row.”

Harry was concerned too. Slytherin had lost to Gryffindor but only by ten points. They had beaten Ravenclaw, and they were sure to beat Hufflepuff. But if Gryffindor beat Ravenclaw in May, Gryffindor would win the Quidditch Cup with three wins, regardless of the point differential. Ravenclaw had to beat Gryffindor by more than ten points for Slytherin to take the Cup -- then head-to-head point differential would be the tiebreaker. But it did not look good now, given how poorly Ravenclaw had played against Slytherin.

Hermione did not say anything, but she had an odd look on her face. Harry knew she agreed with Draco, but she still wanted Gryffindor to win the Cup.

## Chapter 12 – Darkening Days

At Harry's next Occlumency lesson with Professor Snape, Harry was able to stop Snape penetrating his mind every time. It took his full effort and concentration, but he was up to the task even when Snape tried to catch him off guard.

"Well, Mr Potter, we are finished," said Snape at the usual time.

Harry turned to leave, but Snape held up his hand and Harry paused.

Snape continued, "This was your *final* lesson. I have nothing more to teach you. It is now time for you to continue on your *own* -- to continue to practice *controlling* your emotions and *focusing* your mind. Only through *self-discipline* will you be more than merely *adequate*. Relax in any way and you will fall *victim* to the Dark Lord."

With that, Professor Snape flicked his hand for Harry to go.

Harry looked at Professor Snape but did not leave. Instead, he said, "Can I *win*, sir?"

Snape did not answer at once. He cocked his head to one side as if evaluating Harry, or perhaps he was surprised that Harry was confiding in him. Harry wondered if *any* student had *ever* confided in him.

After a moment, Snape simply said, "I do not *know*, Mr Potter... But you must *try*."

Harry nodded in appreciation and left.

\*\*\*\*\*

In April, just before Easter Break, the Daily Prophet published a special edition with a headline that covered the whole top half of the front page.

### AZKABAN FALLS

The Dementors had attacked the wizard prison in mass and overwhelmed the Aurors guarding it. All the Death Eaters had escaped along with any prisoners who were not already debilitatingly mad. The Dementors had then set out roving the countryside creating upset and despair wherever they went.



The Ministry had deployed the maximum number of Aurors available, attempting to round up as many escaped prisoners as possible, but they were greatly outnumbered. A not unexpected consequence of the effort was a reduction by two thirds in the number of Aurors guarding Hogwarts.

Harry was glad to see that Tonks was not one of them.

Dementor sightings were being reported up and down the country. The wizarding public was terrified and were advised to stay indoors and to only travel outside in groups with someone skilled in using the Patronus charm.

The wizarding community was becoming even more secluded. They blamed the Minister for Magic, of course, but he made it worse by refusing to be interviewed or even make a reassuring speech. Dolores Umbridge, however, was everywhere with a clearly take-charge attitude. Whether or not she was effective was another matter.

All new security measures were being implemented by Ministry decree, bypassing the Wizengamot. No one was sure whether they originated from Umbridge or Scrimgeour. Two decrees were getting the most attention -- the *Ministry of Magic Loyalty Oath* and the *Muggle-Born Protection Act*.

The former required all of-age witches and wizards to pledge their loyalty “to the Minister for Magic and the Ministry for which he stands.” The pledge had to be signed. Anyone visiting the Ministry had to make the pledge or would be denied entry beyond the Atrium, foreign visitors excepted.

The Loyalty Oath was raising quite strenuous public objection. Even the Daily Prophet questioned it in an editorial. The main objection was pledging loyalty to the Minister and not just the Ministry. Very few objected to pledging loyalty to the Ministry as the concept seemed to be above politics.

Unfortunately, this controversy greatly overshadowed serious discussion of the Muggle-Born Protection Act. This act was touted as officially recognizing the additional danger Muggle-borns faced at the hands of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named and his followers, and, as a result, it offered additional Ministry protections. It asked that all Muggle-borns identify themselves to the Ministry and register to qualify for these additional protections, none of which were yet specified.

Few witches and wizards raised any concerns. Most Muggle-borns signed up within the first few weeks. A representative from the Ministry of Magic, Percy Weasley in fact,

showed up at Hogwarts to sign up the Muggle-born students. But Professor Dumbledore refused to permit it. He declared that students of all birth status had more than adequate protection at Hogwarts and that it was up to their *parents or guardians* to decide whether to register them, particularly under-age students.

Professor Dumbledore received a strongly worded letter from Dolores Umbridge the next day for failing to support the Ministry's decree, but he ignored it. Because Umbridge did not follow up, Dumbledore knew that Scrimgeour had not backed her up when she tried to escalate it.

When Hermione read the article about the new security decrees in the Daily Prophet, Harry asked her if she were going to sign up for Muggle-born protection.

Before she could respond, Ginny cut in sharply, sounding alarmed, "Don't you *dare*, Hermione!"

Both Harry and Hermione were startled by her outburst.

Ginny continued, "Nothing that Umbridge woman comes up with concerning Muggle-borns could be a good thing. My dad says she *hates* Muggle-borns. She's a pure-blood *fanatic*. It's a wonder she's not a Death Eater!"

Draco nodded emphatically. "Ginny's right. The whole thing smells fishy to me. My father said Umbridge was one of the strongest pure-blood law supporters in the Ministry. *Don't* do it, Hermione."

"OK. I *won't*," said Hermione firmly. Hermione was more than persuaded. She added, "I'll spread the word around school to the others like me."

"Good idea," said Harry. "Maybe we should talk to Professor Dumbledore about it."

They agreed, but before breakfast was over, Professor McGonagall made an announcement on behalf of Professor Dumbledore saying that Muggle-born students should *not* consider registering until they were of-age *and* out of school.

Draco chuckled, "Sounds like Professor Dumbledore's already on top of things -- as usual."

\*\*\*\*\*

The Easter holidays came and went. Even more students remained at school than had at Christmas. Though most fifth-years and seventh-years usually stayed to begin revising for O.W.L. and N.E.W.T. exams, very few students in other years went home this time.

Sirius wanted Harry to come home for Easter, now that he and Fleur had returned from France. But Harry said he wanted to remain with his friends. Draco was staying because Ginny was going to study for her O.W.L.s. Hermione was already revising for end of year exams, which by now did not surprise anyone.

Harry had never understood studying during any holidays and spent his time in the Student Lounge while Hermione ensconced herself in the library. This meant Harry only had to endure Hermione's reproof at meals and when she occasionally decided to take a break.

The real reason Harry wanted to stay at school over Easter was because he did not want to miss out on another possible Horcrux hunt with Professor Dumbledore. The fact that it had been six months since their first hunt had been a major disappointment.

Harry began to wonder if Professor Dumbledore had already gone on one -- or more than one -- and decided not to invite him. Rejecting that depressing thought, Harry concluded that Dumbledore must have determined that finding hidden Horcruxes was going to be much harder than he had imagined.

\*\*\*\*\*

The first week of class after Easter Break, something unusual happened in Potions.

For once, Ron was *terrible*. The topic was antidotes. Ron seemed totally clueless and was not able to produce anything like a proper antidote.

Hermione's antidote was the best by far and received all the praise from Professor Slughorn usually reserved for Ron. She positively basked in it.

However, Professor Slughorn chalked up Ron's failure to being distracted by his breakup with Lavender Brown.

The breakup had been rather messy, with yelling and crying in the Great Hall in front of the whole school at breakfast that morning. Lavender had stormed out and was not seen all day -- reportedly having gone to the hospital wing to see Madam Pomfrey.

In Potions, Harry -- and surprisingly, Draco -- realized they did not have a clue how to concoct an antidote either. Hermione had to help them at every step in the process -- and they still did not understand what they were doing even after she had explained it at least a half-dozen times. After a few steps, she had given up and just told them exactly what to do.

The Advanced Potions textbook did not have much to say on the matter and Professor Slughorn's instructions were cryptic. Slughorn's discussion with Hermione on the subject sounded like a foreign language to Harry. Of course, Hermione understood every word and attempted to translate as best she could. Draco may have gotten the gist of the theory, but he still could not figure out what to do.

Hermione later told them that Professor Snape had ridiculed Ron in Defense Against the Dark Arts over his very public love-life dramatics. He warned Ron not to let it carry over into *his* classroom whenever Lavender might manage to return from the hospital wing. Hermione also reported that Lavender had been consoled by all the girls in the Gryffindor common room the previous evening.

However, she noted that Romilda Vane had not been frowning over her shoulder at Ron, like all the other girls had.

### Chapter 13 – Draco Distracted

Before the start of the next week's Dueling Club meeting, Neville and Luna approached Harry.

"Say, Harry," said Neville, "Luna and I saw something *odd* early this morning. We were up quite early..."

"...Before breakfast," interjected Luna, "helping Madam Sprout prune Tentacula vines to prepare for her class..."

"...And we saw Montague in the Entry Hall near the grand staircase," finished Neville.

"Montague?" asked Harry, sounding puzzled. "Are you *sure*?"

"Fairly sure," said Neville.

“He was a little too far away to be certain,” said Luna pleasantly. “We were coming in the front door, but we both thought it was him.”

“He turned and ran when he saw us -- down the corridor where Mr Filch’s office is,” added Neville.

“It’s quite odd,” said Luna, “because...”

Harry finished, “...Fred and George chased him into the vanishing cabinet in that unused classroom on the first-floor last year during the battle with the Dark Lord’s Army.”

“And he *hasn’t* been seen *since*,” said Luna definitively.

“Wasn’t that cabinet moved to Filch’s office?” asked Draco, who had joined them moments before.

“Yea,” said Harry.

“Well, that’s a *long* time to be stuck in a vanishing cabinet, don’t you think?” said Draco.

“Definitely,” said Harry. “You’d think he’d die of thirst or starvation -- unless you’re in limbo while you’re inside one,” Harry speculated. Then he asked, “Do you think we should check it out?”

“You mean get in the cabinet?” responded Draco.

Harry nodded.

“No *way!*” said Draco emphatically. “Too dangerous ...but we *should* report it.”

“OK. I’ll tell Professor Snape,” said Harry, who paused and then said hopefully “... or Professor Dumbledore, if I see him first.”

When Harry returned to the dorm after another frustrating Animagus training session with Hermione, he checked the Marauder’s Map. Montague was not on it, and he knew the Room of Requirement was currently in use as the Student Lounge.

Professor Snape was quite skeptical. “Montague? Now?” He was looking at his calendar. It had been almost a *year*. “Mr Potter, it seems *very* unlikely. Longbottom and

Lovegood must have been mistaken. Are you *aware* of how vanishing cabinets work?” asked Snape in his usual condescending tone.

“Yes, sir,” said Harry trying not to sound impatient. “Maybe Montague was in limbo...”

“Limbo does not exist,” said Snape curtly, cutting across Harry. “If Montague had been vanished this long, he would not have survived.”

“But, sir...” Harry tried to respond.

But Snape continued, “Even if, *somehow*, however unlikely, he had survived, he must have left the castle by now or he would have been reported by others. This report was obviously a mistake. There is nothing more to it, Mr Potter.”

“But...” Harry again attempted to get a word in -- in vain.

“Nonetheless,” said Snape, “I shall have the cabinet moved to a more secure location than Mr Filch’s office.”

“But...” tried Harry a third time.

“Enough. You are dismissed,” said Snape with finality while flicking his wrist.

Yes, dismissed again, Harry thought angrily as he left Snape’s office. Professor Snape was forever dismissive.

Harry made up his mind to tell Professor Dumbledore about Montague the next time they met. He hoped it was soon.

But it was not soon, and he forgot about it as Slytherin’s final Quidditch match approached. They had to beat Hufflepuff to have any chance at winning the Quidditch Cup.

Harry was relentless at practice -- driving the team hard, practicing every day. He knew Summerby was a very good Seeker, sometimes great -- though not as great as Diggory had been. Fortunately, the rest of Hufflepuff’s team was not good at all. Still, they could win if Summerby got the Snitch early. Harry wanted to be at his best, so he had the entire team play opposing Seeker against him during the last thirty minutes of practice to push himself to the limit.

At Quidditch practice the next day, something unusual happened, or more precisely, did not happen.

Draco did not show up.

He had never missed Quidditch practice before. And missing their next to last practice before their match with Hufflepuff on Saturday was -- there was no other way to describe it -- *shocking*. Harry realized he had not seen Draco since Potions -- not at dinner or before Quidditch practice.

Ginny had asked Harry and Hermione where he was at dinner, but they had not thought anything about it.

Draco did not show up until right before bedtime in the dormitory. He told Harry he had fallen asleep in the library after Potions in a chair way in the back behind the Daily Prophet stacks. He said he was sorry. But he really did not *sound* sorry to Harry -- more like, "no big deal."

"Draco, this Quidditch match is *critical* to our chances of winning the Cup. You *know* that, right?" asked Harry testily. "You're not *acting* like you do."

"No. No. I do; I do," said Draco, now sounding a little bit more engaged. "Don't worry about it. We'll win for sure," he said, adding a very un-Draco-like wink.

"Are you *alright*?" asked Harry. "You're acting a bit ...*odd*."

"No. I'm fine. Just a bit tired, that's all," assured Draco.

Harry dropped it and went to bed.

Draco seemed fine in the morning and all-day during classes, though he was not as talkative as usual. He mainly responded to Harry's conversation. But that evening at their last Quidditch practice before Saturday's match, Draco was *not* in form. His efforts seemed half-hearted and at times he almost looked like a beginner. He missed shots on goal he should have made easily and even dropped simple passes.

No one said anything.

At the end of practice, Harry took him aside. "What's *wrong*, Draco? You're not in form."

“Just had a bad practice. It happens to everyone. Nothing to worry about,” said Draco amiably.

Again, it was casual excuse making -- totally uncharacteristic for Draco. Harry was worried that Draco’s bad practice could spook the rest of the team’s confidence, so he gave a pep talk in the changing room -- something he rarely had to do other than say, “Good practice.”

His pep talk fell flat. As he spoke, he kept seeing the team members glancing at Draco, who seemed oblivious. Draco continued to act as if nothing were wrong and was impatient to get back to the castle.

On the walk back, Harry again asked, “What’s *wrong*, Draco?”

“*Nothing*,” said Draco curtly.

“I *know* there is *something* bothering you... What *is* it?” insisted Harry.

Draco stopped. He was angry. “*Stop it*, Harry. There is *nothing* the matter. Please don’t ask me again.” He turned and stalked off. And he was already in bed asleep -- or pretending to be -- when Harry got back to the dorm room.

## Chapter 14 – Ron’s Reckoning

“Ginny says Draco is not quite himself... Like something’s bothering him,” said Hermione the next day.

“But he *denies* anything is wrong and gets mad if you ask him,” said Harry, sounding worried.

“I suppose we’ll just have to wait until he’s ready to talk about it,” concluded Hermione.

Harry reluctantly agreed. “I just wish I had *some* idea what it might be about. But I’m sure it has nothing to do with the match,” said Harry sounding quite frustrated.

Slytherin *lost* to Hufflepuff on Saturday by ten points.

Draco was *terrible*. He did not score *any* goals and his defense was abysmal. Trying to make up for Draco’s poor play put everyone, even Harry, off their game. Worse, Draco



had accidentally gotten in Harry's way, enabling Summerby to get the snitch. Otherwise, they would have still easily beaten a very poor Hufflepuff team.

No one said anything in the changing room after the match. They knew it meant the end of their chances of winning the Quidditch Cup. Draco was the subject of muttering by the other team members, who kept their backs to him. But they kept glancing at him with distain over their shoulders.

Draco was clearly not bothered by either his poor performance or the loss to Hufflepuff. When Draco finished changing, he announced, as if nothing had happened, "I'll see you back at the castle."

When he left, the rest of the team erupted on Harry, but all he could say was that Draco had something bothering him. Vaisey's comment summed it up, "He didn't look like *anything* was bothering him -- *especially* the match."

Harry, Hermione, and Ginny learned it was no use questioning Draco. He would walk away if any of them asked what was bothering him.

Fortunately, over the next two weeks, he slowly seemed to be returning to normal, though much more relaxed and easy-going. This was quite notable in one respect -- Ron Weasley no longer drove him crazy. It was as if Draco did not notice Ron anymore, despite Ron's unrelentingly annoying popularity. Also, since their loss to Hufflepuff, Draco did not seem to care about the Quidditch standings and the upcoming decisive match between Gryffindor and Ravenclaw. If Ravenclaw won, it would come down to the total point differential between Gryffindor and Ravenclaw who won the Cup.

Ron, on the other hand, was boasting about how Gryffindor would annihilate Ravenclaw and win the Cup outright.

Harry could not talk to Draco about it because he was not interested. And he could not talk to Hermione or Ginny because they really wanted Gryffindor to win the Cup. They wanted Ron to perform his best -- no matter how annoying he was. Normally Draco would have balanced the conversation on the friendly rivalry, but now Draco had nothing to say. It was infuriating to Harry.

Harry went to see Professor Snape about Draco.

He was surprised to see the vanishing cabinet standing in the back of Snape's office. Seeing Harry looking at it, Snape said, "I thought it better kept under *my* supervision than Mr Filch's. He has been known to '*lose track*' of certain items being held for safekeeping..."

Harry recalled the Marauder's Map that Fred and George had 'obtained' from Mr Filch's office their first year.

"Now what is it *this* time, Mr Potter?" said Snape impatiently.

"It's Draco Malfoy, sir. He's not acting normally, not since right before the last Quidditch match," explained Harry.

"Perhaps he has been brooding about the match. His performance was, to say the least ...*lacking*," said Snape derisively.

Harry knew Professor Snape prized the Quidditch Cup at least as much as Professor McGonagall. The unexpected loss to Hufflepuff had ended Slytherin's prospects.

"Sir, it's like he's lost interest in the things he used to care about," said Harry, not wanting to get into a conversation about Quidditch with Professor Snape.

"Mr Malfoy's schoolwork is unchanged, certainly better than yours. I have seen no *difference* in his behavior," said Snape dismissively.

"Please sir, is there a way for you to check him -- to read his mind -- to see what's bothering him?" asked Harry -- the question that had been his purpose in coming to see Professor Snape.

"Mr Potter," said Snape in the tone he used whenever he was about to lecture Harry, "Legilimency is *not* to be used for such idle purposes. Did you not learn *anything* when I taught you Occlumency? Do not waste my time with such *tiresome* teenage angst again. You are dismissed."

Harry fumed all the way to the Gryffindor common room and told Hermione what happened.

"You could see Professor Dumbledore..." suggested Hermione.

Harry just shook his head.

Ginny was sitting by the fire with Draco. He looked to be enjoying her company.

Harry considered he might be overreacting. But whatever it was with Draco, it made him uneasy.

\*\*\*\*\*

The Quidditch match between Gryffindor and Ravenclaw was one for the record books. For the *third* straight match, Ron did not allow a *single* goal. This time he made it look effortless.

There was a rumor that scouts from the Professional Quidditch League were in attendance.

Ron sometimes seemed to pose after making a particularly spectacular save. The crowd was going wild. You could not hear except for Ron's name being chanted rhythmically. Of course, the poor Ravenclaw fans were not part of the uproar. They were humiliated, miserable, and quiet. After only twenty minutes, they could hardly muster a cheer.

The Ravenclaw team was demoralized. It was obvious their Chasers had given up and had put all their hopes on Cho Change, their Seeker. She was good and made a real effort, but Ginny caught the Snitch.

The fact that the game lasted just under an hour kept the score relatively low -- two-hundred seventy to zero. Teams had been known to lose by much more, especially in longer matches, but it was no consolation to Ravenclaw. Because of their catastrophic loss, they finished a distant fourth place on points, despite having one win along with Slytherin and Hufflepuff.

Slytherin barely came in second in the final Cup standings ahead of Hufflepuff by only forty points.

Ron was carried on the shoulders of the Gryffindors to Professor Dumbledore, who presented him with the Quidditch Cup. Their three wins and Ron's goal keeping were *remarkable*.

The Gryffindors held an all-night party in Gryffindor tower to celebrate. Professor McGonagall did not put a stop to it, as might have been expected. Instead, she actually joined in when she showed up sometime after midnight.

Ron now had Romilda Vane covering him with kisses and her arms around him. Harry knew this because he overheard Lavender Brown crying about it to Padma Patil in the Student Lounge. Harry had not attended the celebration even though Hermione and Ginny had invited him. Draco, on the other hand, did go. It was too much for Harry. He left and went to bed.

At breakfast on Sunday morning, Draco *also* did something remarkable.

Not many Gryffindor students had gotten up to have breakfast after their nearly all-night celebration, but Ron was one of them -- he loved to eat; never missed a meal.

Hermione and Ginny were also there, both having gone to bed at a reasonable hour.

The Gryffindors who did make it to breakfast were still celebrating their victory. Every one of them came over to Ron and congratulated him yet again while he was eating. Ginny even kissed her brother on the cheek. Ron was basking in the continued adulation.

Harry wanted to throw up.

He leaned over to Draco and said quietly, "Ron is such a *git*."

Draco did not say anything. Instead, he got up, walked over to Ron and congratulated him. Draco actually held out his hand and shook hands with him. Ron was as surprised as Harry, who had been expecting Draco to *do* something -- like pour a pitcher of pumpkin juice over Ron's head.

Harry had enough. He *snapped*.

He charged over to the Gryffindor table, pushed Draco aside and yelled, "RON, YOU *CHEATED!* There is no way you blocked every goal in *three straight matches*. You used the *Lucky Potion* you won in Potions... I *KNOW IT!*"

Harry was seething.

There was complete silence. Everyone in the Hall was shocked by what Harry had done.

Ron reacted very coolly, almost practiced. With a smirk on his face, he pulled out the small vial of Felix Felicis from his robe pocket and held it up for everyone to see. The full vial clearly still had the wax seal around the stopper. But to Harry, the contents no longer had the same shimmering light gold color he remembered. It was just *slightly* darker, like...

Harry snatched the vial from Ron's fingers and ripped out the sealed stopper in one quick motion. Before anyone could react, Harry poured the contents onto the wooden table, dipped his finger in it and tasted it.

"PUMPKIN JUICE!" Harry shouted. "Ron, you *dirty cheat!* I *knew* you used *Lucky Potion* to block every goal and win those matches!"

By now, all the students in the Great Hall were rushing over and gathering around.

Several other students had immediately sampled the liquid and started yelling, "CHEAT! CHEAT! CHEAT!" There were gasps and outcries, which quickly escalated into pandemonium. Fights were breaking out between Gryffindors and the other houses trying to get at Ron.

Teachers were now rushing from the High Table.

Ron was witnessing his downfall, but instead of cowering in shame, his face was filled with rage, directed at the object of his undoing -- Harry Potter.

In the melee, only Draco saw Ron draw his wand and point it at Harry.

In an instant, Draco jumped between them as Ron screamed, "*SECTUM SEMPER!*"

There was a huge spray of blood and Draco was down, writhing in pain as blood jetted from a vicious deep gash across his face, neck and chest.

Ginny screamed.

The fighting and shouting stopped.

Ron looked shocked -- along with everyone else that could see Draco. Ron dropped his wand and the sound of it clattering on the stone floor was clearly audible.

“Oh, dear God!” cried Professor McGonagall as she pushed through the crowd to Draco’s side. “Get Madam Pomfrey at once!” she ordered.

But Professor Snape was only a few steps behind her. He pushed through, crouched beside Draco and immediately began passing his wand back and forth over the gushing wound while uttering a nearly silent spell. It almost sounded like a lullaby.

The bleeding stopped and the wound closed, though it remained a glistening dark red mark against Draco’s fair skin. He had clearly already lost a lot of blood and was now unconscious. His robes were saturated with it and the floor around his entire upper torso and head was covered in a spreading pool of dark red.

“Hagrid!” commanded Professor Snape without looking.

The students made way and Hagrid moved in. He gently picked up Draco and quickly carried him out of the Great Hall. Ginny and Professor McGonagall followed closely behind.

As Professor Snape stood up, he picked up Ron’s wand.

Ron had clearly been in shock, but now seemed to becoming aware of his surroundings. His eyes were shifting as if looking for a way out.

But Professor Snape turned on him and snapped, “Come with *me*.” He grabbed Ron by the upper arm and marched him out of the Great Hall.

Harry thought about following but did not. Instead, he grabbed Hermione and took off for the hospital wing as the remaining students began to buzz with conversation. Any notions of continuing the brawl were over.

Something *big* had just happened. And there were going to be major consequences.

## Chapter 15 – Expulsion

Madam Pomfrey declared that Professor Snape had saved Draco from bleeding to death. But she said he would wear the vicious scar for the rest of his life because it had

been inflicted by a curse. The scar was livid red, but she said it would slowly fade to white and not be nearly as glaringly visible as now.

Draco had also nearly lost his left eye.

The gash ran from his forehead down the left side of his eye, across his cheek and jaw, then down his neck. That's all Harry could see. The rest was covered by the blanket over Draco's chest.

He was still unconscious. Madam Pomfrey could not account for that, but she expected him to come around soon. She did not want to force it. Ginny was sitting at his bedside holding his hand. She was not crying but looked distressed.

"What was that curse?" asked Harry.

Hermione shook her head saying, "I have no idea. It was like he was slashed with a sword. Do you know, Ginny?"

She shook her head too.

All they could do was wait.

It was not until the nighttime that Draco woke up. Ginny had stayed by his side the whole time.

Draco had no recollection of what happened. Madam Pomfrey said it must have been the shock that had kept him unconscious for so long. It also seemed to have affected his memory in general. He could not even remember the Quidditch match with Hufflepuff from two weeks before. When he heard they lost to Hufflepuff because of his poor play, he apologized profusely and angrily used profanity against himself.

Draco finally seemed to be back to normal. He was even more enraged when he learned that Ron had cheated after all and had tried to attack Harry.

"You *saved* me, Draco," said Harry. "I owe you *again*."

"Anytime, mate," replied Draco cheerfully, "but I'm not keeping score."

The fact that Ron had cursed him did not seem that upsetting to him, though he did finally say, "Well, I always *wanted* a scar like yours, Harry... Guess I overdid it a bit."

\*\*\*\*\*

Ron was expelled -- his wand snapped in half.

Professor Dumbledore had no choice. Ron had committed too many serious transgressions -- using Felix Felicis to win organized sporting events and who knew what else, using an unknown spell to attack and nearly kill a student, and (following an investigation) taking credit in Potions for another student's work.

To everyone's surprise, the old Potions textbook Ron had been using all year turned out to have been Professor Snape's when he was a student. It was filled with additional notes and research that had propelled Ron to the top of the Potions class. For some reason, Snape had referred to himself as '*The Half-Blood Prince*', using the moniker in his old textbook. Hermione asked Professor McGonagall about it, and she said that Prince was the maiden name of Snape's mother, a witch.

Professor Slughorn said he should have realized that Ron was a fraud, since he had also taught Snape all those years before, and that Ron's "style" had been suspiciously similar.

Hermione did not believe it. "He's just making *excuses*. I bet he'll modify *that* memory too."

Professor Dumbledore ordered Professor Slughorn to never again offer *Felix Felicis* as a prize to students in his Potions class.

The textbook had also been the source of the curse that Ron had used on Draco. Many thought it was ironic that Draco was injured by a curse created by his own Head of House. This restarted the rumors about Professor Snape's past, but they did not last long -- Ron's story was much more interesting and relevant to the students.

Professor McGonagall escorted Ron around the school as he collected his things and packed his trunk. Mr and Mrs Weasley were notified and met him at the gate of Hogwarts as he was walked out of school by Professor McGonagall and Professor Dumbledore.

Ron had not pleaded or protested. He seemed totally defeated.



Mrs Weasley was in tears and Mr Weasley could not look at his youngest son. He even held Mrs Weasley back from embracing Ron. Mr Weasley nodded to McGonagall and Dumbledore. Then he took hold of Ron's arm, his wife's hand, and Disapparated without saying a word. McGonagall and Dumbledore both sadly shook their heads and returned to the castle.

Ginny received a letter from her mother the next week which said Fred and George had taken in Ron to live and work in their joke shop. He had a small living space in the attic, which Mrs Weasley hoped was nicer than their attic. She said that Ron could not stand living at home and having her cry every time she looked at him or having his father ignore him. Mrs Weasley was clearly distraught and worried what would become of Ron.

At school, Professor Dumbledore announced that the Gryffindor Quidditch matches had been forfeited and Slytherin had won the Quidditch Cup on points. It had been expected, so there was no real joy in it -- no cheering, just quite applause.

Lavender Brown was universally consoled as having been wronged by Ron, while Romilda Vane, unfortunately, was criticized for not seeing Ron's true nature. Hermione observed it was really a matter of bad luck -- Lavender had not seen it either. No one had, except maybe Draco, but he admitted, "I just thought he was a pompous git, not a *total low life*."

Ron's expulsion had seized the attention of the students.

Expulsion was often talked about as the 'ultimate punishment' by Hogwarts students, but nobody anybody knew had ever been expelled. Well, yes, the members of The Dark Lord's Army had been expelled the previous year, but they did not count. They were *real criminals* who had been arrested by the Ministry of Magic, tried, and sent to prison. For as long as anyone had ever heard, no one had ever been expelled for *just* breaking school rules. (Very few knew about Hagrid's history.) Ron proved it could actually happen, and that was sobering. In fact, the Ministry could have prosecuted Ron, but they were too busy with more important matters, like fighting a wizarding war.

After things settled down, Harry asked Draco if he remembered what his problem had been the three weeks before Ron cursed him. Unfortunately, Draco could not remember.

“I can’t. It’s all foggy, but I realize now that *something* was wrong. Maybe someone in Gryffindor put a spell on me or slipped me a potion to help them win the cup... maybe Ron?” suggested Draco.

“Not Ron; he’s a fraud,” said Harry. “There’s no student other than Hermione who could have done it.”

“Yea... Something like that would take a *very* skilled witch or wizard. I think only a teacher or an Auror would have that knowledge,” agreed Draco.

“Aurors wouldn’t have a motive. But you seriously don’t think any Hogwarts teacher would, do you?” asked Harry.

“No. Of course not... Well, at least not any here *now*. I wouldn’t have put it past Lockhart,” said Draco derisively.

“Or Quirrell,” added Harry.

“Right,” agreed Draco, continuing, “The only teacher here now that anyone is suspicious of is Professor Snape, but I don’t believe for a minute he would do it. What would be the motive?”

“Who knows? But he didn’t want to help me find out what was *wrong* with you,” argued Harry.

Draco laughed. “So? Professor Snape *hates* students -- only a little less if they’re in his house...”

“...and can win the Quidditch Cup for him,” finished Harry.

“...making us his *favorite* hated students -- about one step above *Flobberworms*,” concluded Draco.

Harry and Draco both laughed.

## Chapter 16 – Another Hunt

“Something’s up,” said Draco to Harry.

Hermione and Ginny had just entered the Slytherin common room. It was about an hour after dinner. They both looked worried. Without any greeting, Hermione announced, “The Ministry has just withdrawn all the Aurors protecting Hogwarts without an explanation.”

“Tonks told us just before she left,” added Ginny. “She said they were *ordered* not to provide any warning, but Tonks did anyway.”

“I wonder what’s going on,” said Harry.

“What’s Professor Dumbledore going to do?” asked Ginny.

“Whatever he can, I’m sure,” said Draco.

“We can offer to help guard the school... I mean, we can offer the services of Dumbledore’s Army,” said Harry.

Draco nodded, “Whatever it takes.”

Hermione shook her head, “Tonks told us Professor Dumbledore would bring in the Order of the Phoenix to replace them. She said she’d be back on her time off.”

Draco said, “Get *off* work and then *go back* to work? This isn’t good. Things must not be going well, or the Ministry wouldn’t have called them away.”

“Maybe Tonks will have more information when she returns...” said Harry just as a Slytherin first-year came through the door, ran over to Harry, handed him a rolled up note and then ran off.

It was from Professor Dumbledore.

Harry felt a thrill go up his spine. He quickly tore off the seal and read it quietly to his friends, “*I think I have found another one. Come to my office. Bring your cloak. A.D.*”

“Professor Dumbledore is taking me on another Horcrux hunt,” said Harry excitedly.

“Now?” said Hermione, sounding alarmed. “This doesn’t seem like a good time... I think you should ask him to *wait* until whatever’s going on resolves itself.”

Harry shook his head. “Professor Dumbledore wouldn’t leave if he thought there was any danger to the school. With the Order of the Phoenix here, they should be able to handle anything.”

“Well, just the same, I *agree* with Hermione on this,” said Draco. “Let’s meet with the other Prefects and organize the students to be ready.”

“Ready for what?” asked Harry.

“*For anything that happens!*” answered Draco emphatically, staring at Harry. “Isn’t that what we’ve been teaching in the Dueling Club? You know... ‘*Something could happen anytime, and we need to be ready.*’”

“You’re right, Draco,” said Harry. “That’s what we say at the start of every meeting. I’ll meet you all here when I get back... no matter how late. Please ignore curfew and wait up.”

They all agreed, and Harry took off at a run. He already had the invisibility cloak with him.

## Chapter 17 – Cavern Catastrophe

Professor Dumbledore was not well.

He was leaning heavily on Harry’s shoulder as they Apparated back outside the Hogwarts gate.

The Horcrux hunt in the cave by the sea had been a *disaster*. Harry could not see it any other way. Yes, they had retrieved the Locket Horcrux, but at a terrible, possibly fatal, price. Professor Dumbledore had insisted on drinking the potion in the basin and had nearly gone mad. It might be slowly killing him even now. Somehow, he had recovered sufficiently in time to save Harry from the Inferi.

Harry was still admonishing himself for forgetting what Professor Dumbledore had said about using fire against them. Harry had panicked and used every curse he knew, *except* for fire. He had even used the curse Ron had used against Draco -- *Sectumsempra*. But nothing had stopped the Inferi from grabbing him and starting to carry him head down into the dark lake.

He knew he was going to be drowned.

Only Professor Dumbledore's amazing lasso of fire had forced the Inferi to drop Harry and retreat. Harry had scrambled frantically out of the water's edge and rejoined him. But he could see that Dumbledore had not fully recovered from the potion. He looked exhausted and frail, and he continued to weaken as they made their way slowly out of the cave.

It was Harry who had Apparated them back to Hogwarts because Dumbledore was in no condition to attempt it. It was the first time Harry had ever performed side-along Apparation himself and he was relieved he had been able to do it.

As Harry staggered while supporting Professor Dumbledore as they slowly moved toward the school's iron gate, he became aware of a green light casting shadows of the bars in front of them.

Harry looked up and gasped.

The shimmering images of a death's head and snake were floating high above the castle.

The Dark Mark!

"NO!" cried Dumbledore. "Not now."

His voice was strained and weak, but he seemed invigorated, taking his weight off Harry's shoulder and standing on his own.

"Harry, put on your Cloak again! Quickly now!" commanded Dumbledore.

Harry pulled out the cloak and said, "I'm covering you too, sir. You're hurt."

Professor Dumbledore did not argue. Harry threw the cloak over them, and they walked crouched over up to the school gate. The gate was still locked, but no one was on guard. Dumbledore told Harry the spell to unlock it. Harry pushed it open just enough to get themselves through and then shut it. It was an effort because Dumbledore seemed to be fading again, once more leaning heavily on Harry. Harry had to use all his strength to keep Dumbledore upright and moving up the path toward the front door to the Entrance Hall, which he could see was wide open.

Someone must have gone outside to cast the Dark Mark. But *how* had they gotten into the school in the first place?

Now they could hear shouting and sounds of battle from inside.

Dumbledore drew his wand, but his hand was shaking terribly.

“I need to see Professor Snape,” said Dumbledore very weakly.

“Madam Pomfrey...” said Harry.

“No!” Dumbledore croaked insistently, “Severus. Bring me *Severus*. I told him to wait in the Staff Room. Tell him what happened. He will know what to do...”

Dumbledore sagged to his knees. Harry could no longer hold him up.

“I’ll get Professor Snape,” said Harry, “...I’ll leave you the Cloak and...”

“No!” Dumbledore again countermanded Harry, “You will need it to find Severus. Help me to the wall next to the door. I will wait there.”

Harry managed to heave Dumbledore up and get him against the wall a few feet from the castle door, where he slid to a sitting position. Harry pulled the cloak off the headmaster.

The sounds of fighting inside were louder.

As Harry was about to go, Dumbledore grabbed his arm firmly and said, “Take the Locket, Harry.”

Professor Dumbledore was holding it out to him in his other hand.

Harry did not want to waste any more time arguing, so he grabbed the Locket and stuffed it into his pocket. Dumbledore nodded and his arm dropped away heavily; he was clearly fading quickly.

Harry adjusted the invisibility cloak and ran into the Entry Hall to find Professor Snape.

Students and Order members were fighting Death Eaters.

There were at least a dozen bodies lying on the floor of the Entry Hall and on the grand staircase -- both defenders and Death Eaters, but more of the latter. Many more Death Eaters were crouched behind plinths, statues, doorways, and passages on the ground floor, including the stairway leading down to the dungeons -- anywhere offering cover.

The defenders were above the grand staircase on the first-floor balcony -- the high ground. They seemed to have the advantage and were keeping the Death Eaters at bay. The initial fighting must have been in the Entry Hall, judging from the positions of the bodies. Harry could not tell who any of the fallen defenders were, which he was thankful for.

Spells and curses filled the Entry Hall, many rebounding off the stone floor and walls.

Harry wanted to join the fight -- he could easily take out half a dozen Death Eaters from his current position under the cloak -- but helping Professor Dumbledore was his first priority. Given the apparent standoff between Death Eaters and defenders, Harry ducked down very low and was able to move quickly through the Entry Hall past the Great Hall and down the corridor toward the Staff room.

He seriously doubted Professor Snape would be there given the circumstances, but he had to check. Harry entered the Staff room past the two gargoyles, who were muttering about all the noise. To his very great surprise, he found Professor Snape inside, pacing, and looking very anxious.

Harry yanked off the invisibility cloak and said very quickly, "Professor Dumbledore sent me to fetch you. He's very sick and weak from drinking an unknown potion. He's sitting against the wall just outside the front door to the castle."

Harry paused to catch his breath expecting Professor Snape to ask questions, which he always did. However, Snape did not say anything. He had not even been startled by Harry's sudden appearance. Instead, he rushed past Harry toward the door.

"Wait! There are Death Eaters attacking in the Entry Hall!" exclaimed Harry, turning to follow him.

"I know," said Snape without stopping as he passed through the door.

Harry chased after him. "Sir, you'll need the Invisibility Cloak to get past the Death Eaters..." continued Harry.

But Professor Snape still ignored him and continued walking very briskly. Harry had never seen Snape run. Even now, with Professor Dumbledore's life at stake, he still walked.

"Please, sir, you just can't walk out there without the Cloak..." insisted Harry.

But Snape still ignored Harry, who, because they were only moments away from entering the Entry Hall, threw the invisibility cloak back over himself. Harry had his wand out ready to defend Professor Snape and was glad to see that he, at least, also had his wand out as well.

They were almost to the Entry Hall -- they could see some of the bodies on the floor -- when a ball of white light appeared a few feet directly in front of Professor Snape. He stopped dead.

The white light morphed into the shape of a lynx and spoke in the deep voice of Kingsley Shacklebolt, "The Ministry has *fallen*. Scrimgeour is *dead*. They are *coming*."

The message Patronus faded away.

Professor Snape felt to his right, grabbed Harry's arm through the cloak and turned to face him. He spoke gravely. "Listen to me now, Mr Potter, as you have *never* listened to me before. I only have time to say this *once*. You must *find* your friends -- Malfoy, Granger, and Weasley -- and get to an Order safe house *immediately* or you will *all be dead* by morning. GO NOW!"

Snape practically barked the last command.

Harry was shocked, but he got the message. He croaked, "I understand."

Snape released him and Harry took off running. He ran through the Entry Hall and up the marble staircase.

Harry found Hermione and Ginny with Professor McGonagall behind the balustrade on the first floor next to the top of the staircase. They were all firing spells at the Death Eaters along with dozens of other students and Order members.

Harry pulled the cloak off his head without warning and said, "Where's Draco?"



Professor McGonagall jumped and almost stunned him, stopping barely in time. Hermione and Ginny were by now used to Harry appearing suddenly from under the cloak and were about to answer when McGonagall yelled, “Oh, my word, Mr Potter; thank goodness! You must leave the school *immediately* and go into hiding! I was just telling Miss Granger and Miss Weasley. The Ministry of Magic has just fallen and You-Know-Who...”

“I know; I know,” interrupted Harry, “Professor Snape just told me. I’m here to get Hermione, Ginny, and Draco. Where *is* Draco?” he asked again.

Hermione jumped in, “He’s taken some Slytherins to try and get behind the Death Eaters. They came out of the dungeons. We don’t know how because you can’t Apparate or...”

“We *KNOW*, Hermione!” exclaimed Harry in frustration. “We *can’t* wait. Professor McGonagall, you’ll have to get word to Draco to join us. Tell him we’re going to Order Headquarters.”

Turning to the girls, he commanded, “We’re going, **RIGHT NOW!** Get under the Cloak.”

Ginny looked like she did not want to go without Draco, but Hermione said to her reassuringly, “Ginny, we *must* go. Draco would want you to.”

Ginny nodded.

Harry said, “Crouch down as low as you can; I’ll throw the cloak over you. We need to keep very low to cover our feet... and stay below the spells.”

Very slowly and carefully they made their way down the grand staircase, hugging the shielding banister. Luck was with them; there now seemed to be a lull in the fighting. Harry assumed both sides had received the news about the fall of the Ministry and were deciding what to do.

However, Harry was shocked at what happened next.

Professor Snape slowly walked out from the corridor to the Staff room until he stood in the middle of the Entry Hall with his hands held out away from his sides, facing the stairway to the dungeons. He was *not* holding his wand.

The Death Eaters did not attack him.

Harry wanted to take advantage of Professor Snape's diversion and whispered to Hermione and Ginny to move more quickly. They shuffled past Professor Snape and were halfway to the open front door when he began to speak in a loud and clear voice.

"We *know* the Ministry has fallen... Professor Dumbledore has *left* the school... You have *accomplished* your mission... The school will be *yours* without further fighting... but *only* if you let those leave now who wish to do so... We, the teachers, and staff, will remain." Snape stopped speaking and waited.

After a few moments, a rough voice from the stairwell to the dungeons called out, "Who gives *you* the authority to offer safe passage?"

Snape answered, sounding very confident -- almost arrogant. "You know *very well*... Yaxley."

There was another pause, this one longer. Finally, the same rough voice, Yaxley, said, "Very well... but *Harry Potter* and the rest of the students will *not* be allowed to leave. You have ten minutes."

Harry was impressed with what Professor Snape had accomplished. The Order members would be allowed to leave and fight another day... *and* they would be able to save Professor Dumbledore and take him to safety.

They had just cleared the front door when Harry stopped dead in his tracks, causing Hermione and Ginny to bump into him.

"What is it, Harry?" whispered Hermione. "Why have we *stopped*?"

Professor Dumbledore was gone!

He was not sitting against the wall beside the door. Harry looked frantically around but Dumbledore was not anywhere outside on the grounds that Harry could see. He swore under his breath.

"What *is* it, Harry?" asked Hermione again, more insistently.

"I'll tell you later," said Harry. "Let's go."

He knew they had no time to search for the headmaster. They had to get away. They resumed walking toward the front gate, standing upright and much faster now that the darkness effectively hid their exposed feet. Harry repeated the spell Professor Dumbledore had told him to open the gate.

“Thank *goodness* you knew the spell,” said Hermione anxiously, “I didn’t know *what* we were going to do.”

Harry told them they would use side-along Apparation to get to Sirius’ house. Because she had already passed her license exam, Hermione assumed she would do it. But to her surprise, Harry grabbed their arms and said, “I’ve already had a bit of experience doing it, actually.”

## Chapter 18 – Accounting

They arrived in the green park of Grimmauld Place still under the invisibility cloak. They did not remove it until they were inside number Twelve. No one was there except Kreacher.

“Master Harry, the house is empty; Master Sirius and Mistress Fleur are away...” explained the old house-elf.

Kreacher was surprised and delighted to see his master’s godson before the end of school. He insisted they come to the kitchen so he could prepare a very late midnight snack.

When they were seated at the kitchen table, Hermione exclaimed, almost bursting, “Tell us what *happened*, Harry!”

“OK, but *you* first,” said Harry, just as anxious to know what had occurred at the school while he and Professor Dumbledore had been hunting the Horcrux.

Hermione began her story, much like a report, calmly and efficiently as always. “The Prefects organized volunteers from the Dueling Club, mostly fifth through seventh-years. We set up a schedule to patrol the school with the Order members who were on duty. I paired with Ginny. We were on the first floor when we heard shouting below. We ran down the grand staircase and there was a battle going on in the Entry Hall.”

“Draco was in the middle of it. He was more than handling his own. He took out two Death Eaters, but more kept coming out of the dungeons every minute or so. We joined in and were able to hold them off until Professor McGonagall brought reinforcements. We got two more Death Eaters but lost Zacharias Smith. I think he’s dead.”

“We thought we were about to take them out, but then more, maybe a dozen, arrived all at once and we had to fall back to the first-floor balcony. Then it became a stalemate. We could easily hit them if they tried to get to the stairs. We got three more until they gave up trying. At the same time, we couldn’t go *down* the stairs.”

“Draco said he and Vaisey were patrolling the dungeons when they saw Montague standing outside Professor Snape’s office. As they approached him, two Death Eaters came out of the office behind him. Vaisey got stunned and Draco had to run. Moments later he ambushed one who charged up the stairs to the Entry Hall. He held off the other Death Eater for a while and called for help.”

“Chang and Boot were patrolling outside and came to help Draco. But when they tried to go down the stairs after the second Death Eater, there were suddenly three more and they were driven back. That’s when the dueling moved to the Entry Hall. Draco got another Death Eater, but Boot went down. He may be dead, but I’m not sure. That’s when we and a few others arrived.”

“After we retreated, Draco took three of the others, Chang, Greengrass and Davis, to try and get behind the Death Eaters. He called Dobby and had him Apparate them into the Kitchens. But we never saw any indication that they were able to attack the Death Eaters from behind.”

“More Death Eaters kept arriving and managed to take up positions in niches and behind statues in the Entry Hall. That made it much more difficult for us to expose ourselves -- because they had more angles to fire spells at us. If Kingsley’s Patronus hadn’t arrived next to Professor McGonagall, to report the fall of the Ministry, they would have eventually been able to overwhelm us and get up the grand staircase. Then you showed up and you know the rest.”

Harry digested what Hermione told him. He had seen Ginny tense up when Hermione talked about Draco. She was clearly worried.

Suddenly, Harry exclaimed, “The VANISHING CABINET!”

“What?” said Hermione.

“Montague and the vanishing cabinet -- Professor Snape had it moved from Filch’s office to his office after Neville and Luna said they saw Montague last month. Montague must have figured out how to use it to get into Hogwarts.”

“But how is that *possible*?” asked Hermione. “They don’t work that way.”

“I don’t know,” replied Harry, “But can you think of a *better* explanation of how Montague and the Death Eaters got into Hogwarts and came out from the dungeons?”

Hermione could not and she just shook her head.

“I bet when Montague came out in Professor Snape’s office instead of Filch’s, he probably scouted ahead to make sure they could continue as planned. He might have been the one who set the Dark Mark over the school.”

“The Dark Mark?” gasped Hermione.

“Yes,” said Harry, “But I’m getting ahead of myself... Voldemort must have planned simultaneous attacks on the Ministry and Hogwarts. Having a way to gain surprise entry into Hogwarts allowed him to use only a small force here and use his main force against the Ministry. They clearly wanted to capture -- kill more likely -- Professor Dumbledore, like they did Scrimgeour. Taking out the key leaders of the Ministry and Hogwarts at the same time would be an incredible blow and give them total power over the wizarding world in England.”

“But I’m certain they *didn’t* get Professor Dumbledore,” said Harry quite confidently. “And Professor Snape negotiated the Order members safely out of Hogwarts -- they are the essential core of a resistance movement.”

“Why did Professor Snape say Professor Dumbledore had *left*?” asked Hermione.

“That was to stop the fighting and our loses. Professor Snape knew what happened; I told him,” explained Harry.

Harry then told Ginny and Hermione everything that had happened to him and Professor Dumbledore -- the cave by the sea, the island in the underground lake, the potion in the basin, Dumbledore’s madness, the Locket, the Inferi, his rescue, their return, the Dark Mark, and leaving Dumbledore to fetch Snape.

Finally, Harry said, “I have to assume Professor Dumbledore recovered enough to get away. He didn’t join the fight because he wasn’t well... I mean, he could *barely* stand up.”

“Or he realized the situation was hopeless when he got Kingsley’s message,” suggested Hermione.

“Probably both,” agreed Harry, adding, “We’ve *got* to get in contact with him as soon as possible so we can join the resistance. We’ll send him a letter as soon as Hedwig or Aristotle show up.”

Hermione nodded.

Then Ginny finally spoke, sounding very worried, but also angry. “What about *Draco*? How do we find *him*? ...Send *him* a letter too?” Then she shouted,

“HE WAS SUPPOSED TO BE WITH US!”

Her condemnation stung Harry; Hermione too, from the looks of it.

Harry could not help but remember what Professor Snape said, ‘*You must find your friends... or you will all be dead by morning.*’

It made Harry’s plan to send a *letter* look pathetic.

Finding Draco and joining Dumbledore in the resistance were going to be a *lot* harder than sending a letter.

## 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 Half-Blood Prince* by J.K. Rowling.